LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

An Informational Guide for Conducting Educational Meetings with Members of the United States Congress and State Legislators
In Our Own Voice: National Black Women’s Reproductive Justice Agenda is a national-state partnership focused on uplifting the voices of Black women leaders at the national and regional levels in our fight to secure Reproductive Justice (RJ) for all women, girls, and gender-expansive people.
We are a collective of eight strategic partners and currently four state enhancement partners—Black Women for Wellness; Black Women’s Health Imperative; New Voices for Reproductive Justice; SisterLove, Inc.; SisterReach; SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW!; The Afya Center; Women With A Vision; Wisdom Institute; Birth In Color RVA; The New Jersey Black Women Physicians Association; and Oshun Family Center—advocating for the human right of Black women, girls, and gender-expansive people to control our bodies, sexuality, gender, work, and reproduction.

In Our Own Voice: The National Black Women’s Reproductive Justice Agenda goals are:
- To establish a leadership voice for Black women on reproductive rights, health, and justice policy at the national level;
- To build a coordinated grassroots movement of Black women in support of abortion rights and access, including ending onerous funding restrictions, achieving contraceptive equity, and providing comprehensive sex education;
- To lay the foundation for ongoing policy change at the national and state levels that impacts the lives and wellbeing of Black women and their families; and
- To engage and motivate Black women as a traditionally underrepresented group to use their voting power in the American electorate.

Introduction
This toolkit is intended to be used by the In Our Own Voice partner staff to provide tips and suggestions to assist in advocacy, policy development and implementation, and community engagement.

It is intended to be used by people with all levels of policy experience.

As state and local Reproductive Justice organizations you can make a difference in conveying the impact of policies and practices in your communities to members of Congress and state legislators. Without your help, they may not realize the real needs and tangible ways that they can improve the quality of life for Black women, their families, and the community. You have the power to educate them and engage them on important Reproductive Justice issues on Capitol Hill and in state capitols.

We want to make it as easy as possible to do just that. We created this toolkit to assist you in improving and forming a cohesive advocacy strategy and coalition in your state and will lay out the many advocacy efforts that can be utilized at the local, state, and national levels. We hope that you will find this toolkit useful.
ADVOCACY

It has never been a more important time than now to be a Reproductive Justice advocate.

Without the voice of those who possess both expertise and experience in Reproductive Justice, the legislation, regulations, and other policy decisions made by those in power may not reflect what is best for Black women, girls, and gender-expansive individuals. While the legislative process can be long and complex, effective advocacy does not have to be. Advocates with Reproductive Justice expertise are vital to the process and can help shape and improve policy. Through meeting with your members of Congress, writing letters, and sending emails, you have the ability to educate your elected officials and encourage them to incorporate the unique reproductive health considerations of Black women into their decisions across all policy areas. For members of Congress who already are supportive of Reproductive Justice, your advocacy presents an opportunity to transform supporters into even more vocal champions.

What is Advocacy?

Advocacy is targeted action directed at changing the policies, positions, or programs at any type of institution, at any level, and encompasses a broad range of activities. Effective advocacy can:

- Educate leaders, policymakers, or administrators who implement policies.
- Alter existing policies, laws, and budgets.
- Develop new programs.
- Create more open dialogue with decisionmakers.

Advocacy vs. Lobbying

Although most people use the words advocacy and lobbying interchangeably, there is an important distinction between the two. Advocacy is educating and creating awareness among key stakeholders (e.g., state and city legislators, the general public, etc.) on issues facing the community and the importance of aligning public policy to address the needs within the community. Advocacy does not endorse or oppose specific legislation, but rather informs the community and decisionmakers at large how public policy decisions impact service provision.

Lobbying, on the other hand, is the act of asking an elected official to take a particular position on a specific piece of legislation or issue. Lobbying can often be thought of as educating a legislator on an issue and influencing legislation, including a specific request, such as explicit support of a bill or increased funding for a particular program.

Government employees and non-profit organization (501(c)3) employees are prohibited from lobbying but are not prohibited from doing advocacy. Educating policymakers on the facts associated with Reproductive Justice and health in their jurisdictions, key elements of programmatic activities, and efforts to address the issues are all examples of advocacy.

Quick Facts: What You Can Do:

- Share your efforts with policymakers by visiting their federal or district offices.
- Invite your members of Congress and local legislators to your offices and/or events that your organization is hosting. If possible, invite them to speak during the event.
- Call or write your representatives to share information, concerns, and personal stories about the impact of specific policies or practices on Black women and families.
- Recruit community coalition members and local advocates to meet with your congressional delegation district staff or participate in a public forum being held by your legislator(s) or candidates.
- Submit a Letter to the Editor on an issue area and the impact that Reproductive Justice legislation has on the wellbeing and quality of life for Black women.
- Provide policymakers with the background information they need to write legislation, resolutions, or proclamations for events such as Women’s Health Month, Black Women’s Equal Pay Day, World AIDS Day, or any awareness days that fall under the RJ framework.
- Engage in social media platforms like Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to reach the public, elected officials, and your constituencies.
ADVOCACY DAY & VISIT GUIDE

Ideally you will meet with the actual legislator, but for the most part you will be scheduled a meeting with the relevant staffer in the office responsible for issues such as women’s health, reproductive health, and other issues relevant to Reproductive Justice.

