

Building a Legislative Campaign

1. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Identify problem you want to solve.

Begin by choosing a barrier to reproductive health in your state that you would like to address. Depending on the political climate in your state, passing evidence-based proactive policy may be unlikely. However, there can be other reasons to introduce legislation, such as raising public awareness.

Set goals for your legislative campaign.

There are many ways to define the success of a legislative campaign; passage is far from the only one. Once you have decided on these broader goals, you can develop key benchmarks for progress, such as the number of legislators you would like to speak to, or the number of grassroots activists who attend a specific lobby day.

Identify, organize, and/or expand your coalition.

Think about the stakeholders in your coalition today, and in the future; these include primary and secondary allied organizations, additional organizations and individuals you seek to recruit, champion elected officials, and the key individuals who will be the primary leaders for the coalition.

Meet with allies to develop the content of your proactive legislation.

Research existing legislation or model bills and develop state-specific content. You might want to make deletions, additions, or modifications to sections of the model legislation. Assess what resources are currently available, and what resources are needed. Then begin your initial campaign planning: create a communications plan; prepare a budget for the next 12 months that includes organizers, managers, consultants, and volunteers; and develop a fundraising plan.

Draft your state's version of the legislation and supportive materials.

Conduct the research that is necessary to make substantive changes to the model legislation you may have used and draft your state-specific version. You should also create materials to support your state's version of the legislation, such as legal memos, brochures, leave-behinds, press and media material, and campaign merchandise.

2. STARTING THE PUBLIC CAMPAIGN: ORGANIZING AND MAKING THE CASE

Build momentum and “chatter” about your legislation.

Once you've mapped out your resources and initial campaign plan, and drafted the legislation, it's time to start your public campaign. Create buzz for your policy. What problems will it fix? Why is it needed? Begin by holding informational meetings and disseminating message materials to interested groups, individuals, foundations, and individual donors, and shopping draft legislation (which should be confidential) to champion legislators and their staff. You can use these meetings to identify possible sponsors, and get a feel for the opportunities and challenges ahead. You may also participate in panels or give presentations to publicize the legislation. Make sure to create ways for individuals or allied organizations to get involved and show grassroots and grassroots support, such as hosting community events. Use doctors as spokespeople when desired and possible. This is also the right time to begin working with the media and conducting online and social media advocacy. To stay on track, develop a timeline and operational plan that includes all of this work. This should be flexible and dynamic; some things will likely change as you move toward achieving your goals.

Assess the political landscape of your state government.

Understand the demographics of the state legislature: identify legislators who are pro-choice, anti-choice, pro-health care, are health care providers, or vote for other progressive issues like LGBTQ or immigrants' rights, and those who have leadership roles in relevant committees. Identify who of your allies, both organizations and individuals, are constituents for key elected officials. As you map out the legislators you will try to work with, make sure you also understand the history and context of reproductive health legislation in your state that has passed or failed. Try to identify what led to success or failure. Research potential or existing opponents to pro-choice legislation and try to anticipate challenges and strategize solutions.

3. INTRODUCING YOUR STATE'S ACT

Hold informational meetings with legislators or their staff and disseminate message materials.

Focus on legislators who are in leadership positions, chair key committees, or are historically supportive of choice. During these meetings, you can shop confidential draft legislation to interested legislators to identify sponsors – ideally, both pro-choice Republicans and Democrats. Follow up on these meetings to secure sponsorship, and work with sponsors to ensure that they are bought into the draft language.

Demonstrate community support for the legislation.

In order to build momentum as you begin holding these meetings, circulate sign-on letters and petitions showing the support of constituents and experts. Organizations and physicians can both contribute sign-on letters, which can be directed to the media and/or the legislature. Media attention is also very helpful to build momentum at this stage (more information is available in Building a Communications Campaign). As you ramp up to the introduction of your legislation, continue to facilitate the involvement of your base, as well as allied organizations and experts. You can host legislative briefings, events at the Capitol, and more. A press conference is an important media opportunity that should coincide with the introduction of your bill. More information on planning this event is available in Building a Communications Campaign.

4. MOVING TOWARDS PASSAGE OF YOUR STATE'S ACT

Organize campaign events to rally your base, and to gain attention from the press and the legislature.

There are numerous activities you can undertake in order to support your campaign, including: canvassing and tabling to raise awareness and gather petition signatures; holding rallies remotely or at the Capitol; and hosting house parties, taking advantage of tabling opportunities, or attending other community events. Continue to conduct media outreach, especially around these campaign events and any significant moments of legislative action, as outlined in your communications campaign plan.

Intensify educational efforts.

Continue meeting with any caucus or committee that deals with pro-choice, reproductive health, women's, or health care issues, and meet with pro-choice champions in the legislature. You should also meet with key legislative staff and Governor's staff who are or may be supportive of issues addressed in the Act. If you have the resources, consider working with a professional lobbyist. A grassroots lobbying effort is an essential complement to this work inside the dome. Encourage your supporters to call or e-mail their support to their legislators, and to write thank-you notes after they sign on as a sponsor or vote favorably. Track the progress of the bill, and ensure that you have a presence at hearings and votes. Whenever possible, supporters and experts should submit or read testimony when your bill is up for a vote or committee hearing. Even if they do not testify, try to bring as many activists with you to the Capitol as possible as a sign of broad constituent support.

Sample Legislative Campaign Timeline

Before legislation is introduced

- Determine your spokespeople and train them well
- Build strong media lists
- Meet with reporters to brief them on the issue
- Draft messaging and talking points on the issue and legislation (sample messaging guidelines and a message box focused on a medical framework are included with this toolkit)
- Use messaging to inform press advisories, releases, and statements to come
- Build social media audience and educate followers on need for legislation

When legislation is introduced

- Hold press conference with spokespeople and legislators announcing bill
- Push editorial boards to cover legislation favorably
- Submit op-eds and letters to the editor from supporters and validators to local papers (sample op-ed included with this toolkit)
- Use social media to encourage press coverage and legislative support

After legislation is introduced

- Hold press call to elaborate on need for legislation and publish white paper showing research backing legislation
- Keep pressing for editorial and reporter coverage of the legislation
- Ask legislators to schedule public hearing where supporters can testify
- Plan lobbying day in the statehouse for supporters to talk to their representatives about the bill
- Continue to use social media to drive interest in the legislation and issue

Nearing a legislative action (hearing, vote, legislative deadline...)

- Hold rally at statehouse to generate press and show community support
- Keep pressuring for editorial coverage, targeting hometown papers of key legislators
- Advise press on availability of spokespeople around legislative action

Following a legislative action

- Respond on social media quickly to legislative moves
- Release congratulatory or condemning statement, depending on news
- Reach out to editorial boards and encourage them to speak out