



LEGISLATION PILLAR

OUR STORY

Our first piece of legislation in New Mexico was to close the gun show loophole. We learned during that first legislative session that it was vital for us to build relationships throughout the state if we wanted to pass any bills. We immediately began creating and implementing programs in a broad range of communities. We made sure to invite the elected officials, when appropriate, to events and to send out press releases with regularity. The more you can get the name of your organization broadcast throughout the state, the easier it will be to establish a presence in the legislature and to gain the trust of elected officials.

Lobbyists vs. Advocates/ National GVP groups vs. local GVP

As volunteers, we are advocates and not paid lobbyists. We have leverage and power to effect policy changes. But, that influence differs from the influence of lobbyists. How we use our power requires strategic planning, but a little power can go a long way. Yes, lobbyists, in some ways, have more access to elected officials. But, advocacy groups can be little boats that make big waves. It can get frustrating to see elected officials offer a seat at the table for the larger national GVP groups who pour thousands of dollars into campaigns. It is equally frustrating to see these groups take credit for so much of the work done by the grassroots GVP groups that are the core of this movement. Our advice is simply to accept this reality and move on. Dwelling on it will only become an unnecessary distraction. Build relationships with these groups, but be firm in asking them to stay in their own lane. While these groups will get more attention from elected officials because of pay-for-play politics, there is a built-in respect for the local groups. Elected officials know that these advocacy groups are not paid lobbyists and are giving their time because of genuine concern about the trajectory of gun violence in our country.

We were very fortunate in our second year to begin working with the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (Now the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions).

They have been instrumental in helping us plan our legislative agenda and they continue to be an essential partner in our legislative work. Unlike some other groups, the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions understands the importance of local GVP groups growing the endemic voice of their communities state by state.

WORK WITH OTHER ADVOCACY GROUPS

Partner with advocacy groups that have chosen gun violence prevention as one of their legislation targets. We partner with Indivisible, The League of Women Voters, and interfaith organizations. We present to these groups before the legislative session and provide them with talking points for consistent messaging as they testify at legislative hearings. We strongly suggest that you identify these groups and form mutually beneficial alliances.

CHOOSING A BILL

When choosing whether or not to target a particular bill, it is important to be strategic. There are two threshold criteria we consider first: (1) Would the bill have a tangible impact on reducing gun violence? and (2) Is it something we can actually pass? Research is critical in this effort. Your research team will have examined gun violence and its particular impact and relationship with communities in your state. Be aware that supporters, group members, and even funders will likely want you to attempt bills that have no chance yet of passage in your state (e.g. universal background checks, assault weapons ban, etc.). This is particularly true if you live in a state that has few gun violence prevention laws on the books. It is always good to start with low-hanging fruit that you can use to build coalitions. In New Mexico, for example, an assault weapons ban would not pass the two-question test above. It would likely not make a significant difference in terms of gun violence reduction. These types of weapons (while we abhor them and would love to see a national ban) are used in few of our state's gun deaths. And, the legislation would almost certainly fail today, as we have conservative Democrats who regularly vote against gun violence prevention legislation. That being said, things can change swiftly in the wake of mass shootings like the tragic event in Uvalde, Texas. Many of us would like to think that another example of slaughtered school children in classrooms may be a tipping point for such a ban, even in gun-loving states like New Mexico.

HELPFUL HINT:

