

Bringing the Health Care Fight Home: Town Hall and Bird-Dogging Toolkit

February 2017



What You'll Find in This Kit

1. Overview of story we want to tell during recess
2. Tips on bird-dogging and engaging in town halls – and feeding updates to us so we can amplify
3. Questions to ask Senators and Representatives, with follow-up on their buzzwords to bring them back to question
4. Sample letters to the editor
5. Social media kit
6. Backgrounders on decoding GOP buzzwords/proposals, Medicaid, and our health care principles
7. Template press release and advisory

The Story We Want to Tell

Thank you to the People's Action Institute affiliate health care strategy team, who made recommendations about major stories that we want to emerge from this month and the recess:

1. Opposition to Republican attempts to take away our health care is growing. Momentum is on our side.
2. The Republicans don't have any good options for us. Instead they're using a "bait and switch" scheme to take away our health care.
3. Republicans in Congress spent the recess hiding from constituents, because it's becoming clearer how much we'll all be hurt by ACA repeal and other plans to take a wrecking ball to our health care.

The other night, Virginia Organizing's Matt Skeen sent a clear, compelling message on NBC Nightly News, when he was interviewed at a health care rally.

["I'm fighting Congress for my life,"](#) he said. Matt's not alone. Our job is to show Congress, Trump, and the world that we're fighting now and are going to keep on fighting.

Tips on Bird-Dogging and Engaging in Town Halls

1. **Finding events.** (1) Check out these national lists to find events: one from the [Town Hall Project](#) (run by volunteers) and a [second list from progressive allies](#) that only lists GOP events. (2) Call the member of Congress's office and ask if events are coming up (3) if not, ask them to schedule one and to add you to their list to notify of events and (4) try to get on a friendly mailing lists to learn about upcoming events eg a donor list.
2. **Prepare a strong question with follow-up.** The most powerful exchanges that shift the narrative on health care are from constituents who have benefited from the ACA, Medicaid and Medicare demanding that their member of Congress not vote to take away this coverage that is essential to their health and lives. Be ready to critique the bait and switch GOP plans that will provide less coverage at higher cost. More below.
3. **Stand up and follow out.** Arrive early to get a seat near the front. Stand up and dive in to ask your question. If you don't get your question asked, follow the member out of the town hall and ask them on their way to the car. Many a great questions have been asked on the fly.
4. **Amplify with press and on social media.** If the press doesn't find you, go up to them, or call them. Share why you are there and your concerns. Always have someone ready to videotape your interaction and post it asap on facebook with linking short tweets. When you tweet, tag [@PplsAction](#) so we can share.

Immediately after the event, share your photos and videos with us at news@peoplesaction.org and cc s.warner@peoplesaction.org so we can continue to amplify your work nationally. The sooner you get them to us, the better. Striking when the iron is hot is key to garnering attention.

5. **Use your phone video camera.** Video is best shot with the camera phone held horizontally or sideways (landscape mode), especially for sharing with news media or posting to sites like YouTube. The same is recommended for using Facebook Live or Periscope.

Consider using Facebook Live for key moments. Set up the description of the feed in advance so that when your activist is called, you can go live immediately. Be sure that you can get clear audio as well as video of both the question and the answer. (Make sure your questioner speaks loudly and crisply.) Keep the video rolling for any drama that may follow, but feel free to end the live feed once the discussion of your question ends or take several short clips at different key moments of the event. Even if your live feed did not attract many viewers, you now have a Facebook video you can share freely, and Facebook Live videos are given more prominence in news feeds than videos imported into Facebook from sources like YouTube.

For more details on all these strategies and more, check People's Action's [New Townhall and Bird-dogging memo](#).

Questions to ask your Senator or Representative

A good bird-dogging question has three parts: (1) A fact, (2) Statement of a problem, and (3) Pointed ask of the elected officials. We want electeds to answer these questions, yes or no:

1. Tens of millions of people rely on the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid to get health care and coverage. Many Republicans are now trying to ram through Congress a dismantling of these programs. Will you promise to vote against any bill that could take away or reduce our health care, whether we're getting it through Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act, or Medicare?
2. Tens of millions of people rely on the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid to get health care and coverage. Many Republicans are now trying to ram through Congress a dismantling of these programs. Will you promise to vote no on any health care plan that could leave any one of us without health care we need?

Sharing a personal story before asking the question is also effective - Explain briefly what the ACA or Medicaid has meant to you:

I'm a cancer survivor and couldn't get affordable health care before the ACA. Now I have insurance, and you want to repeal the ACA and take away my health care. I think that's wrong. So, I'm asking you now, will you promise to vote against any bill that could take away or reduce our health care, whether they're getting it through Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act, or Medicare?

