

Guide to Reproductive Health Advocacy for Medical Students

By Kizzi Belfon, Kathryn Callahan, Alice Chen, Cassie Crifase

In this three-part guide, four medical students share their advice, insights, and learnings to encourage their fellow trainees to take actionable steps toward becoming health care advocates.

Explore the three installments to learn how medical students can be advocates for access to health care, how they can learn and connect with effective partners, and how they can use their voices to effect legislative change.

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FIRST INSTALLMENT

Medical Student Advocacy: We Can Make a Difference

While the public eye and media often focus on physicians, health care professionals, and politicians as the champions of reproductive rights, it is crucial for medical students to recognize our own potential to make change. We don't have to be bystanders in the advocacy space: we can and should take action and lay the groundwork for the advocacy we hope to do as residents and attendings. Health care professionals [at every stage of training](#) can have a powerful voice in health policy decision-making.

Physician advocacy is important in improving health outcomes for patients—and the agency it provides us can also be beneficial for our own well-being. Many health care professionals attest that engaging in advocacy not only serves as a powerful force of change but can also act as a [buffer against burnout](#). It helps stave off feelings of hopelessness that stem from focusing on all the patients we aren't able to help.

As medical students ourselves, we understand the barriers that prevent more of us from participating in advocacy; we have grappled with them as well. Logistically, there are time constraints. We have nonstop schedules and we feel the need to fill any free time with studying. Advocacy may not have been in our background, so there's a sense of unfamiliarity with the process and uncertainty about how to start. And there's a mental block: as students, we are constantly learning and trained to identify areas where we need to improve before we can take action rather than recognizing our own power do to something now. But the beauty of advocacy is that it can take many forms and that everyone can make a difference.

Recognizing all of the above, this guide is intended to increase accessibility for medical students interested in engaging in advocacy; to demonstrate how simple and easy advocacy can be; and, most importantly, to inspire students to begin their advocacy journey and improve reproductive health. We hope to dispel myths about advocacy and offer simple, feasible suggestions of how to get started in advocacy that are tailored toward medical students' schedules.

Advocacy doesn't have to be a huge commitment. Even little steps that we take can add up to making a difference. Here are ways in which the authors of this guide forged their first paths in advocacy:

- Served as legislative intern for a state senator while earning her master's in public health
- Led development of a reproductive justice course for medical students to address gaps in the reproductive health curriculum
- Formed a book club for fellow medical students to discuss *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* by Dorothy Roberts
- Hosted an educational session on medication abortion at an obstetrics and gynecology skills night for medical students
- Developed and taught monthly reproductive health modules to local high schoolers to empower young people with knowledge of their bodies and local resources

Ready to get started? Read the second and third installments for tangible advice to help you become a medical student advocate for reproductive health care.

SECOND INSTALLMENT

Set Yourself Up for Success

The first steps to getting involved in advocacy are to learn more about the topics about which you're passionate and to connect with others who share similar passions and are doing similar work. Below are tips to help you form a foundation for advocacy as a medical student and beyond.

LEARN

Medical school is a great environment in which to build knowledge of health equity and begin developing advocacy skills. Getting involved while in medical school can be as easy as enrolling in courses or electives that focus on advocacy and health equity. Most medical schools offer [at least one advocacy course](#) in which medical students can learn more about health policy, social determinants of health, or other important foundational information for advocacy work.

It's easy to get overwhelmed in medical school by the fast-paced curriculum and seemingly endless studying. If you don't have the time to join another extracurricular, advocacy or health equity courses can earn you needed credit while developing your advocacy know-how. If your medical school doesn't offer a specific class in health advocacy, look online for available lectures or courses that meet your interests. Building your foundational knowledge of health justice through coursework will make you better equipped to become an advocate outside of the classroom.

Joining social justice- or advocacy-focused clubs at your medical school can further foster your advocacy skills. At club meetings, you'll be able to connect with fellow students who have a passion for health equity and find mentors to guide you. If your school doesn't offer a club that aligns with your interests, start your own!

If you're looking to start your own advocacy-focused initiative, here are a few ways to start:

- Develop a health justice book club to go more in depth on a topic you are passionate about
- Host guest speakers in person or virtually who can offer insight into current issues and share their advocacy work
- Start a journal club to keep up to date with newly published research and identify the gaps in current medical evidence
- Take advantage of the resources that your medical school has to offer, whether that's funding for hosting events or a network of physicians with expert experience in health advocacy to serve as mentors

ACOG also has a number of resources to help inform you on your advocacy journey. The ACOG website houses relevant resources, such as the CREOG-developed [advocacy educational modules](#) curated specifically for trainees and the [Abortion Is Essential](#) hub, which contains comprehensive messaging, information, and guidance about reproductive health advocacy.

