WHAT IS PUBLIC POLICY?

Public policy is an attempt by the government to address a public issue. The government, whether it is city, state, or federal, develops public policy in terms of laws, regulations, decisions, and actions. There are three parts to public policy-making: problems, players, and the policy.

The problem is the issue that needs to be addressed. The player is the individual or group that is influential in forming a plan to address the problem in question. Policy is the finalized course of action decided upon by the government. In most cases, policies are widely open to interpretation by non-governmental players, including those in the private sector. Public policy is also made by leaders of religious and cultural institutions.

Academics continue to contemplate the definition of public policy, since there is currently no consensus. The study of public policy began in 1922, when Charles Merriam, a political scientist, sought to build a link between political theory and its application to reality. Numerous issues are addressed by public policy, including crime, education, foreign policy, health, and social welfare.

In 1993, due to ineffective healthcare policies, the Clinton administration sought to implement policy that would bring about a national healthcare system. As part of the policies being considered, the federal government would protect the healthcare consumer’s rights, consumers would be able to form alliances to obtain better healthcare prices, and caregivers would be required to provide fair healthcare packages. Players involved in the policy-making process included lobbying groups and politicians. While some changes were made to healthcare provisions by legislators, the policies advocated by the Clinton administration were not put into effect as result of political differences.

The rational model for the public policy-making process can be divided into three parts: agenda-setting, option-formulation, and implementation. Within the agenda-setting stage, the agencies and government officials meet to discuss the problem at hand. In the second stage,
option-formulation, alternative solutions are considered and final decisions are made regarding the best policy. Consequently, the decided policy is implemented in the final stage. Implied within this model is the fact that the needs of the society are a priority for the players involved in the policy-making process. Also, it is believed that the government will follow through on all decisions made by the final policy.

Unfortunately, those who frame the issue to be addressed by policy exert an enormous amount of influence over the entire process through their personalities, personal interests, political affiliations, and so on. The bias is extenuated by the players involved. The final outcome of the process, as well as its implementation, is therefore not as effective as that which could result from a purely rational process. Overall, however, public policy continues to be vital in addressing social concerns.

Can you think of a public policy issue that is important to you?