Before the Legislative Visit

IDENTIFY ROLES FOR THE MEETING

For group visits or visits with more than one person, be sure to plan who will speak on each issue. This will ensure that all speakers are prepared and that no issues are lost in the shuffle. You should identify a facilitator who frames the issues, hands out materials, makes sure that all the issues are covered, keeps track of time and introduces each presenter. Roles and responsibilities should include a facilitator/lead, storyteller, and who will cover each issue area.

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT FROM YOUR MEETING—“THE ASKS”

When you discuss issues with a legislator or their staff, you should always have an “ask,” e.g., a request for the legislator to demonstrate support for services or programs, sign-on to a letter, or issue a resolution. This ask should be the first thing that you do after introducing yourself or the group.

KNOW YOUR TARGET

Be sure to know the party affiliation, committee or subcommittee membership of the member, and past record on the issue. These facts will help guide your discussion and convey that you have done your homework. Another important fact to know when targeting your meeting request depends on whether the member of Congress is an authorizer or appropriator. It is important to meet often with the legislators who represent your organization and/or you personally.
During the Legislative Visit

**BE ON TIME**

It is very important to arrive on time, and arrive early if possible. As a courtesy, call the office if you are running late. Make sure to give yourself plenty of time to travel to the office, and account for security lines into the building.

**MEETING WITH THE LEGISLATOR OR STAFFER?**

Your member of Congress may not be available to meet with you and you will meet with a staff person responsible for Reproductive Justice issues. Staffers are responsible for various portfolios, and they report directly to the legislator. Do not consider meeting with a staff member to be a negative. Legislators are very busy and rely a great deal on their staff and receive detailed reports on visits with constituents. The staffer is the individual who does the research and makes the recommendations on issues important to our movement.

**INTRODUCE YOURSELF**

Open the meeting with an introduction. Sharing your personal story if you are directly impacted by any of our priority issues in your introduction can be a powerful tool.

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### Legislative Visit Etiquette

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<tr>
<th><strong>DO</strong></th>
<th><strong>DON’T</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wear professional attire</td>
<td>Wear jeans, t-shirts, or flip-flops</td>
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<tr>
<td>If multiple people are in a visit, assign someone in your group the facilitator role</td>
<td>Talk over one another or leave someone without a speaking role</td>
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<tr>
<td>Make it personal. Talk about who you are and what expertise you bring as a constituent working in the field or as a concerned community member</td>
<td>Leave out a human or personal element to your conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offer solutions about what is working in addition to what can be done better</td>
<td>Complain or point fingers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be succinct and to the point when telling your story or delivering your ask</td>
<td>Talk about 10 different things</td>
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<tr>
<td>Read the staffer’s body language to assess attentiveness</td>
<td>Continue talking despite cues that the meeting is over or the staffer is not receptive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assess the staffer’s knowledge on Reproductive Justice policies and issues</td>
<td>Use jargon unless staffer is well-versed</td>
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<td>Go with the flow</td>
<td>Be surprised or offended if:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Follow up with a thank you, relevant information, and updates</td>
<td>• The staffer does not know about your organization or issues</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• You do not get to say everything you want to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The meeting takes place in the hallway or lobby area of the office</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The meeting is with a staff person rather than the legislator</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Forget to follow up, even if no further information was requested</td>
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Some sample introductions:

_Thank you for taking this meeting. My name is X and I am a lifelong resident of state Y. I am the founder of Z organization, where we work with Black women and girls who have experienced homelessness or intimate partner violence. I very much appreciate this opportunity to speak with you about some important issues for our community._

_Hello, Congresswoman X. My name is Y and work at Z where I see constituents such as myself who became pregnant at a young age. I am here to talk with you about reproductive health policies and the impact in your district, and some actions that the advocacy community would like you to take to champion several issues for us such as A, B, and C._

**STATE YOUR CASE**

Be clear about what you hope to come out of the meeting. The legislator and/or their staff is expecting concise and clear information from you on your issue as well as a specific way they can help. Your conversation should revolve around the support you want. Since you represent a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization you cannot ask for support for a specific policy, but you can generally ask that the legislator support our issue areas, perhaps by drafting a resolution or participating in a district-level activity.

**THE MEETING LOCATION AND DURATION**

Given the limited space in Congressional offices, meetings happen in all sorts of places, from the legislator’s office to the hallway. You should not take it personally if you need to meet in the hallway. Most meetings will last 20 minutes at most. It is important to ask the legislator or staff in the beginning how much time they have available to meet.

**THANK THE LEGISLATOR OR STAFF**

Always start off a meeting by thanking a legislator for their support or ask the staff to thank their boss for you. Letting an office know that you recognize the important role they play is always appreciated.

**ASSUME NO KNOWLEDGE**

Legislators and staff are less familiar with your issues than you. Be sure to explain all acronyms, programs, funding sources, which agencies administer the funds, etc. Be comfortable with having to dedicate more time in the meeting to going over the basics of a program or Reproductive Justice itself.

