

# Youth in Advocacy: No Longer the Next Generation

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### **What is the importance of youth in advocacy efforts?**

Advocacy ensures that people can have their voices heard on issues that are important to them. Many youths participate in advocacy; the majority of the decisions made affect us to a greater extent. Therefore, empowering youth to engage and take an active role can play a crucial part in changing the future for the greater good.

As a youth advocate, it is important to aid in all aspects of the issues at hand, whether education, employment, or health. For example, for a wide array of mental health issues, youth are the victims and are the only ones who can effectively advocate. Youth advocates fight to prevent youth from diminishing self-esteem while encountering professional authorities and roles in their life. Youth advocates build themselves and represent the society they live in as they are most capable due to their first-hand experience with the rising generation. Therefore the importance of the young in advocacy is to provide the platform of leadership roles and voice for the current challenges and represent the upcoming generation — the rising leaders of the world.

### **What are the barriers to being a young activist, and how can we overcome them?**

Youth activists constantly find themselves facing barriers in their advocacy work. Politicians might consider minors last when thinking of constituents, simply because

children have no voting power come Election Day. Youth looking to plan public protests may struggle to obtain permits needed for road closures or sound equipment (“Protestors’ Rights”).

Even after turning 18, youth activists struggle to be taken seriously by adult policymakers who consider us ‘uneducated’ or ‘inexperienced’ and therefore unqualified to work in advocacy and policy. This mindset dates back to the Progressive Era in the United States, where adults mobilized on behalf of youth to protect them from things like child labor (Hodgson). Though well-intended, this created ‘separate spheres’ for adults and youth, making it difficult for young people to be heard as activists.

Regardless, young activists globally (and many in the United States) are constantly finding ways to speak up and push for their policy objectives using tools like petitions, protests, civil disobedience, and social media (Pires). Speeches that are punchy enough to be shared in viral clips online reach past politicians to voters and people willing to mobilize. Additionally, many youths can overcome barriers to activism by creating youth organizations (like GGI!) that can harness the power of youth en masse to effect change.

### **What methods do the GGI and other advocacy teams use?**

Perhaps one of the greatest tools that youth advocacy teams use is social media (Espinosa). Recent social movements such as March for Our Lives and Black Lives Matter have gained ground through apps like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, largely thanks to youth activists. GGI uses technology to connect supporters of our policies, from posting policies on our social media accounts (thanks, Strategy Team!) to hosting virtual town halls, live streams, and takeovers via Zoom and Instagram.

But advocacy work is hardly ever glamorous, and GGI advocacy teams are well aware of this fact. Although we use fun virtual events to promote policy, the primary method of advocacy that our teams use is email blasts to elected officials, political candidates, other advocates and activists, and even people connected to our initial contacts. Our

hope in sending these emails is to gain attention for our policies and secure meetings with people who can help us push these policies into law. GGI has been successful with this method of advocacy. Many of our policies have received endorsements from elected officials and advocates and are being considered for introduction into state legislatures and local governments. Writing emails and having meetings with policymakers and policy influencers are skills that many advocacy fellows and directors did not have direct experience with before joining GGI. Our advocacy teams give students the unique opportunity to gain experience in direct advocacy efforts while furthering our teams' policy efforts.

### **How has advocacy changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Elements of advocacy like communication and teamwork have become extremely difficult as the number of opportunities for development advocates to meet policymakers has diminished. Digital advocacy has its own set of challenges. In the digital world, communication feels very disconnected and is unengaging. As a result, information becomes very abstract. To advocate efficiently, one must establish relationships and engage in outreach through social media.

COVID-19 has been beneficial to marketing and advocacy through social media since people are more actively using social media during quarantine. The use of more social media such as local radios, television, and publishing brief overviews are tactics that are being implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic as a call to action.

Lastly, the topics that require advocacy have also changed immensely. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the main focuses of advocacy have included improving and adequately funding federal small business disaster aid programs and expanding COVID-19 point-of-care testing across the country. These new and urgent topics emerging have caused all the other important issues to become of lower priority. This shift in priorities marks a change in advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **How can legislators include youth in policy and advocacy efforts?**

Legislators don't need to go far to see youth activists pushing for a change. To include youth in policy and advocacy efforts, legislators need to allow youth into "adult" policy debates and conversations, rather than reducing youth activists to the word "inspirational" (George). A coalition of youth organizations, including GGI, also submitted a proposal to the Biden-Harris Administration calling for the creation of an Office of Young Americans within the Executive Office of the President (EOP) ("#YouthInGov..."). Proposals like this create opportunities for public officials to directly and consistently include young activists in policy work. The proposal also included a provision asking for a "diverse public service pipeline" that would hire young Americans to work in the government.

GGI has been so fortunate to work with legislators who are interested in having these policy conversations with us and consider us in the same breath as they consider adult activists and organizations. It is because legislators are willing to listen to us and include us that we've been able to gain traction on so many of our policies over the last year. Policymakers must continue to include youth activists in conversation and consider the policy recommendations we bring. We may be young, but we are creating lasting change in the world of policy and advocacy.

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