# Developing and Using Key Messages About Your Public Report: Strategic Considerations

## Purpose

You can approach discussions about your public report in a number of ways when it is released to the community. But building agreement before the report is public regarding the best way to talk about the report will yield several benefits. Using agreed-upon key messages will clarify and reduce the white noise of different and potentially conflicting messages. This is essential when releasing your first public report, as you only have one chance to make a good first impression.

## Considerations

* **Clarify important issues by developing key messages.** Without a specific discussion, leaders in your Collaborative will likely have different answers to basic questions such as “*why* are we producing this report?” and “*how exactly* do we expect this report to be used once it is public?” These questions will be asked when your report is public, so developing simple, straightforward, and honest answers to these questions is important. Your Collaborative has one chance to make a good first impression, so this discussion is best done with stakeholder leaders *before* the report is public. When developing key messages, consider your long-term vision, but focus primarily on a realistic assessment of the report content as it stands now.
* **Reduce white noise.** With key messages developed or approved by a multistakeholder group of communication experts and other leaders within your Collaborative, you and your stakeholder partners can be more consistent in the content of the various communications from each organization (see Toolkit Resource 3a). Without key messages, the likelihood of conflicting messages increases and the resulting “white noise” will confuse the public or cause them to miss the entire event.
* **Avoid unnecessary controversy.** Without shared key messages, stakeholder groups will avoid saying anything or will develop their own ways to talk about the report. The different and possibly conflicting perspectives about the purpose, value, and use of the report could be used by reporters looking for controversy and conflict for their stories. You are more likely to have a smooth and effective rollout of your report if you take the time to develop clear, agreed-upon key messages in advance.
* **Keep key messages simple.** Key messages make communication easier. If people have three or four simple points to focus on—whether in media interviews, press releases, newsletter articles, or presentations—they are far more likely to get the main points across when communicating about the public report. Key messages will help a wide range of people become better and more effective communicators about the public report.

With some advance work done by stakeholder leaders and communication experts along with your Collaborative, you can create a path forward with key messages that makes a wide range of communication efforts more effective and, as a side benefit, much easier. See Toolkit Resource 4b for a potential template for your key messages, based on work done by the Puget Sound Health Alliance for their first public report in 2009.