My mother counts on Medicaid for her nursing home care. I know you're looking to cut Medicaid – a good program my family counts on – and not just the Affordable Care Act. I think it's wrong to take people's health care away. Will you promise to vote no on any plan that could leave any one of us without health care we need?

Follow up on weaselly buzzword responses by calling out the buzzword and restating the question:

"Flexibility" for Medicaid

That means cuts. Medicaid comes with guarantees, so what you call flexibility means insecurity for families like mine. Again, will you promise to vote no on any plan that could leave any one of us without health care we need?

Medicaid Is Failing/Not Good Coverage

Medicaid is good coverage that saves lives, not just for my family. And it's important to hospitals in this community. Again, do you promise to vote against any bill that could take

away or reduce anyone's health care, whether they're getting it through Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act, or Medicare?

Costs Too High in Obamacare

You can bring the costs of health care down for us without repealing the Affordable Care Act. You could open up Medicare for all of us. Again, do you promise to vote against any bill that could take away or reduce anyone's health care, whether they're getting it through Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act, or Medicare?

High-risk pools

We tried that in 35 states. That means high-deductibles and premiums of more than \$1,000 a month for people with preexisting conditions. That's not who we should be as a country. Again, do you promise to vote against any bill that could take away or reduce anyone's health care, whether they're getting it through Medicaid, the Affordable Care Act, or Medicare?

Health Savings Accounts

That means a tax break for the rich, a high-deductible plan for people like me, and another giveaway to the insurance corporations. Again, will you promise to vote no on any plan that could leave any one of us without health care we need?

Insurers Pulling out of Obamacare

We know Aetna lied about this, which is a good reason to open Medicare to all of us instead of repealing the Affordable Care Act. Again, do you promise to vote against any bill that could mean less health care for more money?

No Republican Plan Will Hurt People with Preexisting Conditions

You just voted to confirm a Secretary of Health and Human Services who wants to let insurance corporations [charge us more for preexisting conditions](#), or reject us if we have a gap in coverage. So, again, do you promise to vote against any bill that could mean less health care for more money?

Buy Coverage Across State Lines

Only someone who puts insurance corporations above people would propose that. For us, it means higher premiums, higher deductibles, worse coverage. Again, will you promise to vote no on any plan that could leave any one of us without health care we need?

Sample Letters to the Editor

Before the Affordable Care Act, I couldn't afford insurance and didn't get coverage through work. Now I get my health care through Medicaid. **NAME of Senator/member of Congress** voted to start taking that health care away, and I'm terrified. The congressional recess starts on Feb. 18, and I want **member of Congress** to hear my voice but **HE/SHE** is nowhere to be found. We need **member of Congress** to hold a public town hall. You can't do your job if you don't listen to your constituents. That's not what democracy is about.

Signed,
NAME

Where's **NAME of member of Congress**? I was sure **HE/SHE** would use the congressional recess to talk to us about taking away our health care. But **member of Congress** is nowhere to be found. I call. A "telephone town hall" is not enough. **Member of Congress** and the rest of Congress swear they're going to take care of our health care needs. But how can you trust them when they're hiding? I'm one of more than 74 million people who uses Medicaid. If **member of Congress** is going to take away my health care, **SHE/HE** should have the decency to say it to my face.

Signed,
NAME

More than 30 million people will lose health insurance if Congress repeals the Affordable Care Act. More than 74 million people use Medicaid, and Congress wants to cut \$1 trillion from that, too. I've called **member of Congress's** office for some answers, and they won't tell me a thing. **Member of Congress's** staff tells me **SHE/HE** has no scheduled events for the public this February recess. Maybe **SHE/HE** only has time for fundraisers? When **member of Congress** comes back home, **SHE/HE** should listen to people who are afraid for our health care.

Signed,
NAME

If Congress goes through with its plan to take away our health care, the richest families in the country will walk away with a tax break of \$197,000 each. That's not the job we elected **member of Congress** to do. This recess, let's remind **member of Congress** that **SHE/HE** represents all of us, no matter how much money we have, our race or ethnic background, or our gender. We should all get the health care we need.

Signed,
NAME

Social Media

Please include the hashtag #ResistanceRecess in EVERY social media post.

