



NATIONAL LATINA INSTITUTE FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH



A Guide to Monitoring State Legislation





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Introduction

Monitoring state legislation requires not only an understanding of the state's policy and legislation, but also an understanding of the state's legislature, key demographics, and political landscape. All of these factors influence why legislation is introduced and why it is able (or not able) to pass into law. How to find and analyze all of this information is discussed in this guide.

Being able to find and understand legislation is an important part of setting up a successful lobby visit. Once you decide on your community's priorities and become educated on key legislative efforts, you will be prepared to educate your fellow activists and organize lobby visits around them.

The National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health (NLIRH) has defined its priorities under three main policy areas:

- ✪ Abortion Access
- ✪ Reproductive Health Disparities
- ✪ Immigration

These priority areas will help you as you select what information is relevant and what is not. However, these are broad guidelines into which many more specific issues may fit. For example, you may want to focus on legislation to improve public transportation so that members of your community are able to access health care, or work on employment non-discrimination legislation so that members of your community are able to access employer benefits equally. You know best when it comes to the issues that affect your community's access to reproductive health services; identify these issues and look for policy efforts that address them.



Creating Your State Profile

Demographics

“Demographics” include information about the state’s people: who they are and what they do. This information is important to the legislative process because it lets us know who will be impacted by policy and how.

There is a lot of information online, but there are certain things to watch out for. Use the priority areas to guide your research. You might be interested in general demographic information, or information about women’s health, economics (i.e., income), and immigration. The following types of information might be helpful:

- ✪ Statistics (number or percentage) of Latin@s in a state or district
- ✪ Statistics (number or percentage) of Women in a state or district
- ✪ Prenatal care access in a state or district
- ✪ Insurance status (uninsured, publicly insured) in a state or district
- ✪ STIs & HIV rates in a state or district
- ✪ Infant & maternal mortality rates in a state or district
- ✪ Cervical cancer rates in a state or district
- ✪ Statistics (number or percentage) of Foreign born (amount & nation of origin) in a state or district
- ✪ Median income in a state or district
- ✪ Number or percentage of speak who speak a language other than English at home
- ✪ Educational attainment in a state or district

These are websites that have been commonly used for state demographic data:

- ✪ Census: www.fastfacts.gov
- ✪ Kasier: www.statehealthfacts.org
- ✪ NARAL: www.prochoiceamerica.org *be sure to check the state NARAL*
- ✪ Mapping Our Rights: www.mappingourrights.org
- ✪ Guttmacher: www.guttmacher.org
- ✪ State Department of Health (website varies by state)

Keep in mind that you might find additional information not mentioned here that you might find useful depending on the legislation on which you choose to focus. Particularly, the Guttmacher and NARAL sites are especially well-suited for finding out what the current status of reproductive health-related laws is in your state.



What is the political landscape in your state?

The “political landscape” refers to a variety of things.

Your starting point is the legislature. You need to know when the legislative session starts and ends, and how often they meet. This information varies by state, and can be surprising. Texas’ legislature, for example, only meets once every two years.

In addition, **you need to know the name of the legislature and how it is setup.**

- ☀ Does it have a House and a Senate or is it unicameral (meaning only one chamber)?
- ☀ How many people are in the legislature?
- ☀ How is the leadership organized?
- ☀ Is there a Speaker of the House? If so, who are these people and what does their leadership mean (i.e., first woman, youngest, first democrat in decades, etc.)?

Next, you want to understand the political party breakdown of the state. This has a significant impact on legislation.

- ☀ How many democrats and how many republicans are in the legislature?
- ☀ Are there any third party representatives (such as working families, green party or independents)?
- ☀ Which party has the majority, and how wide is that margin?
- ☀ In addition, NARAL may have information about whether or not legislatures are “pro-choice” or “anti-choice.” This information is also helpful, so check their websites for details.

Lastly, you need to know the political affiliation and background of the governor. Usually the governor must approve or can veto legislation, significantly impacting the passage of bills into law. If you can get any information on the governor, such as their priorities (i.e. immigration, outlawing abortions in the state), it may be helpful in your understanding of state policy.

The knowledge of the history of the legislature can prove to be important. For example, if this is the first democratic legislature in 50 years, it can significantly impact what kinds of legislation is introduced and passed.



Identifying Bills and Legislation

Legislation and Navigating State Legislative Websites

Each state legislative website is different. You have to spend some time on it to get acquainted with how it works. Below are some general tips that may be useful for most, if not all, state legislative websites.

