

# Lobbying for Political Change under Adverse Political Conditions: Lessons from Advocacy Work in North Carolina

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## Project Summary

**Background:** Since 2010, the North Carolina AIDS Action Network (NCAAN) has led advocacy and lobbying efforts in North Carolina (NC), a state in the Southern United States, related to HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention.

**Description:** Currently there are 36,300 people living with HIV in NC and 7,278 (1,910 female, 5,310 male, 58 transgender) people are enrolled in the NC AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP), which provides free HIV medication.

With the 2010 & 2012 state elections, political control of the NC General Assembly and Governor's Office changed from the Democratic to the Republican Party. Since then, legislative leadership has largely opposed expansion of LGBTQ rights and significant investments in public health initiatives. Even under adverse political conditions, the HIV/AIDS advocacy movement has experienced successful outcomes by focusing on three key strategies:

1. Build a network/database of educated activists through grassroots organizing and digital outreach, focusing on individuals impacted directly and those living in political districts of key legislative leaders;
2. Sustain investment in building personal relationships with targeted legislators and staff in the NC Governor's office and state health department;
3. Regularly educate journalists about HIV/AIDS, and frequently submit and cultivate HIV/AIDS content in traditional and digital media.

**Conclusions/Next Steps:** Policy change is a multi-year process requiring long-term investment of resources. Current HIV policy campaigns in NC are focused on further expansions of ADAP to cover full health insurance costs, closing the Medicaid coverage gap so all people with HIV have access to health care, and repealing NC's HIV criminalization health code.]



## Political Context in North Carolina

The HIV and AIDS epidemic is a significant public health challenge in North Carolina. Currently, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services estimates that there are 36,300 people living with HIV in the state. Like the rest of the South, the epidemic is also defined by significant disparities based on race. According to the 2013 (most recent) North Carolina HIV/STD State Epidemiologic Profile:

Among the newly diagnosed adult/adolescent HIV infections, Black/African American (non-Hispanic/Latino) males had the highest rate at 92.3 per 100,000 adult/adolescent population, which is nearly nine times higher than that for White/Caucasians (non-Hispanic/Latino) (12.0 per 100,000 adult/adolescent population).

In 2016, the NC General Assembly passed "HB2" (House Bill 2), legislation that received national notoriety. The legislation prohibits local municipalities from passing non-discrimination ordinances to protect the LGBTQ community and requires trans-individuals to use the bathroom of the gender they were assigned at birth.

## Build Your Network of Activists

NCAAN has a long history of supporting and investing in the leadership of people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS who want to speak out to find support, allies, and resources. Advocates in our Speaking Positively Program have contributed to media stories in the state's major media markets and small-town papers. They have blogged, spoken at events, and gained national recognition for their leadership from organizations like the ADAP Advocacy Association, *POZ Magazine*, and AIDS United. The NCAAN annual conference brings together over 100 residents for training and community building. HIV-positive individuals help plan the event and lead workshops sessions at the conference.



## Sustain Relationships with Legislators

NCAAN is represented at the NC General Assembly by Mark Benton and John Thompson, lobbyists with The Paratum Group. Although funding for lobbying work is limited, the expense is well worth the outcome. NCAAN lobbyists focus their time on education and advocacy with leadership of the NC House and Senate Health Appropriations Committees.



## Cultivate Content in the Media

NCAAN staff have built relationships with key reporters at significant media outlets covering state government (The News and Observer, WNCN) and social justice issues (NC Health News, QNotes). By frequently submitting commentaries, regularly releasing press releases on breaking HIV/AIDS topics, and providing reliable, accurate information when called upon, NCAAN has established a mutually beneficial relationship with the media. NCAAN communications staff strategically promote media content on social media and work with volunteers to share articles with key policy makers.



## Legislative Success

Legislators and lobbyists say that advocacy efforts in North Carolina have had a critical role in achieving these positive outcomes over the last six years:

- An increase in eligibility for ADAP (AIDS Drug Assistance Program) from 125% of poverty level in 2011 (the lowest in the United States) to 300% in 2016.
- Overall enrollment growth from 6,241 people in 2011 to 7,278 in January 2016.
- Creation of an assistance program that reduces costs for patients who purchase their own health insurance by covering medication co-payments. 90.97% of the 155 patients in the program are virally suppressed, compared to 82.12% of overall enrollment in 2016. The program will be expanded in 2017 to include insurance premium assistance.
- Legalization of syringe exchange by the state House and Senate (as of July 10th, 2016, legislation is waiting for Governor's signature).



## What's Next?

The 2016 legislation session has ended in North Carolina, and NCAAN staff, board members, and volunteers will spend the fall preparing and planning for the 2017 legislation session. Upcoming efforts and activities include:

- Hosting the annual HIV/AIDS Advocacy Conference on September 10th at Winston-Salem State University in Winston-Salem NC. This year's conference will include a pre-conference summit on PrEP access on September 9th.
- Expanding the engagement of local AIDS service organizations and non-profits through the creation of the NCAAN Policy Partnership.
- Increasing engagement of local health departments and health directors in PrEP access (to build support for future state-wide campaigns)
- Strategically capitalizing on media opportunities for World AIDS Day in December 2016.

*Pictures clockwise from top right:* NCAAN staff and partners at a press conference for National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day in Feb. 2016; Representative Susan Fisher speaks to advocates at 2015 NC HIV/AIDS Advocacy Day in Raleigh, NC; Volunteers at the 2015 HIV/AIDS Advocacy Day; NCAAN staff and board members at the Campaign for Southern Equality's LGBT in the South Conference in 2016.

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Questions? Contact Lee Storrow at [lee@ncaan.org](mailto:lee@ncaan.org) or on twitter at [@leestorrow](https://twitter.com/leestorrow).