

Case Study 2022

HOW RIGHT TO HEALTH ACTION BUILT REPLICABLE TACTICS FOR A NATIONWIDE HEALTH JUSTICE MOVEMENT



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HEALTH JUSTICE
COMMUNITY

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This case study is part of a series developed by [People Power Health](#) in collaboration with the [Leading Change Network's](#) Health Justice Community.

You can learn more about community organizing for health in our Health Justice Guide.

Our special thanks to the LCN Health Justice Community team members for their generosity in sharing their experiences creating meaningful impact to stop health inequities and bring health justice.

If you are a health activist interested in embracing community organizing in your work, get connected to [People Power Health](#).

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Jonathan Shaffer

Co-Founder, Organizer
R2H (Right to Health) Action

“Each of us has an embodied and personal experience with health. There’s an enormous constituency of people who have been directly harmed by this virus and the political conditions that have led to our complete neglect of doing the things we know could save lives.”

OVERVIEW

There’s incredible power in uniting thousands of experts, health workers, and activists behind strategic health activism and community organizing. It’s this power that helped Jonathan Shaffer, Co-Founder and Organizer for Right to Health Action (R2H), build a grassroots movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.



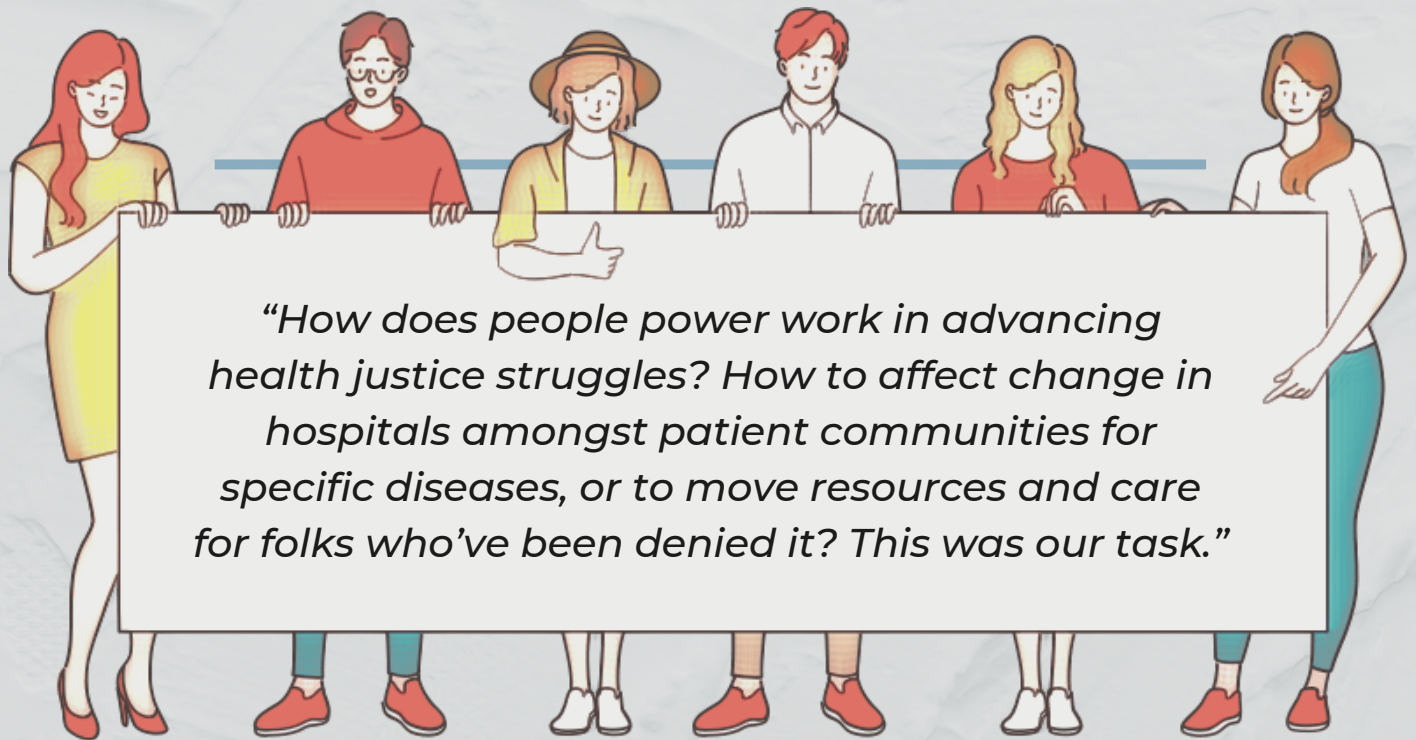
Organizing and Equipping a Grassroots Movement Focused on Breaking the Cycle of Deadly Pandemics

To Shaffer and his colleagues at R2H Action, COVID-19 revealed the deadly policies that allow pandemics to disproportionately impact underserved populations. Around March 2020, recalls Shaffer, “we saw a catastrophe unfolding so we decided to do something about it—to organize people in the name of addressing issues of health and human rights across our fifty states.”

Of course, the team faced a rather daunting task. While they found ample enthusiasm for addressing this particular healthcare reform, the team needed to devise the strategy and tactics that would give their movement teeth enough to affect real change in Washington. They also needed to make sure that their strategy was grounded in the resources of their people.

