

Case 1: The Deciding Vote

You are one of nine members on the board of a local health department.

It has been discovered that your county suffers from unusually high rates of infant mortality. Although the county is facing a severe budget deficit, the state has offered additional funding to address this problem. Your board is considering two excellent proposals that would improve the infant mortality rate. Proposal A targets the highest risk group of women of childbearing age (which represents about eight percent of all women who are of childbearing age in the county). Proposal B targets all women of childbearing age in the county.

Four of the board members support Proposal A because they feel that it is the responsibility of the local health department to care for the most vulnerable members of the population with tailored interventions. They also believe that focusing on the highest risk group will have the greatest impact since county data has shown that this group is disproportionately affected by infant mortality. One of the four board members has stated, "Those with the highest disease burden should have special services." The other four board members support Proposal B because they believe that it is the responsibility of the local health department to serve the needs of all county residents equally. They feel that an intervention focused on all women of childbearing age will improve the health of everyone. One of these individuals has asserted, "A rising tide floats all boats."

Those eight board members have cast their votes with four supporting Proposal A and the other four supporting Proposal B. You are due to cast the ninth vote, which will determine which proposal is selected.

Study questions:

1. Which proposal will you choose, and why?
2. What additional information would help you to make an ethically informed decision?
3. Do you think it is morally right that a decision like this one should be made by majority vote of a nine-person panel of public health officials?
4. Suppose all pregnant women in the county already receive standard prenatal care, and the benefits whose allocation you are considering are extra benefits above and

beyond the essentials. Does this additional fact change your reasoning about which way to vote? If so, how and why?

Author: [Jessie Kimbrough Marshall, MD, MPH](#) is the medical director of [Washtenaw County Public Health](#) and an [adult hospital medicine physician at the University of Michigan](#) Health System. As medical director, she provides leadership in multiple areas including the provision of medical oversight to the health department, prevention of disease and promotion of public health, and policy-setting through coordinated planning with local health systems, health care providers, residents, and other county stakeholders. As a practicing physician, she cares for patients with chronic and acute disease. Dr. Marshall has years of leadership experience with [health equity initiatives](#), cross-cultural care training in medical education and clinical care of vulnerable populations.

Dr. Marshall attended medical school and completed residency at Wayne State University. She is a trained internal medicine and pediatric physician. She received a Master's Degree in Public Health with a concentration on health policy and management from Harvard School of Public Health and completed a health policy fellowship at Massachusetts General Hospital, in Boston, MA. Dr. Marshall completed the General Internal Medicine Research fellowship program at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, MD.