When looking at legislation, you should seek out the following information:

- 🌟 Bill name
- 🌟 Bill number
- 🌟 Summary/description
- 🌟 Date introduced
- 🌟 Last action item

TIP: the *last action item* refers to the last thing that happened to the bill. This can include anything from a committee referral to governor approval. This can be found on the legislation document online, or there may be a link that will detail this information. For example, a bill might say *Referred to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions on March 16, 2009* (or any other committee, for that matter). This means that the bill is now up for discussion in that committee and has yet to be brought for a vote, making it a good bill on which your advocacy group can concentrate its efforts.

Searching for Legislation

If you are looking at a legislative session that has completed, there may be a document on the website that lists all of the bills introduced and/or all of the bills that had an opportunity to be passed into law (meaning bills that were passed by the legislature and may or may not have been approved by the governor). This list can prove to be very helpful and usually contains the aforementioned information. You can print this list and look through it to see if any of the titles or descriptions are relevant to NLIRH's or your LAN's three priority areas.

If you are searching in a legislative session that is currently in session, or if you are looking at bills that did not even come up for a vote in a previous session, you want to use a keyword search. If the legislature is not unicameral, be sure to do equivalent searches in all of the legislature's chambers.



Un-passed bills are just as important as passed bills. It gives you a sense of the legislature's priorities as well as what types of efforts are made by legislative members.

TIP: Resolutions are bills that are introduced to express a sentiment of the legislature. The bill number may contain the letters "RES" to signify that it is a resolution. Some of these may be relevant to you if they apply to one of your priority areas. Resolutions, however, are not as important as general bills, so don't use too much energy on researching and analyzing them.

Please keep in mind that you might be interested in both legislation that your advocacy network would support, as well as legislation you might oppose (such as anti-choice legislation). You must use this when thinking about keywords to use. For example, relevant legislation about abortion may include either "fetus" (language associated with pro-choicers) or "unborn child" (language associated with the anti-choice movement). For every piece of legislation that you choose, be sure to save a copy.

Keywords that may be helpful in your search:

- 🌟 **Abortion:** abortion, fetus, unborn child, fetal pain, crisis pregnancy centers, child birth, child, terminating pregnancy, trimester
- 🌟 **Reproductive Health Disparities:** health, reproduction, reproductive health, health insurance, Medicaid, medical school, health career/education, emergency contraception, birth control, rape, sexual assault, disparities, sexuality, sex education, pregnancy, unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection/disease, parent notification, cervical cancer, women, abstinence, pregnancy prevention
- 🌟 **Immigration:** immigration, immigrant, illegal alien, legal permanent resident, employment verification, forged documentation, undocumented, foreign nationals
- 🌟 Also keep in mind that searches of "Hispanic", "Latino" or "woman" may also bring up relevant legislation.



Breaking it down—what does it all mean?

Do not stress yourself! Legislation can be intimidating to read. The legislature may have a summary highlighting key points. If not, skim the legislation and look for information that gives you basics of the legislation. You want to know what it is, how it will be accomplished and what its goal is.

For example, based on what you know about the state and the purposes of the legislation, write a few sentences explaining how this legislation can impact Latina women.

Keep in mind that some legislation may not seem immediately relevant. In some cases, a bill that increases access to prescriptions, for example, may seem irrelevant; but in fact, this bill may impact Latinas, in that they can have greater access to prescription birth control.

Developing Talking Points

After you have connected a piece of legislation with community priorities you need to come up with compelling ways to talk about it.

Since you are going to meet with legislators or members of their staff, it is a good idea to have a few talking points ready. This will help make the visit go smoothly and quickly (legislators and staffers often are short on time!), and organizing what you will talk about into a few concise points will ensure that you stay on-message and cover everything that you want to cover.

TIP: As a starting place, it may be helpful to review NLIRH's blueprints, which provide a comprehensive assessment of policies that are important for Latina women's reproductive health. These include ideas and policies that may not immediately appear to be "reproductive health" issues to some, but apply to NLIRH's analysis of reproductive justice.



You understand the legislation, and now your job is to explain to the legislator or staffer how the passage of this bill would affect your community, and whether the effects are positive or negative. Remember, you know your community best, and your goal during a lobby visit is to educate your representative on how the legislation you have chosen will affect you and your community. A personal story – something you or someone you know has experienced – can really help put a human face on the effects of the proposed legislation; if you have one, you should share it.

Since you have looked at demographics, you might want to include these in your talking points. If the legislation you have chosen addresses a certain population (e.g., Latinas, women, people living with HIV/AIDS), make sure to include information about what that population looks like in the legislator's district, and how they will be affected.

Lastly, make sure everyone going on the lobby visits understands these points well. It is important that everyone has an understanding of how the legislation would affect them and their community so that they are able to talk about it effectively and with passion. Remember that not everyone will understand your positions immediately, and some legislators might disagree. Do not let this deter you – your voice needs to be heard!

**Be confident, and always remember: elected officials
are working for YOU.**