Additional Hashtags

#SaveOurHealthCare
#MissingCongress
#HaveYouSeenMe[Name of member of congress]
#DontPhoneItIn
#CareNotChaos
#DoYourJob
#TownHall

Best Practices

- 1) Tag your target:** On Twitter and Facebook, it is easy to raise pressure on members of Congress. Simply include their handles in tweets or tag their public facebook page.
- 2) Leverage the media:** Make sure members of the media know that you are targeting your member of Congress. Include their handles or official facebook pages so they know that you are confronting your member of Congress during the recess. Tagging individual reporters, editors, or producers is more effective than tagging media outlets, but both can work.
- 3) Use photos and videos:** A picture is worth a thousand words. When possible, include an image or a short video in your post to garner more attention. It doesn't have to be fancy.
- 4) Try to create sticky content:** Pull out memorable and powerful quotes from your leaders that could be rebroadcast by the media or catch fire among other users on social media.
- 5) Make sure to tag us:** We want to amplify your work. But we can't do that if we don't know it's happening. During events, if you have particularly important content you want us to share, tag our handle ([@pplsaction](#)) or [facebook page](#).

Backgrounders

Decoder for Republican proposals

1. What they say: Block-granting Medicaid
What it is: *Waiting lists and stripped-down coverage*

[Cuts of \\$1 trillion](#) to a program [covering almost one quarter](#) of the country. [End to the guarantee that anyone who's eligible](#) can enroll. The result: [anything from waiting lists to stripped-down coverage](#). Less care for everyone from children to nursing home residents.

2. What they say: Health savings accounts
What it is: *High-deductibles for us, tax shelters for the rich*

[Tax shelter for the rich](#) and rip-off for everyone else. Tied to [high-deductible insurance plans](#) with [minimum deductibles of \\$2,600 for family coverage](#). Deductibles could be as high as [\\$10,000 or even \\$20,000](#). Big [source of profiteering for insurance corporations](#). Even [people enrolled in them don't recommend them](#).

3. What they say: High-risk pools
What it is: *Premiums above \$1,000 a month*

Segregated insurance for people with preexisting conditions, tried and failed in 35 states. Premiums [upwards of \\$1,000 a month](#). History of premiums hitting [\\$20,000 a year](#) or more. [Deductibles up to \\$25,000](#). Lifetime caps as low as \$75,000.

4. What they say: Per-capita caps for Medicaid
What it is: *Arbitrary limits on your health care*

[Arbitrary limit on our health care](#). Ends guarantee that Medicaid will pay for covered care as needed. Could mean high deductibles, high premiums, elimination of benefits like prescription drugs or maternity care, and more.

5. What they say: Medicare privatization/premium support
What it is: *Throwing seniors to insurance corporations*

Turns popular Medicare program over to insurance corporations. Replaces guaranteed coverage with a voucher. No guarantee the voucher would be enough for the same level coverage – or any coverage at all. In short: [worse coverage at a higher price](#).

Understanding Medicaid

Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress [say](#) they will slash \$1 trillion to states for Medicaid. That threatens health care for all of us. Medicaid covers more than 74 million people nationwide. That includes everyone from newborn babies to people receiving nursing home care.

Medicaid is a joint state-federal program, with the federal government setting the basic ground rules and states designing their own programs. The federal government matches state spending on the program. The more states invest in Medicaid, the more federal dollars they bring in.

The most essential ground rule is that anyone who is eligible for the program can enroll. With some exceptions, there are no waiting lists. Another ground rule is that there are [no dollar caps on services](#). If the state needs to cover more people or care, it will be funded. This allows states to cover more people during a recession or in the event of a natural disaster.

- *Rural communities.* Medicaid is especially important in rural communities, where [poverty rates are higher and there is less access to insurance through work](#). Before the Affordable Care Act, [21 percent of rural residents were covered by Medicaid](#) compared to 16 percent of urban residents.
- *Racial justice.* African Americans and Latinxs adults are [twice as likely to get their coverage through Medicaid](#) as are white people. Our health care system remains shockingly unequal, with people of color shut out of insurance and health care at much higher rates. Without Medicaid, our health care system would be even more unequal.
- *Seniors.* [Half \(46%\)](#) of Medicaid spending goes to long-term care for seniors and people with disabilities. Medicaid helps [one in five Medicare enrollees](#) with their premiums, cost-sharing, and services not covered by Medicare.
- *Educational benefits for children.* Expanding Medicaid for low-income kids [increases high-school graduation and college completion](#).
- *Small businesses.* Medicaid provides health coverage to 6.1 million small business owners and employees.¹

¹ Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 Current Population Survey with small businesses defined as those with fewer than 50 employees.

The Affordable Care Act allows states to expand Medicaid eligibility for many adults previously excluded from the program. About [11 million](#) people are now insured through Medicaid thanks to this coverage expansion.

