

Activists and Medical Students: Working Together to Expand Abortion Services



A Guide for
Pro-Choice Activists

INTRODUCTION

Every medical student is a potential abortion provider and/or source of skilled options counseling for patients. These future physicians need to be a critical part of any pro-choice strategy to expand abortion access if activists are to successfully address the current critical shortage of abortion providers and change the culture of medicine that currently marginalizes abortion services. Developing pro-choice awareness in the medical community will increase the number of physicians who choose to offer abortion to their patients. In addition, it will create a culture of support among physicians, thus encouraging non-providers to be active supporters of their colleagues who do provide abortion services.

Medical Students for Choice (MSFC) was founded in 1993 by a small group of medical students who were seriously concerned about the shortage of abortion providers, the lack of abortion content in medical education, and the rise in violence against abortion providers. Less than 10 years later, the organization currently has student groups at over 100 medical schools in the U.S. and Canada and represents over 7000 medical students and residents. The organization works to build a network of support and resources, reform medical education curricula and training, increase education opportunities and instruction, as well as educate the public on the need for abortion training. MSFC has a national office in California and has school, regional, and national coordinators throughout the country. Their mission can be greatly enhanced if their efforts are supported at the grassroots level by activist organizations.

The Abortion Access Project (AAP) has developed a successful model for long-term collaboration and partnership with medical students who are part of or want to develop MSFC groups at their institutions. The partnership between the two groups has led to successful events, conferences, joint newsletters, co-authored articles, development of innovative new projects, and pro-choice strength within Massachusetts on both the medical and activist fronts. Medical students have become an invaluable ally for AAP's events and strategies to expand access. AAP has been able to support MSFC in developing large conferences, creating extensive opportunities for clinical observation, and ensuring a connection with the activist community.

PURPOSE OF THIS KIT

This kit is a resource and guide to working with medical students, based on AAP's work in Massachusetts and New England. We hope that you will use it, expand on it, and build a strong partnership with pro-choice medical students in your community or state.

There are a number of organizations that work with medical students on the national level. Before you and your organization begin to reach out to medical students in your community, check with these organizations to find out what they are doing in your area, if anything, and access their resources and support. These organizations and their contact information are listed in the Appendix.

SECTION I: **SUPPORTING MEDICAL STUDENTS IN YOUR STATE/COMMUNITY**

Supporting Individual Medical Students

There are many ways to support individual medical students in your area. Your organization has a wealth of knowledge and resources that students can access to fill academic, clinical, and personal needs.

PROVIDE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES AND SUPPORT



Research is a large part of medical education. Students may be required to do research projects or may be pursuing their own research independently. Your organization's mission/scope/goals may fit into the topics that medical students want to research to fulfill class requirements. By suggesting topics, providing materials and consultation, and linking students to knowledgeable professionals in the community, your agency can become a valuable resource to medical students.

Many medical students need to do research projects as part of their curriculum. Your organization may have a topic or idea you would like researched and documented, but there is insufficient time, staff resources, and/or expertise to do so. Students who are looking for research ideas and/or opportunities to be published can work with your organization and meet some of your research needs.

At some medical schools, students have a service requirement. Putting in time at your organization is a great way to meet that service need. Whether it is using the student's expertise to further develop your organization's work or introducing the student to the nature of your work, this has the potential to develop new collaborations and projects.

PROVIDE GENERAL SUPPORT AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES



Your organization has resources that are invaluable to medical students. You may have a video library, speakers' bureau, or archived articles on reproductive health. By contacting medical students and making these resources available, you can lay the groundwork for a mutually beneficial collaboration. Direct person-to-person contact is critical; bulletin boards at medical schools are too full for your resource list to be prominent.

Consider your financial resources. You may have funds that could be used to fund a student's project or even help send her/him to a professional conference. Regardless of whether you have financial resources or a wealth of materials, don't underestimate the general support and guidance you have to offer students. Remember, they are medical students! They may not have any background in organizing or activism. Offer to help them develop ideas, brainstorm research topics, and/or assist them in planning and forming working timelines.

Don't underestimate the value of linking a student with pro-choice activists. While you are surrounded by your staff and colleagues, it is possible that a medical student feels isolated within their program or in their community when it comes to their pro-choice position. Just knowing that you are available for support is invaluable!

FACILITATE CLINICAL OBSERVATION OPPORTUNITIES



A clinical observation allows a student to spend either a half or full day at an abortion clinic to observe the services being provided. Most students do not have mandatory or even elective opportunities to observe abortion care within their medical curriculum. Observing abortion care, counseling, procedures, recovery and after-care is invaluable for medical students at every stage of their education. It destigmatizes the procedure, frames abortion as medicine rather than as politics, can change attitudes and beliefs, connects the student to real women, thereby challenging rhetoric and stereotypes, and can ultimately influence a medical student's decision about whether to train in abortion procedures. This is especially crucial for the students who are "sitting on the fence" and aren't already actively pro-choice.