“The initial concept for R2H was to bring people together to think and learn about what actions could be taken at that moment,” says Shaffer. “Through engaging with experts and policy makers, clinicians and activists, we began developing a detailed policy response that our community members could advocate for in their own states, cities, and towns.”





“How does people power work in advancing health justice struggles? How to affect change in hospitals amongst patient communities for specific diseases, or to move resources and care for folks who’ve been denied it? This was our task.”

What a Citizen-Led Response to a Health Catastrophe Can Look Like

The group’s first formal strategy was to develop the People’s Pandemic Prevention Plan, a set of policy interventions designed to bring the COVID-19 pandemic to an end and invest in prevention of future pandemics. The R2H team then began the hard work of moving that policy vision into legislation, which required some will power and creativity, to say the least.

To change the legislation, the team first needed to reach the lawmakers. To do so, they took on the role of “citizen lobbyists,” so to speak, using their power in numbers and persistence to get legislators behind their policy demands. They carried out this constituent lobbying through a cycle of iterative campaigns tethered to the legislative calendar.

“Our state captains built teams in particular House or Senate districts,”

says Shaffer.

“They reached out to staffers to secure meetings in which our team members would advocate for specific legislation,”

such as global vaccination, new financing for pandemic prevention, and increased funding for municipal departments of public health across the U.S.

To support those efforts, the team developed a package of email scripts, meeting templates, agendas, talking points, leave-behinds—everything a team member might need to conduct a productive meeting with an elected representative.

Ultimately, the goal of these meetings was to call on representatives to support R2H’s policy platform, namely: to end the big pharma monopoly on vaccines and launch a global fund to prevent and prepare for pandemics.

“Our policy director Paul Davis likes to say that each meeting is like piling stones on the scale so that we can then say to legislators, ‘You already supported this language, now help us get this into actual legislative texts that move this policy into reality.’” To measure progress, the team developed a set of tools to track targets, meeting attendance, and where members were at in the process of scheduling, planning, meeting, and following up for each cycle.

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To date, these efforts have led to more than 1,000 meetings with members of Congress. As R2H Action's managing director, Akshita Siddula, explains, "the key to our collective power has always been our local teams of volunteer advocates who have trained with us to become fierce advocates for pandemic prevention policies. They are at the heart of our work and the reason why we have been able to influence and advance more than a dozen different bills through Congress in the last year."

Today, the R2H team enlists the help of policy experts to craft language for new draft legislation and additional support and training materials. The team holds weekly training Zoom sessions that include state captains, state team members, and functional members of the core team. Finally, the team maintains an active list of contacts in Congress, media, and the healthcare industry that show up in support of the cause.



Given the prolonged timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic—and the dragging of feet in Congress—the R2H team has used its creativity to keep people engaged. Without doing so, the team risked losing momentum and, subsequently, the attention of legislators in Congress. "We'll definitely be bird dogging between now and election day," says Shaffer. He's describing a tactic in which R2H team members show up at campaign stops to ask politicians direct questions, on the record, about some of the issues that R2H fights for.

The team also conducted direct actions aimed at raising awareness around vaccine equity in Boston. "We targeted Moderna with a Squid Game-themed action," says Shaffer. "People showed up at Moderna headquarters on the day of their shareholder earnings call wearing costumes from the show and pushing wheelbarrows full of cash." The goal was to show the evil cynicism at the core of the profit making from the COVID-19 vaccine.

The team also held a press conference with some very prominent scientists and physicians from Harvard Medical School in front of Stéphane Bancel's home. Bancel, the CEO of Moderna, has earned billions in income since the beginning of the pandemic. "It was a very straight-laced, professional press conference with these experts, but behind them was a 12-foot-tall pile of human bones. I think it definitely captured the imagination and gravity of the moment," recalls Shaffer.

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Together, the collective power of this strategy, coupled with R2H's most engaged core members, has shown the potential to organize for and win policies to fight and prevent pandemics. For example, an R2H campaign led to a "Dear Colleague" letter from Senator Elizabeth Warren and House Representative Ro Khanna addressed to Senate and House leadership calling for the People's Pandemic Prevention Plan. In that letter, Sen. Warren and Rep. Khanna signed on their support of R2H's draft language and circulated the letter for wider support, securing the endorsement of more than 141 Congresspeople.

Thanks in part to the efforts of R2H, a bipartisan group of Congresspeople recently proposed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act, with language that specified R2H's global fund to fight pandemics. This was accompanied by hundreds of meetings and a large demonstration the week of the vote on Capitol Hill.

"We had speakers, press coverage, and we marched to the steps of the Capitol building. Four women who had lost close loved ones to COVID-19 spread their ashes on the steps of the Capitol and were arrested in civil disobedience. Rachel Maddow picked up the story. People from all walks of society came together in staunch support of our efforts."

Indeed, between the march on the Capitol, the skeleton press conference, and other creative strategies, R2H has continued attracting people to its cause. Moving forward, Shaffer and the R2H team plan to evolve their strategy in keeping with the country's shifting healthcare landscape. After all, national elections are coming up, COVID-19 is still killing thousands daily, and the next health catastrophe is just around the corner.