Be a Health Care Champion

The pledge:

We, the people, believe our health care system should not serve corporate profiteering or the interests of billionaires. It should serve all of us. That's the vision we're fighting for.

- Every person in our country should get the health care we need.
- We should all have coverage that makes care affordable and allows us to receive it in our communities from providers we trust.
- No corporation should be able to profiteer off our need for health care.
- Protecting our right to health care is one of our government's most important responsibilities.
- Public programs like Medicare and Medicaid save lives and should be strong and open to all of us.

Sign to the left and pledge to stand up for these principles and become a health care champion.

Background:

A health care uprising is brewing in our country. From coast to coast and every state in between, people are standing up to right-wing plans to take away our health care. We're going to defend the health care we get through the Affordable Care Act, Medicaid, and Medicare. But we're not just fighting for what we have. We aspire to become a country that cares for every person.

We are people with preexisting conditions and the young and healthy. We're Black and Latinx, white and Asian American, Native and Pacific Islander. We were born inside the boundaries of the United States and beyond. We are caregivers and patients. We're workers and small business owners. None of us should fear bankruptcy just because we get sick. None of us should have to choose between food and medication.

Template press release and advisory

Media Advisory

YOUR LOGO

February **DATE**, 2017

Contact:

Name, title, phone

Email address

“Don’t Take Away Our Health Care”

Organization Members Plan Town Hall Meeting With or Without Name of Congress Member

CITY – **Organization Name** is calling on **Title and Name of Congress Member** to join constituents for a Town Hall meeting during the Congressional Recess to discuss **his/her** plans for health care for **millions/tens of thousands** of **STATE** residents.

On the first day of the new Congress, Republican leaders started the process of repealing the Affordable Care Act and laying plans for radical cuts to Medicaid, which covers more than 74 million people. However, Republican leaders have not shared details about how they will ensure that every person in the United States gets the health care they need at a price they can afford.

Name of Congress Member, has not responded to requests for a Town Hall meeting.

– Or –

Name of Congress Member has refused to meet in person with constituents.

Organization Name will continue with plans for the the Town Hall meeting, and leave a chair available for **Name of Congress Member** in hope that he/she decides to attend.

WHAT: **Town Hall Meeting with Name of Congress Member**

WHO: **Organization Name**

WHEN: **Day, Date, Time**

WHERE: **Address**

WHY: Recess is not vacation or time to hobnob with donors. It’s a time for legislators to connect with constituents at home. Lawmakers should not hide from constituents or phone it in. They should have the respect for constituents to discuss this life-and-death issue with them in person.

If **Name of Congress Member** declines the invitation to attend the Town Hall meeting, community members attending the gathering will use the time to plan a visit his/her office, make signs and practice chants.

A sentence about your organization goes here.

Press Release

YOUR LOGO

February **DATE**, 2017

Contact:

Name, title, phone

Email address

**Congress Member Name Ducks Organization's
Questions/ Invitation to Town Hall Meeting on Health Care
Organization supporters plan to find other ways to get the attention of NAME**

CITY – More than **how many** people attended a Town Hall meeting with **Title and Name of Congress Member** to express their opposition to Republican plans to repeal the Affordable Care Act and make radical change and cuts to Medicaid. They pressed **Title and Name of Congress Member** to promise that he/she would protect health care for everyone in **STATE** and vote no on any legislation that would raise costs, reduce benefits, or eliminate coverage for anyone in **STATE**.

Community members waited more than an hour and were deeply disappointed when Name of Congress Member didn't show up to provide an update on health care legislation, and hear their concerns. A chair held for Name of Congress Member remained empty.

Or

Name of Congress Member declined to answer questions or promise to protect affordable, quality health care for millions of people, many of them in NAME YOUR STATE.

Republican leaders began dismantling the Affordable Care Act the first day of the new Congress and are laying plans for defunding and gutting Medicaid, which covers more than 74 million people nationwide. GOP leaders have insisted that they will protect health care for everyone in the U.S., but the outline put forward by House Republicans would eliminate guaranteed coverage for tens of millions.

“Unfortunately, our **NAME of Republican Congress member**, is bound and determined to take away our health care,” **said NAME**. “It is more than unfortunate, it is reckless and will put millions of lives in danger. We need care, not chaos.”

Throughout the country Republican leaders have declined to meet with constituents, or answer our questions. They are spending their recess meeting with corporate lobbyists and donors.

“These politicians thought they could take away health care millions of people without us asking questions or demanding answers,” **said NAME**. “Democracy requires them to represent us, not treat us like they don't care if we live or die.”

Organization Name will continue to call on **Congress Member Name** to demand answers.

#

A sentence about your organization goes here.