



Keeping Focus on the Coverage Gap: Best Practices for Organizing Town Halls

Overview

In years when there's no legislative debate on closing the coverage gap, consumer health advocates have implemented proactive strategies to continue to build support and offer new momentum for their states to adopt Medicaid expansion. For example, in Tennessee, Nebraska and Georgia advocates have successfully used town halls to inform and engage community members, grassroots partners, grassroots leaders, legislators and the local media on the coverage gap and its impact at the local level. Advocates used these informal public meetings to generate media coverage, launch local advocacy efforts, identify new supporters and messengers, and build relationships with new allies to move the conversation on the coverage gap forward.

This toolkit includes tips, best practices and lessons learned from advocates that have organized town halls on the coverage gap. It provides advocates in non-expansion states with the steps and tools needed to effectively use town halls as proactive grassroots, grassroots, stakeholder and media engagement strategies to shape the coverage gap debate in their state. Additionally, while this toolkit is intended to offer town hall strategies for states still working to close the coverage gap, we believe the best practices highlighted in this resource will resonate for other advocacy campaigns as well.

Initial Planning

Outline your goals

Decide at the outset what the goal(s) of your town hall is to inform how you'll plan, promote and execute it. If the goal is to sway a conservative legislator to support closing the gap, recruit influential messengers (such as business leaders, chambers of commerce, hospital directors or providers) to promote the meeting to ensure it attracts a conservative audience. If your goal is to build a grassroots base in a local community, identify local activists to help plan and promote the meeting to attract new supporters.

Goals for Town Halls:
- Move moderate legislator(s) to support expansion
- Form an energized grassroots base
- Identify new coverage gap spokespeople
- Strengthen relationships with local and statewide press

Strategically target districts where your town halls will be most effective at moving the conversation on closing the coverage gap forward. Focus on districts most affected by the coverage gap or represented by legislators that could be moved by compelling constituent stories, influential community leaders or local media. Figure out which districts are represented by legislators serving on policy committees assigned to vote on expansion-related proposals (e.g., chairs and members of a state's health policy or budget committee). Look at communities represented by legislators who have casted pivotal votes on the coverage gap. Likewise, look at districts where legislators have contested races coming up for their seats as constituent pressure matters more in election cycles.

Identify supporters to help organize, promote and participate in the town halls. Use lists of supporters who have participated in patch-through call-in campaigns directed at legislative offices or

signed online petitions in support of closing the gap. These lists might come from your own organization’s data (i.e. past volunteers, email list contacts, donors) or from your partner organizations’ similar lists. Likewise, The [Voter Activation Network \(VAN\)](#) could serve as another resource to determine potential expansion supporters from key districts based on voter registration, modelling, and past issue campaign coding. If you don’t have access to the VAN, work with coalition partners who have access to it, such as your [State Voices](#) (c3) or [America Votes](#) (c4) tables. Keep in mind that partisan, progressive organizations typically use this tool to access voter data for their campaigns.

Focus on influential leaders and stakeholders (such as local hospital directors) who could help organize the town hall and reach moderate legislators. Ask supporters or coalition partners to share contacts or facilitate connections with influential stakeholders and community leaders. If you’re unfamiliar with a particular region, conduct a site visit to meet directly and develop relationships with local leaders and stakeholders.

<p>The Tennessee Justice Center targeted 11 districts based on legislators’ party affiliations, committee membership and position on expansion. They also reached out to supporters who signed online petitions, joined phone banks and participated in patch-through call-in campaigns.</p>	<p>Nebraska Appleseed and the Center for Rural Affairs employed their legislative champion to drive the turnout of other legislative leaders to the town hall. They also connected with supporters who signed up for their newsletters and used the VAN to pull new lists of supporters.</p>	<p>Georgians for a Healthy Future focused on organizing town hall meetings in communities north of Atlanta represented by conservative legislators. They worked with coalition partners to engage stakeholders, local community leaders and conservative legislators to join their town halls.</p>
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Reach out to local media who may be helpful in promoting the town hall and covering the coverage gap’s impact at the local level. Hold editorial board meetings or press roundtables to bridge connections with local media. Collaborate with coalition partners who have contacts with local newspapers. Work with a public relations firm (if you have access to one) to help you identify editorial boards and newspapers in specific targeted regions, as well as identify consumers who can put their names on op-eds or letters to the editor (LTEs). Leverage relationships that supporters have with the local media, including ethnic media in small, rural districts where you may not have connections.