CONNECT

Social Media

Social media is a great place to get started connecting to an advocacy network and to individual figures in the advocacy space, since it has become a powerful tool in efforts to disseminate information and unify advocates. Learn about local issues, community organizing efforts, historical context, and varying perspectives by following obstetrician-gynecologist advocates and content creators or accounts associated with advocacy organizations. You might even feel inspired to start your own advocacy-focused account!

ACOG

If you're looking to get started connecting professionally, one of the first places we recommend getting started is ACOG! ACOG is the premier professional membership organization for obstetrician-gynecologists, and membership is complimentary for any student currently enrolled in an allopathic or osteopathic medical school. Representing more than 60,000 obstetrician-gynecologists, ACOG plays a critical role in connecting and uniting the voices of obstetrician-gynecologists, trainees, and other medical professionals through various events and avenues, such as the annual Congressional Leadership Conference, which welcomes many medical student attendees; local lobby days at state capitols; and online resources such as Action Alerts, which let you know when there are opportunities to make your voice heard to elected officials.

ACOG offers an online community platform, ACOG Engage, for more regular day-to-day connection and collaboration between members. Getting more involved in the Districts and Sections within ACOG allows medical students to connect with local ACOG community members and find local advocacy opportunities.

Medical Societies

State and county medical societies have functions dedicated to educating physicians and advocating for the professional interests of their members. Medical students (and even residents!) usually can join for a nominal fee. Events hosted by state and county medical societies are great places to

SECOND INSTALLMENT (CONTINUED)

Set Yourself Up for Success

meet advocates within the medical field, get exposure to expert speakers and educational opportunities, and become connected to a network of advocates on a local level. Assuming a leadership role within a medical society—for example, as a member of a committee—provides medical students with influence on how the medical society engages on their advocacy priorities.

Despite the opportunities present, a [2018 survey](#) found that younger physicians are less likely than older ones to join their county or state medical societies. This leaves these locally focused organizations without critical perspective from younger physicians and physicians in training. It's critical that medical students get involved in their state and county medical societies and take advantage of these opportunities to make a difference.

While state and county medical societies are ripe with opportunities for advocacy, national medical organizations, notably the American Medical Association and National Medical Association, are also great places to search for advocacy opportunities. Both organizations have medical student-specific advocacy arms that you can take advantage of.

Medical Students for Choice

[Medical Students for Choice](#) (MSFC) is a quintessential example of medical student advocacy. Founded in 1993 by a group of medical students in the setting of limited abortion education, the organization continues to champion the expansion of comprehensive reproductive health medical education for medical students and trainees. MSFC's community organizer model provides student leaders with administrative support, training, and resources to implement activities that support other students and local communities. MSFC chapters host events to increase access to abortion

education, such as manual vacuum aspiration skills night; assess the robustness of their school's reproductive health curriculum and advocate to fill gaps in that education; conduct research projects to better quantify and qualify disparities in reproductive health education; and collaborate with community organizers to advocate for reproductive rights. [Join your school's MSFC chapter](#) or start one if it doesn't exist!

Community-based Organizations and Coalitions

Community organizations can help you shape how discussion around the advocacy issue of your choice is manifesting in your communities. In the post-*Dobbs* era, more communities are forming organized coalitions of activists to address reproductive justice issues on a local level.

Once you identify an organization or coalition you would like to engage with, consider attending their meetings and events, becoming a volunteer, donating to their causes, meeting with a representative to learn how you can best support their work, and spreading the word about their work.

Community and Town Leadership

Many community and town governments have resources dedicated to health issues. Use your voice as a local resident by showing up to engage on issues you are passionate about. Most local governments have a health committee where medical students can provide crucial patient-focused perspectives. City and state legislators are often inclined to attend community and town events, so engaging civically can provide you with enhanced legislative visibility and can help galvanize local residents.

Feeling connected and ready to advocate? Read the third installment of this series to get started.

THIRD INSTALLMENT

Engage with the Legislative Process and Amplify Voices

Stories from students, physicians, and patients can be powerful tools to help medical students advocate for legislation based in science. Below are tips and advice for using your unique perspective as a medical student to make your voice heard on behalf of yourself, your patients, and your future specialty.

UNDERSTAND THE POWER OF PATIENT STORIES

As medical students, we have the privilege to be a part of patient care throughout our clerkship rotations as we finally piece together what we learned through our didactic coursework and apply our medical understanding to real patients. But the real joys of clerkship year don't come from correctly applying our clinical knowledge; rather, they come from getting to know our patients on a personal level. Listening to a patient's story and understanding their background can not only improve their medical care but also help us understand the needs of our community.