**KEEP IT LOCAL**

If possible, explain your position in terms that relate to the legislator’s district or state. Provide information on the status of affairs in their state. This focus helps them identify with the problem and understand why these issues should be important to them.

**ASK QUESTIONS**

Meetings should be seen as a two-way street, with information flowing both ways. Take the opportunity to find out where the legislator stands on the issues you are presenting if not already known to you.

Ask questions such as: _Where do you see your office standing on this issue…? I know your office has/ has not co-sponsored X; can you tell me why this is or isn’t a priority for her? What do you think is the best way for us to work with your office on doing X, Y, and Z?_

**STAY ON COURSE**

Resist any side conversations or tangential discussions. Making social conversation is important, but time is limited. Do not hesitate bringing the conversation back by saying, “I know that in terms of our issue...” or “That’s a good point but when it comes to our issue...”

**USE YOUR EXPERTISE**

In general, you will be much more knowledgeable of the issues than the person you are meeting with. Expound on this knowledge when explaining positions or making requests. In addition, you can offer yourself as an expert for them to call upon.
After the Legislative Visit

FOLLOW UP

Be sure to send a thank-you email to people with whom you met, reiterating your points, providing them with any information you promised, and thanking them for their time. The goal is to maintain relationships with offices so that they turn to you for information when legislative decisions are made.

Advocacy efforts extend beyond interacting with your members of Congress or local legislators. To amplify your message and build greater public support, you can help by communicating to the public the important role Reproductive Justice plays in improving lives. This education can take place in the form of town halls or forums about reproductive health, rights, and justice issues and the importance of advocacy. You also can use your social media platforms or submit op-eds and Letters to the Editor to local newspapers to highlight key Reproductive Justice issues and priorities.

SAMPLE EMAIL FOLLOW-UP LETTER

Please tailor to include points made in your meeting and follow-up information requested, state-specific information, and/or to invite them to visit you the next time they are back in the state or district.

[Date]
The Honorable ____________

[Address]

[City, State, Zip Code]

To: [Full name of health staffer]

Re: [Constituent] Meeting on [legislation/policy issue/funding decision]

Dear [STAFFER]:

I would like to thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me on [date]. As we discussed in the meeting, [issues discussed] is/are necessary to ensure the wellbeing of women and their families. [You or your organization] is/are committed to [INSERT RELEVANT ISSUES] and hope [INSERT MEMBER] can join me in obtaining this goal.

I look forward to working with you to ensure [restate issues discussed]. [If you would like, add state-specific issues you would like to discuss and other relevant policy issues; be sure to include any follow-up requested of you].

Please feel free to contact me for more information. I can be reached at (###) ###-#### or myemail@email.com.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Title]

[Address]
KEY LEGISLATION

- **H.R. 3305/S.1606** - The Black Maternal Health Momnibus Act (Momnibus) includes 13 individual bills that invest in solutions to the Black maternal health crisis. The comprehensive legislation includes bills to invest in the WIC program, community-based organizations, the perinatal workforce (including doulas and midwives), research, maternal mental health, support for incarcerated moms, and climate change-related risks, amongst other things. This legislation aims to address the diverse factors that impact the maternal health outcomes of Black moms and birthing people. More information: https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/3305

- **H.R. 4303** - Abortion Justice Act is a comprehensive piece of legislation that seeks to address access to abortion care and offers a comprehensive vision of what abortion access looks like when abortion care is readily available regardless of identity, background, or income. Provisions include steps to:
  - Address the need for federal investments in abortion care, including training, research, doula care, and outreach;
  - Require insurance plans to cover abortion care;
  - Affirm the right to abortion and miscarriage care;
  - Remove systemic barriers to care for immigrant families;
  - Protect patients and providers from criminalization; and
  - Address systemic disparities and systemic racism in the healthcare system.

- **H.R. 11/S.1** - Freedom to Vote Act improves access to the ballot for all Americans, advances commonsense election integrity reforms, and protects our democracy from emerging threats. The bill also puts an end to partisan gerrymandering and roots out the undue influence of dark, special interest money in our politics, giving the voice back to the American people.

In Our Own Voice and State-Specific top issue areas include:
- Maternal Health & Pregnancy Care
- Access to Abortion Care
- Comprehensive Sexual Health Education & Contraceptive Equity
- Voting Rights

RESOURCES

To access specific information on Reproductive Justice, abortion access, contraceptive equality, and comprehensive sex education:
- Black Reproductive Justice Agenda: https://blackrj.org/blackrjpolicyagenda/
- Abortion Access, NARAL Pro-Choice America: https://www.prochoiceamerica.org/fight-back-for-our-freedom/
- Contraceptive Access, Power To Decide: https://powertodecide.org/what-we-do/access/state-policy/rh-access-policies
- Comprehensive Sex Education, SIECUS: https://siecus.org/state-profiles/
- State Innovation Exchange (SiX)-Reproductive Freedom Leadership Council: https://sixrepro.org/
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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