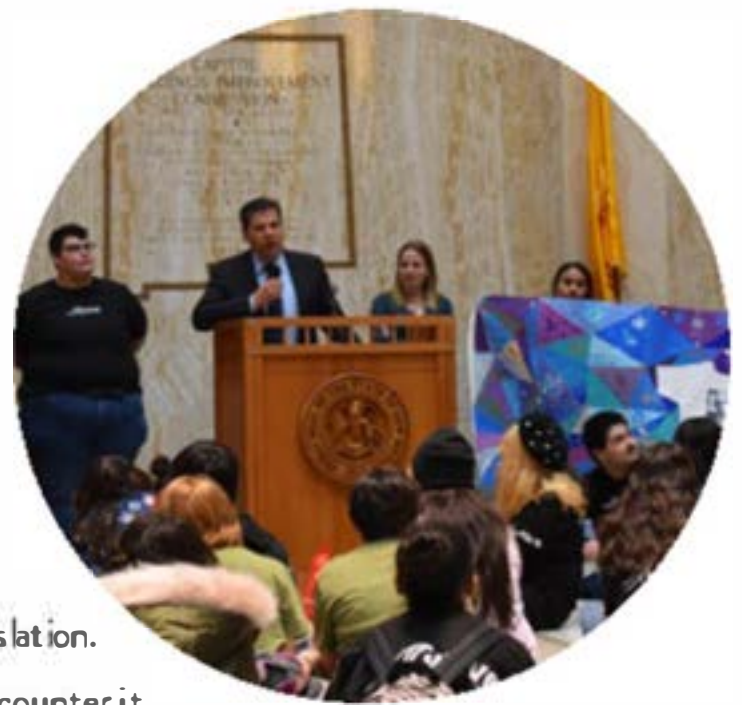
A senator gave us this advice when we first started working on legislation. It was probably some of the best advice we could have been given. It can be frustrating to sit, waiting for hours to have a 15-second conversation with an elected official as they are racing to their next committee hearing. In New Mexico, our legislature is only in session biannually for two months. Every lobbyist and advocate is fighting for those same precious seconds. In that pressure cooker, things can get heated, particularly with gun bills. After our first two years, activists and lobbyists from other causes approached us and offered their support and empathy because of how we were being treated. One seasoned lobbyist actually took us out for coffee to express how in her 20 years of lobbying she had never seen advocates treated so horribly. We were surprised by this outpouring of sympathy as we assumed this was how everyone is treated. As the years passed, and it became clear that we were not giving up or going anywhere, we began to be treated with the respect all advocates deserve and even kindness at times. We, the underdogs, were building momentum and winning. The press took notice and we have become the “go to” for them when it comes to guns, gun violence, and gun violence prevention stories. It would be difficult to overestimate how much of this recognition came from our programs offered to communities across the state, especially our work with youth and the constant research that we were doing. A multipronged approach has proven to be time well spent.

The second piece of legislation we chose to pursue was a domestic violence firearms relinquishment bill. Would it make a difference? Yes. We had researched the issue of intimate partner homicide, and the majority of those deaths were perpetrated with a firearm. New Mexico had some of the highest numbers in the country for women being killed by their partners. This bill also passed the second test question: It was something we thought we could get passed. At the time, we had a Republican governor who ran and was elected with a strident Second Amendment platform. But she had previously been a prosecutor. We thought there might be a chance, given all that she had seen in terms of the domestic violence in our state. We had also met several times with the House Majority Leader. He was a Republican, but we knew he had many constituents that were vocal about the dearth of gun violence prevention laws under his watch. He agreed to help us with the Republicans in the House.

We actually got the bill passed through both chambers, only to have it vetoed by the governor with a message siding with the abuser. Again, we licked our wounds and got ready for the next session. This time we had a Democratic governor. We passed a stronger version of the domestic violence firearms relinquishment law and a background check law that included all gun sales, not just gun shows. We had created strong coalitions and intellectual foundations for the passage of both laws during the four years that we had been advocating for passage. Sometimes it can take several sessions to get a bill passed. Legislative losses can become wins if you use them to educate state leaders about the need. One good way to do this is through an ongoing stakeholders table.

STAKEHOLDERS TABLE

Creating a stakeholders table is an important tool in vetting bills. For the domestic violence firearms relinquishment bill, we held quarterly meetings with key players in the state. The table included domestic violence advocacy groups, law enforcement, retired judges, representatives from the Attorney General's office, and elected officials. It was during these meetings that we hammered out details of the bill. Some of the participants at the table were wary of the legislation. This helped us understand where the resistance would lie and how to counter it.



ENGAGING YOUTH AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS

We believe that our youth are the most important voice in the room when it comes to preventing gun violence. We coach a group of youth every year to testify in committee hearings at the legislature and organize a DIE-IN at the Capitol. (This is explained in detail in our Work with Youth pillar.)



COMMUNICATE WITH THE PUBLIC AND ELECTED OFFICIALS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR BILL

Communication with the public and your elected officials is an ongoing process that needs to continue throughout the year. Meet regularly with key elected officials and explain your legislation months in advance. You will need to get used to the vote counting process. An accurate count of supporters in the House and Senate will be critical to getting the governor's office to participate.

- Create a “one-pager” with talking points. If you list any studies, make certain to show the source. This is what you will hand to elected officials at committee hearings.
- Prepare editorials in advance and have them ready for publication before and during the session. Carefully time their release to let momentum build.
- Organize letter and email writing groups to write letters to legislators asking for support.
- Create resolutions for cities and school boards to pass. This should be done a couple months ahead of the legislative session.
- Organize a student DIE-IN. (see Work with Youth)

APPENDIX

- Child Access Prevention Talking Points