

***Foundations of Political Effectiveness  
in Cooperative Extension—2009***

**Case study: MILWAUKEE COUNTY**

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***Situation***

In 2007, the county UW-Extension department was asked to submit a one percent cut in its 2008 budget request. The department complied and reduced part of a clerical position and part of a horticulture helpline staff person. When the county executive released his recommended county budget, UW-Extension learned that it was entirely removed from it. This was the fourth time in six years that the county executive proposed eliminating the UW-Extension department in the recommended budget. This cut to the 2008 budget would result in the loss of 43 jobs and the loss of \$1.98 million in funds from state, federal, and private grants. The county executive stated "While UW-Extension is a nice program; it is not part of our core mission." He said he chose to eliminate the program rather than cut more deeply into bus service or parks.

In 2006, the Extension office in this county directly served more than 73,000 people. This recommended cut would have eliminated 4-H, nutrition education, master gardener, and gardening programs. Collectively, these major programs alone served more than 10,000 adults and youth.

**Short-Term Response**

Milwaukee County UW-Extension staff visited all 19 county board supervisors with the focus on educating them about the programs that were offered to constituents in their districts. Staff placed emphasis on the value of these programs, as well as on the numbers served and volunteers trained. This one-on-one time helped supervisors learn about all the programs that UW-Extension provided.

Extension staff also talked with volunteers, program participants and supporters who contacted the county executive's office to protest the cuts. County board supervisors were sent a clear message and given examples of Extension's value in helping adults, youth, families and businesses within the county.

Local media also picked up on the potential Extension cut and local newspapers and television stations covered the story. This helped spread the news throughout the entire county.

As a result, county supervisors put Milwaukee County UW-Extension back in the budget. The county executive tried to remove it again with a budget veto, but the county board had enough votes to override it.

**Longer Term Response**

The Extension department celebrated its victory, but did not end its efforts. Extension staff realized that political effectiveness is an everyday activity.

The department staff met and devised a strategy to keep county board supervisors and the county executive informed on a regular basis. This resulted in the creation of "value cards." The card is completed by a county resident who participated, or was impacted by an Extension program. The participant writes down on the card the program they participated in and why they value county Extension services. They also include their

name and address so the county office can determine which county supervisor represents them. The Extension office then records this in a database and sends the original to the county executive and a copy to the county supervisor. More than 200 value cards were sent to the county executive and county board supervisors in 2008.

Another tool developed was an e-mail list-serve. This is used to send key articles with information about Extension research and county programs to local government officials, volunteers and program participants. Volunteers and Extension supporters are also kept informed with succinct messages through more personal contact that includes phone calls, one-on-one conversations and personal e-mails.

This process seems to be making a difference. In 2008, the county executive in his recommended 2009 county budget eliminated the Extension department's horticulture help line. This resulted in a recommended \$12,400 cut. The county board of supervisors restored this funding and also supported the allocation of \$160,000 for the relocation of the Extension department to an upgraded facility. This allocation of funds to Extension was one of only a handful of county departments to receive an increase in funding in the 2009 budget. The county executive vetoed the \$12,400 for the horticulture help line and used a veto to reduce the allocation for relocation and moving from \$160,000 to \$60,000. The county board of supervisors was able to override both vetoes.

## **Outcomes**

- Constantly communicating the value of Extension programs to county board supervisors and the county executive is essential.
- Must be able to communicate effectively with succinct messages to supporters and volunteers via telephone, one-on-one dialog and e-mail. Supporters and volunteers must be able to communicate with elected officials through one-on-one conversation, public speaking, e-mail, letter and telephone conversation.
- Keep good, up-to-date records. When numbers are needed, they must be available immediately. You should be able to make your point in three minutes.
- Positive media attention is important. It spreads the message to a broad audience.