This kind of exposure can really open a student's eyes, especially if they have to travel some distance to get to the clinic or walk through a picket line. It is likely that you either work with an abortion clinic, have colleagues that work at a clinic, or know how to get in touch with staff at a nearby facility. By making a few simple phone calls, you can arrange a half or full day visit at an area abortion clinic for an individual student. Clinics are usually very open to medical students observing at their facility or already have established programs to make a visit happen. By connecting a student to a staff person at the clinic and arranging a visit, you are offering him/her an invaluable experience and directly contributing to changing her/his feelings about abortion.

CONNECT MEDICAL STUDENTS TO TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES



Your organization probably has, or can identify, a wealth of contacts within your community. This gives you the knowledge and connections to make opportunities happen and doors open for students. Medical students may not have any opportunities to learn abortion procedures through their school or simply may not know how to contact the right people if they do exist. Through your colleagues, partner organizations, or personal affiliations you may know of various internships, externships, or fellowship opportunities available for students. Think of yourself as a conduit of information and opportunities!

COORDINATE WITH NATIONAL MEDICAL STUDENTS FOR CHOICE (MSFC)



Get in touch with the National MSFC office and obtain the name of the regional and any local school coordinators in your area. If you are working with an individual student in an area or at a school where there is no MSFC group, put him/her in touch with the national MSFC office and the regional coordinator from your area and encourage him/her to start a chapter at his/her school. MSFC does a great job of connecting students with other pro-choice students across the country, which is especially vital if a student feels that he/she is the only one fighting for these rights. Both the regional coordinator and the national office can offer the student invaluable support and resources, and connect her/him to other pro-choice medical students in the area.

Support MSFC Groups In Your State/Region

MSFC groups exist at over 100 medical schools throughout the country. Each group has designated coordinators who lead the group throughout the academic year. The goal of each MSFC group is to increase membership numbers, generate events that energize pro-choice medical students, provide clinical observation opportunities, and work to reform curriculum so that abortion is integrated into their medical education courses. Holding various events is a priority for these groups. Your organization can assist these groups in many ways.

ASSIST IN PLANNING/SPONSORING LOCAL EVENTS



Sponsoring an event is a great way to support an MSFC group. This may mean making a financial contribution to cover food costs, reserving an event space, or offsetting speaker fees. Many medical student groups have virtually no budget to work with, and a small amount of financial or logistical support can really make events happen that may not have occurred otherwise. You can also sponsor an event without making a financial contribution by offering your organization's space for an event or identifying good speakers for a workshop. Your colleagues can serve as incredible resources for these groups. You or your staff can also offer to be a guest speaker at a general meeting, participate in a panel, or have a member of your staff guest lecture. Many of these students do not have prior experience in organizing or activism. Assisting them in planning events is something you can easily do and is incredibly helpful to them. Even if you are not able to help financially or provide formal sponsorship, you can always help brainstorm events or assist in the planning process, and logistical help is always welcomed by busy medical students.

CO-SPONSOR A REGIONAL CONFERENCE



MSFC regional conferences bring students together for a day of workshops and speakers on both clinical and non-clinical issues in abortion care and general reproductive health. Depending on the region of the country, the conferences draw anywhere from 50-150 students. There are many ways for you and your organization to support these conferences: Offer to be a speaker or assist in finding speakers for the event, facilitate a workshop or panel, provide your organization's display materials, or donate money to help with the conference costs.

The Abortion Access Project has worked with the four MSFC groups in Massachusetts and the MSFC New England regional coordinator to create successful conferences since 1996. By working collaboratively, AAP has developed a model that has ensured well-attended and very successful annual conferences. AAP has a staff member that devotes a significant amount of time to developing a planning committee of students, facilitating meetings, and assisting with details and logistics ranging from securing speakers to managing and significantly contributing to the budget, to developing the conference materials. Your organization may not be able to devote as many resources to a regional conference, but your activist participation on any level truly helps build a movement wide event instead of a conference solely for medical students.

The New England regional conference includes nursing, graduate nursing, and public health students, clinic staff and activists from sister organizations. This makes the event larger, richer, and breaks down professional and academic barriers, and fosters movement building and dialogue among professions. A sample program from a Regional Conference can be found in the Appendix.

HELP ESTABLISH A CLINICAL OBSERVATION PROGRAM



Connecting individual students to a clinical observation is an important step in developing the next generation of abortion providers. Helping an MSFC group establish a formal or informal observation program will empower the coordinators and group, make the opportunity more widely available, and will ultimately assist in institutionalizing the program within local medical schools.

The first thing to do is contact local clinics that provide abortion services. This is something you or the MSFC coordinators can do, or something you can do together. Ideally, a meeting can be set up with the clinic's abortion service coordinator or director to talk about students doing clinical observations. The meeting could also technically happen by phone or e-mail, depending on the working relationships that already exist. In the meeting, it is important to work out all of the logistics and details of the visit, program, and scheduling. The following are some important questions to ask: How often will the clinic allow students to observe? What days of the week work best for the clinic? Are Saturday visits an option? What is the overall clinic schedule like? Establish a scheduling and communication system that works for the clinic point person. Does the point person want to approve every student prior to the visit? Does she want the information via fax, phone or e-mail?

