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Case No. 5, Day 2  
Date Due: 101105

Speaking Scenario With A Leader Who  
Can Influence “The Agenda”

**Crisis Is Opportunity: Respond to the Mid-Term Elections with Proposals to Safeguard the Basic Social Safety Net and Health Programs and Reframe Thinking About What Is Making People Unhealthy**

**What Do I Hope to Accomplish:** As the 2011 legislative session approaches, Washington state leaders will be forced to consider deep spending cuts. A sagging economy and a budget shortfall estimated at \$4.5 billion<sup>1</sup> (or possibly \$5 billion on the upside) mean cuts will preoccupy the state Legislature and the array of interest groups who attempt to influence health and other policy statewide. State social service and health care programs will be at further risk.

My goal is to influence a key state leader most receptive to messages that socioeconomic factors and inequality, more than individual health behaviors, are making Washington unhealthy. I hope to show that likely efforts to further cut state programs benefiting mothers, children, and low-income residents will make the whole population less healthy.

I will attempt to convince this leader that an organized coalition needs to defend recent gains to promote family leave policies in Washington, such as the Washington State Family Leave Act. I will share with the leader some evidence showing that such policies are linked to positive health outcomes in other nations and that poverty prevention and social safety nets provide overall health benefits. I also will propose that to grab media attention, this strategy should be framed as a wake-up call that everyone’s health is at risk when secret and special interest money and billionaires can literally buy elections.

**Audience, State Senator Jeanne Kohl-Welles:** The intended meeting would run no more than 5 minutes



in her district legislative office in Seattle, before the start of the 2011 legislative session.

**Mindset:** Kohl-Welles is progressive Democratic senator from the 36<sup>th</sup> Legislative District (in Seattle). She was winning her re-election bid to the state Senate by an 83-17 percent margin as of Nov. 4. In short, she is in a safe district, is not up for reelection in four years, and has political breathing space. She has the capital to advance initiatives without risk of political blowback, even on the heels of a resounding victory for the GOP nationally and a “smaller government” populism by the Tea Party movement that attacked the recent national health reform legislation by the Obama administration.

Kohl-Welles has a PhD in sociology and an MA in education. Thus she has a greater understanding of the complexities surrounding population health issues and likely understands more than some of her state Senate colleagues that expensive health care is not making Americans or state residents healthier. In her most recent newsletter, she describes herself a politician who stands for “social justice, equality of opportunity, protection of the vulnerable and personal responsibility.” She identified her priorities as: protecting K-12 and higher education system, services for the vulnerable, and affordable housing. She also is a connected leader can engage a coalition on emerging strategies, such as communicating about the social determinants of health, and why policies that create more equity in society should be implemented to promote health.

Kohl-Welles backed the state budget passed in 2010, which cut \$4 billion from many services, saying it still supported policies to preserve education funding, safeguard health care for children, and promote early childhood learning—all policies that work to promote population health. In a recent op ed,<sup>2</sup> she highlighted how the budget protected social safety net programs with net health benefits:

- It protected Working Connections Child Care for 37,000 working families,
- It maintained health care for almost 500,000 of Washington’s children,
- It provided affordable health care for 69,000 working Washingtonians.

**More Cuts Coming:** However, Kohl-Welles will return to Olympia in a fiscal climate in which health care funding is at risk. Gov. Christine Gregoire already has implemented a 6 percent reduction in each agency's budgets for fiscal 2011 and is asking for options for 10 percent in additional cuts for the upcoming biennium. That means cuts to social services that provide for overall all population health. According to the Washington State Budget and Policy Center, during the last budget cycle<sup>4</sup>:

- Programs that ensure overall public health and the environment were cut by 9.3 percent (44,000 lower-income workers have been kicked off our state's Basic Health Plan);
- Investments in education—from preschool to universities—were cut by 11.3 percent;
- Efforts to create thriving communities, such as public safety and economic development, were cut 7.3 percent.

**The Response:** I also would propose to Kohl-Welles that she work with Democratic leadership in the Governor's office, the State House, and the State Senate to convene a half-day summit. The summit should recast the election outcome as less of a populist mandate by voters to reduce government services and more as a wake-up call about the dangers of rich, special interests to everyone's health. The summit should communicate that programs that help working families, maternal and child health, health care for the state's neediest, and continued social service support programs remain at risk, potentially harming the health of everyone in the state. This would not be a health industry or health expert gathering, but a strategy session for leaders who will control the agenda during the next session. It would set the tone to voters what the priorities are for the Legislature, and why.

**Gotcha Message To Consider:** Lastly, I would highlight to Kohl-Welles how inequity is making our state and country unhealthy. I would attempt to persuade her that she and others should start communicating that the 2010 mid-term elections demonstrate that elections can be bought, nationally and in Washington, by billionaires and corporate interests, which threaten the health of everyone<sup>1</sup>:

- WA State Ballot Initiative 1098, opposed by state billionaires Jeff Bezos (CEO, Amazon) and Steve Bahlmer (CEO, Microsoft Corp.) was losing with 65 percent

against the proposed tax on the wealthiest Washingtonians. It would have collected \$2 billion, setting aside 70 percent for education and the remainder for health care, as well as cut taxes on some small business.

- WA State Ballot Initiative 1107, which would repeal a new state tax on candy, soft drinks, bottled water and some processed foods, was winning with 60 percent of the vote. This will cut \$217 million in funding over the next two fiscal years. The measure drew in a record \$15 million of opposition spending by the American Beverage Association.
- Billionaires Buying Elections Nationally/Locally: The New York Times on Nov. 3 reported that nearly \$4 billion was spent on the midterm elections, the most ever, and most by interest groups who are largely anonymous to voters. Forbes reported<sup>3</sup> billionaires were heavily involved in this election cycle, in Washington state and nationally, underwriting election wins of two tea party U.S. Senate candidates through direct donations and money passed through a Republican-run PAC.

## REFERENCES

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