Work Out Logistics

Recruit a small planning team to organize, promote and host the town hall. Keep in mind the goal(s) of your town hall. If the goal is to motivate conservative legislators to support closing the gap, include influential or conservative messengers at the early stages of the meeting planning process to ensure the town hall appeals to fellow conservative leaders. Recruit planning team members by contacting supporters via email or by phone (multiple times) to gauge their interest. Engage key stakeholders who may serve as potential meeting sponsors (e.g., providers, clinics, churches, hospitals) and work to develop relationships with influential leaders and messengers to help map out a town hall that attracts and moves moderate legislators to support closing the gap. If you have strong ties with community leaders representing diverse constituencies, think about reaching out to them to help plan your town hall.

Organize prep meetings to ensure all planning team members

<p>Media Engagement in Tennessee While the governor’s proposal to close the coverage gap had the backing of the statewide newspaper, The Tennessean, local newspapers in targeted districts weren’t covering the proposal. Advocates leveraged supporters’ relationships with local newspaper staff to educate editorial boards about the effort, engage them around attending the town hall and help them frame news stories to reach specific target and conservative audiences. They also helped connect local media with consumers from targeted districts to highlight their stories and experiences being in the coverage gap.</p>

stay on the same page. Use these meetings to plan meeting facilitation roles and steps for recruiting audience members and influential speakers (including legislators). Work with your planning team to craft an agenda, identify accessibility needs and outline next steps. Tennessee advocates, for example, used prep meetings to help faith leaders prepare sermons to give at their town halls on how their congregants are impacted by the coverage gap. You can also use these meetings to discuss how you will make sure to track attendees and gather all contact information for list-building opportunities.

Determine the meeting venue and audience. Select a meeting location (such as a church hall or hospital auditorium) that is accessible for a group of **40-50 attendees**. To make the town hall look packed, think about selecting a meeting venue that seats less than the number of people you expect would be able to attend. Identify potential AV needs to provide all attendees, including attendees with accessibility needs, opportunities to meaningfully participate in your meeting. Depending on the goals for the town hall, you may also want to consider the message a particular venue choice sends. For example, a labor union hall may not be the most effective venue to draw attendance from conservative partners while a chamber of commerce hall may be off-putting to grassroots activists. If the goal is to generate press, venue choice will also matter. Draft a timeline for when and how you should invite special guests.

Promoting

Invite and engage local media. Consider the media’s influential role in the community. Offer them opportunities to interview spokespeople (constituents, activists, business leaders and/or legislators) to highlight the coverage gap’s local impact. Circulate press releases with meeting details to generate community interest. Encourage newspaper staff to write editorials in support of expanding Medicaid or pieces on the coverage gap’s local impact leading up to (and after) the town hall. Nebraska advocates, for example, developed two-five page reports with data they’d already collected on the number of people falling into the coverage gap and the coverage gap’s impact on the local community to share with local media contacts. In addition to engaging local media, Tennessee advocates also leveraged relationships they had with the statewide newspaper, The Tennessean, to cover stories of people impacted by the coverage gap throughout the state.

Invite influential guests. To ensure the town hall has a high turnout, invite targeted legislators who could be moved by compelling constituent stories and influential community leaders. Depending on the goals of the session, extend invitations to small business leaders, hospital executives, clinic directors, faith leaders and community health workers encouraging them to learn about and share how they’re impacted by the coverage gap. Notify influential community leaders and guests **at least one month** in advance of the town hall meeting to ensure it’s on their calendars.

Drive grassroots turnout. Keep in mind the goal(s) of your town hall as it will inform who should be the “face” of the meeting. Turning out vocal community activists who may be critical of that particular legislator could isolate him/her, moving the legislator further away from supporting expansion. To ensure the meeting provides opportunities to build your grassroots base, encourage people in the coverage gap to attend and share their stories. Empower grassroots supporters to participate, learn about and hear how they could be involved in local close the gap advocacy efforts. Use your supporter lists to mobilize members via email or by phone to attend. Encourage

<p>Nebraska’s Story Collection Efforts Advocates targeted people in the coverage gap by partnering with clinics and direct service providers. They organized intensive phone banks where volunteers called contacts shared by coalition partners to ask if they know people in the coverage gap or if they would like to take part in future opportunities, including contributing to LTEs. As a result, advocates were able to generate media coverage in rural parts of the state.</p>

supporters to bring a friend (or two) and/or someone in the coverage gap. Post flyers with town hall details (meeting, time, location, etc) in accessible places, such as schools, libraries and churches. Use your social media accounts to drum up RSVPs as well. As a general rule of thumb, it's safest to assume that nearly 50 percent of those who RSVP affirmatively will not attend; make sure to overshoot your turnout goals if attendance, and the optics of a large turnout, matter to your target goals.