A set of materials should go to every student before their clinic observation explaining logistical information, directions, security procedures, and other details. Have the clinic contact review and amend these materials so that they work for both of you. The MSFC coordinators should also talk through the details of the visit with students doing observations. This can be done one on one or in a group meeting, and the coordinators can lead the discussion or have a member of the clinic staff come to brief the group. Finally, your organization may also be able to provide debriefing opportunities for student participants to explore the feelings and reactions to the observation experience.

The observation program is an invaluable opportunity that can easily be set up and run by the MSFC coordinators. It may take a few phone calls, e-mails, and a meeting in the beginning, but the long-term benefits are worth it. You can help the MSFC coordinators realize the benefits of setting up and leading the program, help them get started, and then share the satisfaction of increasing the clinical opportunities of these potential future abortion providers.

INVOLVE MEDICAL STUDENTS IN YOUR ORGANIZATION'S PROGRAM WORK



Medical students *are* a group of activists, particularly those involved with Medical Students for Choice. While you have much to offer them, they also have much to offer you and your organization, particularly their energy, passion, and commitment. Involving them in your organization's work is a fabulous way to collaborate. You may have events you'd like publicized or need volunteers to assist in making those events happen. Phone calls, protests, and letter-writing campaigns are all things your organization may be working on that could use the participation of medical students. Oftentimes activist organizations pull together focus groups to evaluate ideas and assist in program planning. Medical students could be involved with such a group or connect you to faculty and colleagues in the medical community. Medical students can act as volunteers, part of your advisory board, or even potential donors. The point is to involve them in *your* organization's work!

CONNECT MEDICAL STUDENTS TO OTHER LOCAL ACTIVIST ORGANIZATIONS



Your organization has many partner and sister organizations, as well as connections to other local activist organizations. Connect the MSFC coordinators and groups to such organizations. None of us are single-issue people and we all have personal lives outside of our professional lives (impossible as it may seem sometimes). Other organizations have resources, events, and opportunities to share, and this will help connect MSFC groups to a larger activist movement and the community at large.

CONNECT MEDICAL STUDENTS TO EVENTS AND POLITICAL HAPPENINGS IN YOUR COMMUNITY



As an activist organization you are connected to local as well as statewide events and happenings. Many medical students are not originally from your area or become isolated within the medical school and community. This makes it unlikely that they know of community events, happenings, and organizations. However, many medical students become registered voters in the district that they live in while attending medical school, and would likely be interested in learning more about local politics. Disseminating and publicizing events in your community to MSFC groups only allows them to further connect with the community, as well as create a broad, multi-disciplinary movement. You can easily establish a listserv, mailing list, or simply pass on notices periodically.

SECTION II: **WORKING WITH NATIONAL MSFC**

COLLABORATE AND SHARE RESOURCES



National MSFC is a fabulous resource disseminator to medical students all over the country. The coordinators at every medical school receive an organizing manual with sample materials, a guide to organizing on their campus, information on relevant organizations, as well as videos and publications available through the national office. The national office also sends frequent emails to all school coordinators regarding upcoming local and national events, legal/policy issues, and educational opportunities. The national MSFC office has an extensive video library as well as an archive of brochures, fact sheets, publications and training manuals. You may find many of them useful in YOUR organizing work!

Offer your organization's resources to MSFC! Make sure your contact information is listed with the organization, in their organizing manual, and that your materials are known and available. Get on their mailing list so you are kept up to date on their national work and happenings around the country.

CONTACT AND WORK WITH THE NATIONAL STUDENT ORGANIZER



One of national MSFC's staff positions is the national student organizer. This person works with students and MSFC groups all over the country. She/he can provide you with a wealth of information, including the names of MSFC members and coordinators in your area. Contact the Organizer and introduce yourself and your organization, and let her/him know how your organization plans to work with medical students. The National MSFC Organizer is a key resource!

SECTION III: **RESOURCES**

The Abortion Access Project
552 Massachusetts Avenue, Suite 215
Cambridge, MA 02139
617-661-1161
www.abortionaccess.org

American Medical Women's Association, Inc.
801 North Fairfax Street, Suite 400
Alexandria, VA 22314
703-838-0500
www.amwa-doc.org

Medical Students for Choice
PO Box 70190
Oakland, CA 94612
510-238-5210
www.ms4c.org

The National Abortion Federation
1755 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 600
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-667-5881
www.prochoice.org

National Coalition of Abortion Providers
206 King Street
Alexandria VA 22314
703-684-0055
www.ncap.com

Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health
55 West 39th Street, 10th Floor
New York, NY 10018
(646) 366-1890
www.prch.org