Personal stories play a large role in advocacy work. While data and statistics can serve as important support, personal testimony has the ability to make a lasting effect on [policy makers](#). Before a bill becomes a law, it is heard by a legislative committee, or a group of legislators focused on a particular field, such as health, education, or finance. Legislative committees hold public hearings that give legislators, legislative agencies, experts in the field, and the general public a chance to speak to the pros and cons of the bill. As medical students, we can provide testimony at public hearings, bringing expertise from not only our studies but also our clinical encounters.

Our advice to new advocates: amplify the voices and the stories of the people you advocate for. These stories are our inspiration for advocacy work and are powerful tools in demonstrating to legislators how proposed changes will affect their constituents.

We have been trained on how to present patient experiences during rounds using objective data and evidence-based clinical reasoning, but sharing a patient's story with legislators requires a different approach. Successful storytelling during testimony avoids clinical details and uses approachable, accessible language that focuses on the patient as an individual. Choose stories that illuminate the potential effects of a bill, including how the bill would change the way in which you would provide care. Make clear that the experiences you share are not

hypothetical: they are real patient stories in which you played a part as their dedicated clinician.

While contributing to these meetings can seem intimidating, following the local protocol can set you at ease. At most public hearings, you start by addressing the committee and noting what bill you will be speaking on. Make sure to introduce yourself and your connection to the jurisdiction; for example, you'll want to share if you live, work, go to school, or grew up in the area. You can share that you are a medical student and other details of your training. Then clearly state whether you support the bill, oppose it, or have suggestions for improvement. Use this as an opportunity to uplift the voices of your patients, share their stories without any identifying information, and ensure their story is heard by legal decision makers. It is important that we communicate more than just statistics and data and describe the real-life effects that these bills have or will have in our community.

FOLLOW LEGISLATION

It may seem daunting to track the legislative calendar in addition to your studies, but information is readily available. Most government websites offer a schedule or a bulletin that is regularly updated with bills up for public hearing. Your network of advocates can also help: it is not uncommon for groups of community-based organizers or nonprofit organizations to follow these schedules and get the word out.

As health care advocates, medical students can advise legislators and their staff about the evidence that supports our positions on policies. In fact, [data have shown](#) that legislators often lack the understanding they need to take sound positions on health policy. Our voices are crucial in helping legislators understand medical and policy complexities from an evidence-based perspective grounded in science.

Medical students can help inform legislators by ...

- Completing relevant literature reviews or compiling issue-specific reports
- Conducting original research to inform policy development, implementation, or dissemination
- Authoring policy memos, policy briefs, or issue commentaries that summarize and communicate your findings in a practical way

THIRD INSTALLMENT (CONTINUED)

Engage with the Legislative Process and Amplify Voices

Here are some tips to ensure that your efforts make the biggest impact possible.

- Get familiar with the timing of the legislative session and know when legislators are identifying policy priorities and when research is most appreciated or helpful
- Grow relationships with legislators' offices by connecting at community events, through community or professional organizations, or by reaching out directly to introduce shared interests or values
- Be persistent and follow up

UNDERSTAND YOUR POTENTIAL

While we have highlighted some substantial ways to get involved in advocacy, advocacy doesn't always have to be flashy, public, or wide-reaching. It can start with casual conversations with friends about your day or what you learned from a patient. Talking to close friends and family about the complexities of reproductive health and reproductive experiences can have a profound effect. You may find that simple conversations can correct people's misconceptions of reproductive health care, help people understand the implications of policies they support, and open people's eyes to different motivations for various reproductive health care decisions. The stories and the

information we share with others can cause a ripple effect within our communities, and the practice you get in communicating effectively about reproductive health care will guide your future advocacy work.

Getting involved in advocacy can be intimidating, but history has shown that advocacy works. Advocates working with ACOG's guidance have helped secure the passage of influential pieces of legislation, such as the [Maternal Health Quality Improvement Act](#) and the pathway toward extension of postpartum Medicaid through the [American Rescue Plan Act](#). The time to start is now: developing a foundation for engaging in advocacy work during medical school is beneficial. The more you become steeped in the world of advocacy, the easier it becomes to achieve goals.

As a budding physician, you know more about science, medicine, and health than you might give yourself credit for, and your [knowledge and expertise are valued](#) by legislators who understand that you represent the future of the medical community. Feel empowered to use your medical knowledge while helping create a more equitable reproductive health system.

While this guide was developed to help you get inspired to speak up against reproductive injustice, these tips are applicable to any kind of health advocacy. You just need to take the first step.