



# LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, state advocates have adapted their legislative advocacy strategies over and over again. Typical approaches, like holding in-person rallies, turning out swaths of people to testify at the State House, and hosting community meetings with policymakers and constituents all of a sudden became impossible or unsafe. Some state legislatures remain entirely remote, others cycle between offering remote options and holding in-person hearings, and others still have chosen to do their work entirely in-person without putting in place effective safety measures, disregarding public health. In all fifty states, advocates have been forced to morph their strategies to continue to lift up the priorities of those most affected while keeping themselves, their partners, and the community members they work with safe. It has required significant rethinking of the ways to partner with legislative champions while coming up with strategies to hold other lawmakers accountable to constituent needs.

Advocates have been nimble and creative, coming up with unique ways to continue to work towards health justice in unprecedented times. We also want to acknowledge that barriers to engaging with policymakers are not new, especially for people with disabilities whose accessibility needs have long been disregarded. The pandemic, in conjunction with the lack of responsiveness from lawmakers, has exacerbated these barriers. Still, advocates persist.

This toolkit captures advocacy best practices put into place throughout the pandemic. We hope that, as we move through 2021 legislative sessions, it will give you a sense of what others have tried and found to be successful. We imagine that strategies will continue to emerge that allow advocates to thoughtfully engage with decision makers, elevate the voices of consumers and ensure that people stay safe as we weather the pandemic for a second winter. We will continue to update this resource with innovative approaches, recognizing that there is indeed a learning curve from one month to the next.

## ENGAGING WITH LEGISLATORS: EFFECTIVE LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY TACTICS DURING THE PANDEMIC

For some advocates, the increased reliance on digital technology has made it easier to connect with some legislators, whether through a Zoom call or a virtual town hall. For the majority of advocates, though, it has become far more challenging to connect with a majority of their policymakers. Below are some examples of ways advocates have pushed through these barriers. Whether leveraging social media, going back to the basics and sending snail mail, or holding a vast array of virtual events, advocates have utilized these tactics to successfully engage with policymakers.

### LEVERAGING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media provides an avenue for advocates to engage with legislators and to apply public pressure. Many legislators and their staff members are active on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. It can be advantageous for advocates to track what social media platforms their legislators and their legislators' staff members are most active on. From there, advocates can create targeted social media campaigns.

#### ***State Example: Illinois***

Advocates in Illinois saw the need to for constituents to directly reach their legislators after their typical means of engagement were limited due to the pandemic. The [Protect Our Care Illinois](#) coalition used Facebook Live to hold a [town hall](#), where advocates shared consumer stories with legislators. To ensure that legislators would attend to directly hear the challenges their constituents were facing, Protect Our Care Illinois invited lawmakers to speak at the event.

The town hall was a success, and Protect Our Care then utilized Facebook Live to hold another type of event – this time a celebratory [press conference](#). Following their successful campaign to make Illinois the first state in the country to expand health care to low-income, immigrant seniors, Protect Our Care connected with legislators to hold this press conference, alerting these 'invited guests' to the opportunity to engage with a large number of constituents simultaneously. By using

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Facebook Live, advocates added multiple 'hosts' of the event, allowing the event to be publicized to all of the followers of each account. Advocates effectively leveraged their coalition – digitally – by utilizing this Facebook feature.

Below are some suggestions and a sample event agenda for advocates looking to host a similar Facebook Live town hall-style event.

## Before the Town Hall:

### 1. Invite legislative champions.









- This is an opportunity to ask your allies to invite other lawmakers to speak at the event. Often legislative champions are the most effective at connecting advocates to other lawmakers who they have not established relationships with.
- In the invitation include the following: length of time you are asking them to speak for (ex. "We are hoping that you could spend 3-5 minutes discussing X issue"), a tentative agenda, and Zoom link & directions (if applicable).

2. Invite consumers, storytellers, and other advocates. This is an opportunity for people to share their stories directly with lawmakers.

3. Be mindful of the length of the event. Advocates noted that lawmakers and constituents are more likely to attend and stay for the entirety of the event if it is shorter (1-1.5 hours max)

4. Determine the platform that speakers will be using during the livestream. Zoom, for example, allows meetings to livestream on Facebook Live. Find instructions [here](#).

