MODULE 1 – PUBLIC POLICY & POLICY ANALYSIS
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"Policy analysis" is defined as the answers to the question, what happens when we intervene in the social system this way, rather than that way, and why? To answer the question, policy analysis does four things.

First, it expresses an opinion. That is, it makes an assertion or claim. Second, it supports that opinion by including examples. Third, it justifies that opinion by explaining the examples that have been chosen to substantiate the claim. And, finally, fourth, it shows why the opinion matters. To do that, it extends the significance of the claim to how it will resolve the identified social or health issues or problems.

The purpose of public policy is to address problems. However, policy-making is not an event; it is a process. The process has many steps and includes voices of a number of different stakeholders and perspectives. We believe that evidence, argument, and persuasion drive policy analysis which, in turn, guides the policy-making decision process.

At the federal and state levels, policy may be developed or influenced by the executive, legislative, and/or judicial branches of government. We see this in the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, or ACA, which extends the provision of behavioral health services. We also see this in state or federal supreme-court decisions, such as Olmstead v. L.C. and E.W., which established that persons with behavioral health disorders have the right to live in the least restrictive setting possible.

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In addition, in order to be able to see the construction representation of positions of stakeholders in a specific decision-making event, it is critical to make sense of how an issue is problematized, how information is analyzed, and how stakeholders integrate information to determine best practices. Therefore, it is important to observe the interaction of policymakers, particularly how participants deliberate solutions and, during the process of deliberation, negotiate consensus-- especially since problems at the policy level can be considered significant problems.

Albert Einstein once said "The significant problems we have cannot be resolved at the same level of thinking with which we created them." Significant problems, from a policy perspective, are often contentious, hot-button issues that are resistant to simple explanation and require quite complex solutions. Rittel and Webber argue that significant problems-- that is, "wicked" problems-- are not only harder to define but also more open to dispute as to what constitutes a problem and what is the most effective solution to the problem.

Wicked problems can also be characterized by the following statements. One, the solution and the problem depends on how each is framed. Two, the stakeholders have different frames and language for understanding the problem. Three, the problem has time and resource constraints. And four, the problem is never solved definitively.

Take the example of stakeholders. Every stakeholder group has its position on the problem and a solution they prefer. Consensus-building, then, becomes a critical part of the policy-making process, resulting in numerous drafts of policy or legislation, until a policy problem is finally resolved through legislation. However, then another wicked problem may occur, if there is a huge gulf between the intent of the legislation and its implementation into practice. And the policy process starts over again.

In this next section, we will look at the 10 major properties of wicked problems.