

North Carolina Poison Prevention Project

The Challenge

Every year, thousands of young children across North Carolina and the country accidentally ingest hazardous chemicals such as ammonia, pesticides and solvents that are commonly stored in and around their homes. Thinking the often brightly colored substances are fruit juice or candy, these youngsters frequently become violently ill and hundreds die each year.

To address this problem, the N.C. Pediatric Poison Prevention Project (P4) task force retained the Forge Communications team to design and conduct a yearlong statewide pilot public relations program to educate parents and other caregivers such as grandparents, siblings and babysitters how to guard against such accidental poisonings. Funded by a grant to the N.C. Department of Agriculture from EPA Region 4, the task force was a joint effort of the N.C. Pesticide Board, the N.C. Department of Health & Human Services, Wake Forest University, Bowman-Gray School of Medicine and the Carolinas Poison Center.

The Strategy

Working hand-in-hand with the P4 task force, the Forge team developed a comprehensive, targeted public relations program comprising a mix of targeted communication tactics:

Statewide Media Promotion – Kicked off by a news briefing featuring the Secretary of Health & Human Services guiding reporters through a model home pointing out dangerous household chemical, our media outreach effort targeted statewide and local media outlets (print and broadcast) as well as specific stakeholder groups (e.g., North Carolina parents, property managers, etc.). We developed and distributed monthly news releases on how to prevent accidental childhood poisoning and cultivated print and broadcast feature stories across the state.

Targeted Stakeholder Group Outreach – In addition to the standard media relations tactics (so-called “Aircover”), our team coordinated targeted outreach to key audiences in a position to help prevent childhood poisoning. Some of these tactics included the following:

- Educational materials that were distributed by N.C. hospitals to parents of newborns in the “goodie bags” they receive at discharge.
- Educational materials and newsletter stories aimed at companies that manage vacation rentals at the North Carolina coast as well as mountain resorts. The materials, in turn, were provided to property owners who were advised how to store household chemicals safely before families arrive for vacation.

- Radio PSA scripts sent to radio stations across the state.
- Educational materials distributed at public libraries targeting grandparents, older siblings and other individuals who might care for young children at home.
- Education materials disseminated to day care centers throughout the state advising them of steps they can take to protect children in their care.

The Results

From the kick-off news conference with the Secretary, the campaign received extensive favorable coverage throughout the year across the media waterfront. Television stories, newspaper articles, feature stories, newsletter articles and radio PSAs appeared throughout the 12-month campaign on a range of topics (e.g., a story advising families to safeguard against accidental poisonings of children and grandchildren visiting during the holidays). In addition, thousands of educational brochures and targeted fliers were distributed to target audiences such as new parents, rental property owners and day care center management on a regular basis.

At the end of the year, the P4 task force judged the program a success based on an identifiable increase in the number of calls to the Carolinas Poison Center seeking information about how to prevent accidents as well as a corresponding decrease in the number of emergency calls reporting incidents. The Wake Forest and Bowman-Gray team later published a scholarly article on the pilot project concluding that public relations programs can help “move the needle” in preventing accidental childhood poisoning.