## Hosts

-  **Healthy Illinois**  
Community
-  **EverThrive Illinois**  
Community Organization · Nonprofit Organization
-  **Shriver Center on Poverty Law**  
Nonprofit Organization
-  **Sinai Chicago**  
Hospital · Doctor · Nonprofit Organization
-  **Illinois Legislative Latino Caucus 2020**  
Government Organization
-  **State Senator Omar Aquino** ✓  
Government Official
-  **State Representative Delia Ramirez** ✓  
Government Official
-  **Protect Our Care Illinois**  
Nonprofit Organization

## ***Sample Facebook Live Town Hall Event Agenda:***

### **1. Opening remarks**

- The host can begin by briefly contextualizing the call.
- Questions to consider: What is the objective of the call? What is the political context of the call?
- Agenda overview: what to expect during the call, speaker lineup

### **2. Speakers**

- Lawmakers
  - Advocates have noted that lawmakers are more likely to attend town hall-style events when they are invited to speak at the beginning of the event.
- Consumers, storytellers, advocates

### **3. Closing remarks**

- Reiterate the priorities for consumers, invite attendees to become more involved, thank lawmakers and storytellers

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The [Paid Sick Time Chicago coalition](#) utilized YouTube and TikTok – two video-sharing platforms – to [virtually deliver a petition](#) calling on Illinois state leaders to pass legislation for paid sick days. By employing this tactic, the Paid Sick Time Chicago coalition was able to build energy among advocates by actively involving them in this campaign. We look forward to seeing how advocates continue to use platforms like TikTok to elevate their work and apply public pressure on lawmakers. Please reach out to Rachel ([rkorkodilos@communitycatalyst.org](mailto:rkorkodilos@communitycatalyst.org)) if you are using TikTok, or similar platforms in innovative ways during the pandemic.

For advocates at Georgians for a Healthy Future ([GHF](#)), they took on an entirely new approach to fundraising this year with their, Give 'Em Health Virtual Trivia Night. A teams-driven, interactive trivia competition, hosted over Zoom the event included categories such as Health Care Current Events, Health on Film/TV and Health Care Quotes. GHF thought it was critical to include fun pop culture references, that way everyone from the average consumer to the biggest policy wonk could feel included. In addition to clever categories and questions, the GHF team featured special guests via video questions. GHF was able to reach out to some state legislators to record short messages of support for the organization and to read the question and reveal the answer. The highlight was their [question](#) and [answer](#) from former Surgeon General Dr. David Satcher. GHF's advice: guest speakers are happy to help if you make it easy and give them clear instructions.

With solicitation of sponsors as well as individual ticket sales, the event grossed \$8000, surpassing their initial goals. They found that specific asks of individuals to sponsor or support (or to at least purchase a ticket) were more successful and that they had more success with corporate asks than in previous years. The night was hosted by an event company that GHF contracted with; the additional support helped the event run smoothly and allowed GHF staff to enjoy themselves.

## SNAIL MAIL

Along with digital communications, advocates are going back to the basics and sending mail to legislators in creative ways.

### *State Example: Texas*

[#SickOfItTX](#) started off their legislative session with a [postcard campaign](#), with the goal to send each of the 181 members of the Texas legislature at least 50 handwritten postcards emphasizing why Texans need Medicaid expansion. [#SickOfItTX](#) delivered over 9,000 postcards and stamps to advocates, who wrote their own messages and in turn sent postcards to lawmakers. Throughout this campaign – which made it clear to state leaders that this is the time to extend health coverage to working Texans who can't afford it – advocates employed a variety of innovative strategies to sustain engagement.



Campaign organizers provided multiple ways for people to obtain postcards that would then be sent. Those interested could request postcards and stamps using this [google form](#). In addition to this google form, [#SickOfItTX](#) provided a [toolkit](#) with [postcards to print out at home](#). This toolkit also provides clear step-by-step instructions on obtaining, writing, and sending the postcards, as well as messaging guidance. This comprehensive toolkit made it easier for people to participate in the campaign.

For those interested in connecting with health care advocates and other postcard writers, [#SickOfItTX](#) hosted postcard writing parties on Zoom. They also provided guidance to those interested in hosting their own postcard writing parties.

