



**UNIT IV:
Community/
Public Policy
Leadership
Skills**

Module 3: Public Issues

Do you have an idea that could benefit your community? Is there a concern in the back of your mind that keeps nagging at you? Is there a law that needs updating, or a community problem that someone should do something about? Could that someone be you?

Public concern about a policy issue develops over a period of time. Frequently, people become disturbed by a particular situation — which results in discussion, tension and conflict that leads to a search for solutions. There are often many issues surrounding a problem or concern.

The terms “public issue” and “public policy” can be defined in several ways. A private problem or issue becomes public when consequences of individual or group action go beyond those directly involved. And, there is an effort by others to influence those consequences. As more people become involved, leaders and interested citizens become aware of the concern. Discussion clarifies and defines the problem or opportunity — the gap between “what is” and “what could be.” The issue emerges as different ideas about what could be done are developed.^{1,2}

Public issues are controversial because different groups of people are affected in different ways. Even when a goal is agreed upon, different ways of reaching the goal and/or financing the new outcome, may be favored by different individuals or groups. An advantage or benefit for some may be a disadvantage or cost for others. For example, the problem may be a community’s high rate of illiteracy in adults. The policy options might include reading programs, parent education, or school policies to reduce dropouts. Doing nothing (maintaining the status quo) is also an option.

Public policy consists of statements or principles underlying government action. Policy is expressed in local, state and federal government action as legislation, resolutions, programs, regulations, appropriations, administrative practices and court decisions. Less formal policy also includes customs and traditional ways of doing things.

The Issue Evolution Cycle

Public issues and policies can be examined from many perspectives. They have consequences that affect society, either directly or indirectly. The effects may include social, economic and environmental impacts. They are felt by all individuals, families, industry, agriculture, management, labor, consumers, producers and tax payers.

Issues usually evolve gradually over time, although sometimes a crisis may precipitate a need for rapid action.^{1,3} The issue resolution cycle generally includes these stages:

1. Growing concern and interest.
2. Involvement of officials and/or citizens.
3. Specification or framing of the fundamental issue (not just a list of symptoms).