Executing

Identify new supporters and individuals impacted by the coverage gap. On the day of the meeting, make the most of all of the voices in the room. Include sign-in sheets to continue gathering list of supporters or use laptops to ensure legibility. Draft and distribute postcards for constituents to sign to inform legislators about the coverage gap's impact in their district and make sure to have volunteers collect them at the event. Draft and distribute a questionnaire asking attendees to provide the number of people they know who are in the coverage gap. Since data on the number of people locally in the coverage gap could be limited, [capturing this data](#) at the meeting could be crucial for future opportunities or meetings with lawmakers who could be moved to support closing the coverage gap. Bring a video camera to record people willing to share how they're impacted by the coverage gap. Take a photo of individuals open to having their photo and/or story shared on social media. Think about having consumers sign [waiver forms](#) on-site asking them for permission to use their story for potential media opportunities in the future.

Connect media with people in the gap. Facilitate connections between editorial board members and newspaper staff with consumers and community leaders impacted by the coverage gap. Encourage local community members and leaders to develop and maintain relationships with the local media for future events and media opportunities to keep focus on closing the gap. For example, advocates in Tennessee encouraged and supported faith leaders in organizing religiously-themed meetings tied to the coverage gap in six of the state's largest media markets that helped generate earned media on the coverage gap's impact at the local level.

Close the town hall with next steps. Ask attendees to stay after the meeting if they're interested in planning next steps and encourage everyone to tell their neighbors about your campaign to close the gap. You can also incorporate this section of the town hall directly into the agenda, giving attendees something concrete to work towards going forward. Identify grassroots supporters, stakeholders or community leaders who could potentially host future monthly coverage gap meetings to keep the community engaged and focused on closing the coverage gap. Encourage participants to speak out about the coverage gap and/or any pending proposals in the coming weeks with their friends and neighbors. Devise and implement local advocacy campaigns (such as a [city council resolution campaign](#)) to keep local supporters engaged. Tennessee advocates launched a "key" campaign by collecting keys from supporters across the country to deliver to legislative offices to demonstrate how they are "the key" to closing the coverage gap. Continue [engaging faith leaders](#) and provide them with information on how the coverage gap impacts the local community. Share ways their congregations could be involved in local advocacy efforts. Guide local supporters, stakeholders and community leaders in hosting monthly community coverage gap meetings to keep the community engaged and focused on closing the coverage gap.

Tennessee's Next Steps

After holding their town halls, Tennessee advocates completed a [Counting the Cost Tour Report](#) on how the coverage gap impacts Tennesseans. Advocates included facts and figures about impact the coverage gap has in key areas of the state for supporters, faith leaders and stakeholders to use to keep building momentum and move their legislative leaders to support closing the gap. They also applied lessons learned from their town halls to create resources, such as the [Candlelight Vigil Toolkit](#) and [Petition Toolkit](#).

Follow-up

Step One: Debrief the town hall. Meet with your planning team to go over what worked well, what could have been improved and identify next steps. Determine how to follow-up with attendees and speakers and deliver “thank you” messages to special guests (such as legislators or prominent community leaders) for attending. Send emails or host conference calls to update supporters and community members on your campaign’s progress. In this follow-up, direct attendees to your campaign’s website and/or invite them to future meetings to learn about local advocacy efforts to close the gap. If possible, include an accessible link for them to use to invite their friends, neighbors and family members to sign-up as well, perhaps using social media graphics.

Georgia’s Follow-Up

After holding a series of town halls to engage key stakeholders and conservative legislators, Georgia advocates helped organize follow-up meetings and implemented communications strategies keeping their targeted regions involved in coverage gap conversations. They developed a messaging guide for coalition partners and held in-district meetings followed by publishing LTEs and op-eds on the need to close the gap.

