

Engaging Policymakers in the Research Process: A Case Study Employing Community-Based Participatory Research Principles

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What is the Integrated Disability System (IDES)?

- Pre-IDES, service members were evaluated twice for disability: once by the Department of Defense and then again by the Veterans Administration
- These two ratings often differed, causing confusion among service members
- Under the IDES, service members receive one disability rating from the VA
- It is designed to streamline the transition process, shorten the time to claim adjudication, and increase satisfaction and understanding among users
- It was launched, with congressional support, in 2007 as a pilot
- Recent studies show that the process continues to be slow and confusing
- Congressional policymakers have oversight authority and are interested in the issue and eager to improve it

Background: Policymakers and researchers rarely collaborate on the execution of research, despite relying on each other's work. Bridging this gap can be beneficial to both parties. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) theorizes that more just and effective research results from involving the community of interest throughout the research process (development, delivery and evaluation). In this study, policymakers are considered the community. Through a case study of the military's Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES), we examine the feasibility of engaging policymakers in the formation of research questions and conducting resulting research. We hypothesize that by applying a CBPR approach to policy research, policymakers and researchers will be better able to work together to identify policy research priorities, produce research that is responsive to policy needs, and apply those findings to policy decisions. In a follow-up study we developed a survey based on the results of this study to investigate the experience of IDES.

Study Aim: Apply CBPR principles to the IDES case to provide a model for better integrating research into congressional health policy formulation and in doing so, inform development of a survey to evaluate the IDES experience that was relevant to congressional policymakers.

Research Questions: (1) How can researchers be effectively engaged in the formative stages of research? (2) How do congressional policymakers consider research in the context of policy decisions? (3) What kind of input into the research process do policymakers provide when invited to participate? (4) What value do policymakers add to the research process? (5) How does utilizing a CPBR framework impact the policymaking process?

Methods: We used a case study design and conducted 26 in-depth interviews with legislators, their staffs and representatives from the Veterans Administration, Military and Veteran Service Organizations. We selected key informants through purposeful sampling and used snowball sampling to identify additional informants. We coded the data at three levels and reassembled the coded data according to themes.

Applicable CBPR principles:

- (1) Recognize the community as a unit of identity
- (2) Build on the "strengths and resources of the community"
- (3) Facilitate collaborative relationships during all phases of the research
- (4) Promote co-learning among partners
- (5) Develop system through a cyclical and iterative process
- (6) Disseminate findings to all involved partners and involve partners in the dissemination process
- (7) Make a long-term commitment to the research process

Results: We conducted twenty-four interviews with 27 individuals. Interviews lasted 30-90 minutes. See box labeled “sample characteristics” for details about the sample. We found that Policymakers were amenable to participation in this study and indicated they would like to be involved in future academic research. They also indicated a need for policy relevant academic research, because academia is viewed as “credible” and trustworthy and they viewed it as beneficial to their policy work. Furthermore, academia and university-based research were

“They’re [academics] trying to find the truth. And no matter what that is... it comes from good, solid analysis.”

generally viewed as neutral as opposed to other research, such as that presented by agency researchers and non-governmental organizations, which interviewees described as more biased than academia.

Interviewees also indicated that they would welcome further participation from academia in policymaking but they do not currently involve researchers unless an established relationship exists. However, aside from existing relationships, they indicated that they had not thought to include academics unknown to them in their work or that they do not know how to reach out and begin new relationships.



Participants also indicated that presenting research in the context of policy was vital for research to be useful to policymaking. Interviewees described concise, concrete information that can be quickly and easily understood as far preferable to a

journal article. It was also important to recognize the entire veterans policymaking community. This extended beyond congress to the agencies and to non-governmental organizations. Finally, Policymakers were also provided concrete recommendations for a survey to evaluate the IDES.

Sample Characteristics	Number
Political Affiliation	
<i>Republican</i>	6
<i>Democrat</i>	18
<i>Unknown</i>	3
Place of Employment	
<i>Personal Office of a Member of Congress</i>	13
<i>Committee Office</i>	11
<i>Organizations that support military/veterans</i>	3
Chamber of Congress	
<i>House</i>	16
<i>Senate</i>	8
Former or Current Member of the Military	
<i>Yes</i>	15
<i>No</i>	12
Total	27

Discussion: This is the first time that a CBPR approach has been applied to federal policymakers. Our findings build on what is already known about how researchers may best interact with policymakers; it demonstrates that a CPBR approach can connect researchers and policymakers about policy-relevant research generally and inform research questions specifically. The data suggest that, in accordance with CPBR theory, by involving the policy community in the formative stages of the research, policymakers will be more interested in and more likely to apply the resulting research. The desire to participate in research may reflect how interviewees view academics and their research as “neutral,” and than an academic source provides “instant credibility.” The CBPR approach also fostered the formation of a long-term relationship between researchers and policymakers, something participants mentioned as vital to a collaborative relationship. The CBPR principle of recognizing the “community” as a unit of identity was essential to contextualizing IDES: it illuminates which perspectives are important to consider when crafting research questions. Leaving members of the veterans’ policymaking community out of the formative stages of research would have been a missed opportunity to increase the likelihood that study results will inform policy. While it remains to be seen if research resulting from this type of relationship gains traction, the findings from this case study are an important first step.

Conclusion: The CBPR approach is a viable approach for advancing the translation of research to policy. While researchers must be wary of tension between political parties and between legislators and administrative agencies, there is an opportunity to involve policymakers in the research process. Engaging in this type of relationship potentially increases the likelihood that research will inform policy.