



# “Public Health Just Doesn’t Get It”:

## The resistance to using a Public Health framework in social justice movements.

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### AIM

This study exposes the resistance to using a public health framework to address social justice issues and prepares practitioners to anticipate, understand, and effectively respond to it.

### BACKGROUND

The public health framework has increasingly gained attention and credibility for use in prevention work, yet has also faced unexpected criticism. In fact, many public health practitioners are ill-prepared for the resistance they face when working to prevent issues like gendered violence, human trafficking, hate crimes, and other social justice issues. Many who work in the movements criticize public health, saying it utilizes a disease-oriented model and does not address oppression or social justice. Public Health, however, is very compatible with social justice and an anti-oppression framework.

### METHODS

Information was collected via confidential one-on-one interviews with community-based advocates in Oregon in 2009 and 2010.

### RESULTS

#### What is the resistance?

*Public Health is a medical model, with a history of use for disease prevention, which doesn't easily transfer to issues like violence prevention (which has more social than biological causes).*

*It doesn't address the root causes of complex social problems, just the risk factors.*

*Public Health is about HEALTH. What does that have to do with social justice?*

*Public Health acts like it owns prevention – oppressed communities have been doing this work for ever, just not using these inaccessible terms like “primary prevention.”*

*Public Health just tells people what to do. It doesn't care about eliminating injustice.*

*Public Health ignores gender. It ignores patriarchy. It doesn't acknowledge the 'gender-based' nature of many problems.*

#### How do individuals reconcile their concerns?

*We use the Public Health approach as a compliment to a number of other approaches: human rights, criminal justice, gender equity. It all works together to provide a comprehensive analysis of and response to a community-wide problem.*

*For me, Public Health provides the tools I need to put theory into action.*

*It wasn't until we learned the Public Health model of violence prevention that we really understood the value of data informing our efforts and the importance of thinking beyond the individual.*

*Public Health is just another way of wording all the things I learned in Community Psychology. It's all about the health of a community...finding out why people are falling into the river and stopping that rather than pulling out bodies. It provides a model for strategic action.*

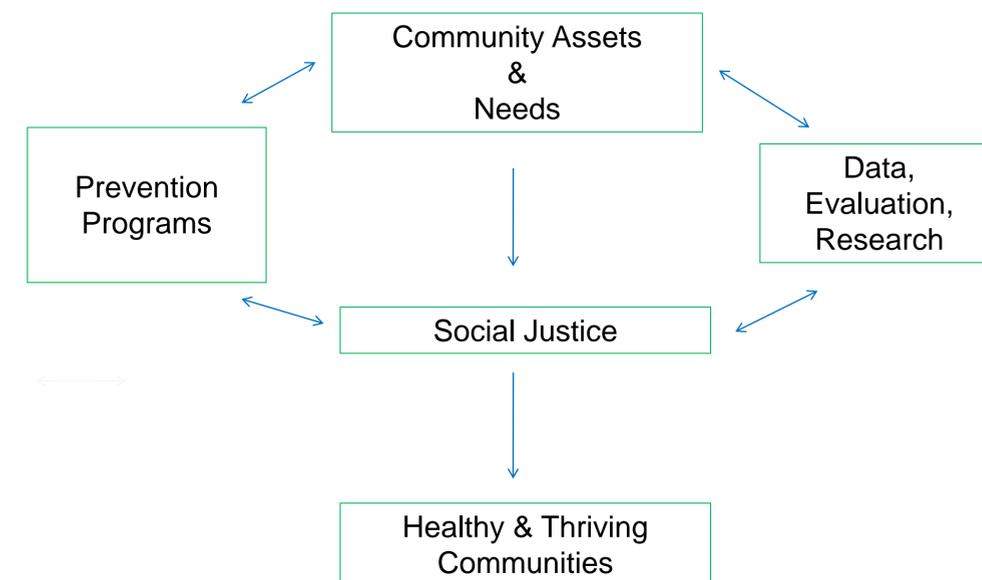
*It helped us to define violence and abuse as an issue of health equity. We hadn't thought about the fact that it stems from health disparities before. Social determinants of health – those are totally based in oppression.*

### CONCLUSION

**The quest for social justice is the driving force of ethical Public Health practice.**

David Lee, MPH  
CA Coalition Against Sexual Assault

### A SOCIAL JUSTICE MODEL OF PUBLIC HEALTH



### REFERENCES

Lee, David. (2009). A Social Justice Model of Public Health: Integrating Prevention of Violence Against Women [Video podcast]. Retrieved from <http://www.preventconnect.org/>

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