



Chapter Spotlight: Utah SSN Informs Reproductive Health Policy

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“There was more discussion about reproductive health than ever before. Proactive policies took up a lot of space rather than just restrictive policies, and that in and of itself can be an important message.” - Jessica Sanders, Utah SSN chapter leader

2021 has been a turbulent year for reproductive health and rights in America. A [record number of restrictions on abortion](#) are being passed in state legislatures across the country, the Supreme Court decided to [hear a case](#) that could overturn *Roe v. Wade*, and Texas’s [6-week abortion ban](#) made major headlines in recent weeks. In Utah, where multiple abortion restrictions are already in place, the local chapter has been playing a big role in this sphere, engaging in reproductive health and policy work in a number of ways.

Connecting with policymakers

Securing alliances with policymakers who can make change on this issue has been a consistently high priority for Utah SSN. Chapter leaders and members often attend legislative sessions and actively reach out to policymakers directly. One of the first – and most valuable – relationships formed back in 2016 when the chapter fellow at the time attended the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists lobby day on Capitol Hill and met with a Republican lawmaker from the state, Representative Ray Ward. As a family practice doctor, Representative Ward was interested in learning more about reproductive health and about the chapter’s family planning interdisciplinary research group that brings together researchers, clinicians, and providers. Ever since, Representative Ward has continued to stay in close conversation with the chapter and regularly contributes to their events and meetings.

Building on such individual connections, Utah SSN decided to organize or participate in multiple group meetings with policymakers focused on reproductive health and rights, including putting on their own Abortion Policy Roundtable last year. This event was meant to strengthen relationships between policymakers, community advocates, and scholars in the state, and four policymakers ended up attending. Because of the important dialogue established between policymakers and scholars at this roundtable, SSN member [Nicole Bedera](#) testified on Capitol Hill in support of a bill sponsored by Senator Carol Spackman Moss about

expanding consent curriculum to middle school sex education. Similarly, chapter leader [Jessica Sanders](#) worked with numerous scholars in the state during the 2021 legislative sessions to testify on several health policy issues, including Medicaid expansion, sexual health for teens, and the rights of transgender athletes.

Training the next generation of healthcare providers

Spending time with policymakers has proven fruitful for this chapter, but there has been another space that's yielded equally meaningful work: the classroom. In the midst of the reproductive rights work in their state, Sanders came upon an important discovery – medical residents and trainees at academic institutions in Utah had a lot of interest in getting training in patient advocacy focused on reproductive health. And so began the chapter's advocacy curriculum program for OB-GYN residents. Led by three faculty members with advocacy experience at local and national levels, including Sanders, the program includes an advocacy day during the Utah state legislative session, as well as five to six evening training sessions per year. The training sessions cover a wide range of topics, including advocating in the patient room, improving pregnancy and birth outcomes for pregnant people of color, learning about the state legislative process, reviewing reproductive health bills for the upcoming legislative session, and best practices for talking with representatives.

Together, these initiatives have helped change the conversation when it comes to reproductive health in Utah. During this past legislative session, Sanders noticed that, "there was more discussion about reproductive health than ever before. Proactive policies took up a lot of space rather than just restrictive policies, and that in and of itself can be an important message." Those proactive policies included ones discussed at the chapter's Abortion Policy Roundtable, and that the OB-GYN residents spent time learning to advocate for in their training sessions.

And they're not slowing down: Utah SSN will be hosting three virtual events in the coming months focused on reproductive health policy. To learn more about the Utah chapter and their members, visit their [chapter page](#).