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## VIRTUAL EVENTS

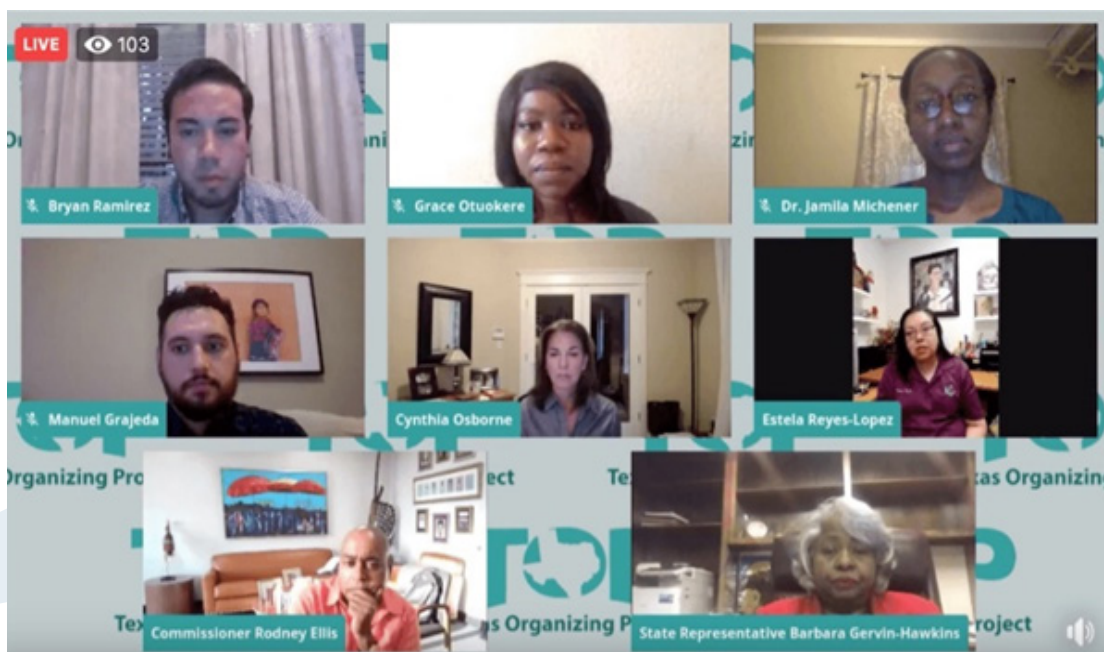
As virtual events have become more commonplace – and necessary due to the pandemic – advocates have tried many different virtual event formats.

### **State Example: #SickOffItTX**

In May, the [#SickoffItTX campaign](#) – a non-partisan coalition of advocates fighting for expanded health care coverage, led by the [Texas Organizing Project](#), the [Children’s Defense Fund - Texas](#), and [Every Texan](#) – hosted [the first-ever Virtual Rally for Medicaid expansion](#) in partnership with 20 local and statewide advocacy groups. Advocates promoted the rally through their supporter bases, emails, social media, and phone banking efforts. The rally called on the state of Texas and Governor Abbott specifically to take immediate action to expand Medicaid. The event, hosted on Zoom and simultaneously livestreamed on Facebook, featured powerful testimonials from Texans living in the coverage gap, state lawmakers, and advocates. During the rally, organizers made several direct asks to supporters watching and generated hundreds of constituent letters and tweets targeting Governor Abbot. The rally now has over 27,000 views as advocates host a recording of the rally on their website for new supporters to watch.



As 2021 legislative sessions carry on, Community Catalyst will continue to take note and record innovative strategies that advocates across the country are employing to successfully advocate for health justice.



## ADDRESSING TRANSPARENCY IN THE LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

State advocates are finding themselves burdened with two seemingly opposing missions: keeping themselves and the individuals that they work with safe and healthy and speaking up for health justice at the state level. Some legislatures have chosen to do their work entirely in-person without effective safety measures and without the option of virtual participation. Below, we outline some ways that advocates are working to increase transparency in their legislatures.

### ***State Example: Every Texan***

In December, a group of 72 advocacy organizations in Texas, including [Every Texan](#), sent a [letter urging state legislative leaders](#) "to ensure that the upcoming legislative session operates in a manner that protects health and safety, ensures transparency and meaningful opportunities for public input, and addresses the many critical issues facing Texans." Not only did this letter bring forth the pressing concerns of Texans across the state, but it also allowed advocates to work in coalition.

## MOVING FORWARD

As 2021 legislative sessions continue, Community Catalyst will continue learn from and share innovative strategies that advocates across the country are employing to successfully advocate for health justice. We hope that this toolkit will be a living document where we can continue to uplift the work and strategies of advocates throughout the pandemic.

## MORE RESOURCES

- Community Catalyst's [Guide to Organizing during Social Distancing](#)
- Community Catalyst's [COVID-19 Resources](#)
- Community Catalyst's [Digital Platforms Overview: Strategies, Tactics, and Ad Costs](#)
- Rooted in Rights' [How to Make Your Virtual Meetings and Events Accessible to the Disability Community](#)

We look forward to hearing from you about your successes and challenges around legislative advocacy during the pandemic. Please reach out to Rachel ([rkorkodilos@communitycatalyst.org](mailto:rkorkodilos@communitycatalyst.org)) if you would like to connect about this toolkit.