Step 2: Develop a proactive media plan. Explore potential story ideas collected from meeting attendees to pitch to local media to shape the coverage gap debate. Use data, consumer stories and interviews collected from the town hall meeting to publish op-eds and LTEs to keep the media engaged on the issue. Have op-eds or LTEs explain what the ‘cost of doing nothing’ is to the local community. Ask supportive stakeholder groups, such as hospital leaders or small business owners, to draft op-eds or submit op-eds/LTEs that your organization has drafted for them, lightening their lift and increasing their odds of engagement in the effort.

Step 3: Identify next steps.

Potential Challenges

Limited capacity. Advocates may have limited resources and staffing capacity to plan, promote, and launch the town halls. They may also have limited time to follow-up with the newly energized groups of supporters from each district who could be helpful in organizing future events or engaging with the media. To keep targeted communities focused on the coverage gap, dedicate time and resources to recruit supporters, community leaders and stakeholders who would be willing to help organize future town halls, follow-up with energized supporters and keep engaging the local media to build community support on closing the gap. One idea for this is to identify volunteer captains who can be responsible for particular follow-up elements. For example, if you have one consumer who is particularly invested and responsive who lives in a targeted district, they can be responsible for outreach to their community and tracking next steps. Empowering them, and creating a title for their role (i.e. Community Captain) allows them to take ownership of their district, frees up staff time and engages

Key State Impacts

- **Tennessee** advocates’ town hall meetings helped switch conservative legislative leaders’ position on expansion, broadened public awareness on the issue and generated strong editorial and op-ed support behind closing the gap. These efforts also helped to continue building momentum to close the gap following the chair of the Senate Health Committee switching their position to support Insure Tennessee.
- In **Georgia**, town halls focused on increasing stakeholder engagement were instrumental in influencing business and industry leaders to offer recommendations on expansion. These efforts led to increased engagement of new faith-based partners, who also helped sway conservative state legislators sitting on influential committees to close the gap.
- **Nebraska** town halls have helped generate local earned media coverage, maintain public conversation on the coverage gap, increase stakeholder participation and move conservative legislators toward publicly supporting expansion. These town halls helped build momentum behind the introduction of 2016 legislation by a conservative policymaker to close the coverage gap in the state. They also helped generate new, vocal support from moderate and traditionally conservative legislators.

community members with a neighbor-based messenger in a powerful way.

Lessons Learned

Start with who you know. Look at your supporter lists to identify which supporters from your targeted legislative districts should be approached with helping to organize a town hall meeting. Leverage the relationships these supporters hold with local influential community leaders, business leaders and local media to ensure the town halls are effective, successful and build community support behind the closing the gap. Advocates in Tennessee, Georgia and Nebraska found it useful to have an engaged and energized group of supporters from targeted districts ready and willing to help organize meetings with local residents. In targeted districts where advocates didn't identify supporters, advocates had to invest more time and resources to develop relationships and create buy-in from local supporters and community leaders in planning their town halls.

Don't take too big of a bite. Focus on a manageable number of districts to host your town halls. Look at districts represented by leaders who could be ultimately influential in moving expansion proposals forward. Keep in mind your staffing capacity, resource availability and where you or coalition partners have contacts. Think about where in your state town halls could be most effective in building your campaign's momentum to close the gap.

Develop a good hook. Explore messaging to mobilize community leaders, activists, new supporters and stakeholders to attend the town hall meetings. For example, advocates could advertise town hall meetings as opportunities for community members to share how the coverage gap has impacted them and their community. Georgia advocates, for example, developed a series of key economic messages on how closing the coverage gap benefits local rural hospitals, saves taxpayer dollars and allows people to visit their doctors instead of the emergency room when they're sick.

Conclusion

Town hall meetings in states such as Tennessee, Nebraska and Georgia have demonstrated how the coverage gap touches a wide variety of communities. In rural and urban areas, advocates were able to meet and hear directly from constituents falling in the coverage gap, doctors serving uninsured patients, business leaders experiencing economic consequences and pastors preaching to uninsured congregations. They were also able to leverage the strong ties community members had with the local media to push messages on how the coverage gap impacts all facets of the community to influence key decision makers. The critical work done by these demonstrates how powerful town halls can be in shaping the coverage gap debate and empowering communities to launch locally based advocacy efforts.

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Community Catalyst works to ensure consumer interests are represented wherever important decisions about health and the health system are made: in communities, courtrooms, statehouses and on Capitol Hill.

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