



## *Advancing Reproductive Freedom in Your City*

# A TOOL FOR LOCAL POLICYMAKERS

**T**HE LOCAL REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM INDEX: EVALUATING U.S. CITIES 2017 (LOCAL INDEX) is a first-of-its-kind initiative by the National Institute for Reproductive Health (NIRH) that evaluates the reproductive health, rights, and justice policies of the 40 most populous metropolitan areas/municipalities in the United States. As the federal government and many state legislatures continue to attack reproductive freedom, now is a pivotal time for cities to ensure that their residents and all who come there have the ability to control their reproductive and sexual lives. The Local Index can help local advocates, community leaders, elected officials, and others interested in encouraging a locality to use the full extent of its policy and programmatic powers to foster thriving families, support people's reproductive and sexual health decisions, and destigmatize abortion and contraception.

This tool provides guidance to local policymakers and elected officials, including mayors, legislators, and administrators, on how to work with local advocates to use the Local Index to develop a vision and strategy to achieve reproductive freedom in their cities.

## **Engaging Advocates and Constituents**

Policy development can most effectively be done in partnership with the advocates who have been working to advance reproductive freedom and the communities impacted by the problems that need to be solved, including the community-based organizations and grassroots leaders who know their communities well. Working with community groups and a wide array of stakeholders creates a mutually beneficial relationship that, among other things, will help you:

**Uncover** new perspectives on various issues and how they are impacting the community you serve;  
**Ensure** your and/or your city's effort is coordinated with existing work already happening;  
**Identify** possible blind spots you have about a policy's impact or potential unintended consequences;  
**Establish** community trust and develop key validators for your work, who can directly connect you to the communities you and other policymakers are trying to reach; and  
**Create** buzz for the project and build support to help mitigate any pushback you may receive from opponents.

### What to Know Before You Start

Community engagement can happen at one-time or recurring events throughout your advocacy and implementation. Early and ongoing engagement will build stronger relationships and foster greater community understanding.

Consider using the following community engagement strategies based on your capacity and needs:

#### ONE-TIME EVENTS

**Host a town hall** Q&A or community conversation about the Local Index, its findings, and what it means for your city.

**Convene a panel** of experts or a facilitated roundtable conversation on a challenge you are facing in your community and a potential solution covered in the Local Index to educate stakeholders, colleagues, and yourself on the issue, and then ask for comments and ideas.

**Share your City Scorecard** or the Model City on social media and ask followers for their comments and feedback.

#### ONGOING PARTNERSHIPS

**Develop an advisory board** composed of experts and community members affected by the issues at hand. Create a feedback loop so you are tapped in to the impact of your work and new challenges or opportunities that arise.

**Empower stakeholders** to educate the community about the issue; consider using the Local Index as a starting point. Community members can also help you implement a new policy by educating the community about its impact, such as by running a "Know Your Rights" campaign. A diverse taskforce can help you reach individuals who might otherwise be left out.

**Find a coalition** of organizations and grassroots advocates dedicated to your area of interest. Cultivate a relationship with them and collaborate on advocacy, so they can inform your work and activate supporters when needed. Use the Local Index's tools to help you develop your agenda with these partners.



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**Make sure to ask your community** what resources they need to participate, such as compensation, child care, or meetings at a specific time of day, and do your best to accommodate them. If there are needs you cannot meet, be transparent about that and, if possible, explain why and offer an alternative way people can offer feedback.

**Be clear with participants** from the beginning on how you will use their input, so they understand to what extent you are likely to use their advice in making final determinations. How much weight will their input have? What will happen if members of the City Council or another body disagree with their recommendations?

**Establish next steps** at the end of every conversation that outline how those who would like to stay involved can do so.

**Always follow through** on commitments you make and let community members know what you did with their feedback.

If you are not sure who the advocates in your community are, contact NIRH staff at [localrepro@nirhealth.org](mailto:localrepro@nirhealth.org), who can put you in touch with local organizations or individual community leaders.

## Building Your Policy Agenda

You can use the Local Index to brainstorm potential policy solutions that will address the needs, concerns, and challenges you have heard. Together with the advocates that work in your community, review the Model City, the Scorecards, and the policy recommendations and assess the following:

*Which policies relate to the most pressing challenges in your community?*

*Which policies seem to be in line with the values of your community and coalition?*

*Which policies seem the most achievable?*

*What policies have been instituted in cities similar to yours (whether in terms of geography, demographics, financial resources, or political makeup)?*

*Which policies are advocates and community members most supportive of and able to contribute to?*

Then, work with your staff, advocates, and constituents to develop a campaign plan and identify how everyone can help move it forward and win.

## How Your Office Can Advance Reproductive Freedom

No matter your position in government, the Local Index is a useful tool for moving your policy agenda forward. Drawing upon input and support from your community, you can:

**Set forth a long-term**, overarching vision for reproductive freedom in your city, creating a compendium of options appropriate for your city from the Model City and policy recommendations.



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**Introduce legislation**, issue executive orders, or identify policies or initiatives that your agency can launch to advance reproductive health, rights, and justice.

**Use the Local Index** as a resource for educating fellow lawmakers or other policymakers.

**Use the Comprehensive Scorecard** as a benchmark for how your city is currently doing and to demonstrate your success after key policy achievements.

**Identify cities** that you can learn from, or provide guidance to, if they are facing similar challenges or pursuing similar policy goals.

**Address your community's** most pressing challenges, needs, or opportunities through creative strategies, such as public education campaigns to reduce stigma around reproductive health care or the establishment of a new data collection initiative.

## How to Talk About Reproductive Freedom

Reproductive freedom is a winning issue across the country. Research shows that the vast majority of voters support abortion access, disagree with the rollback of our reproductive freedoms, and can be mobilized by strong support for defending and expanding access to reproductive health care, including abortion. However, policies supporting abortion access may still be seen by some as more controversial than other policies included in the Local Index. For that reason, NIRH has provided the following data and research-based message recommendations that policymakers can use to confidently advocate for these policies.

Important data you should know: <sup>1</sup>

**FACT:** The vast majority of voters steadily continue to support access to legal abortion

**FACT:** More than 70% of voters think that if a woman has decided to have an abortion, she should have access to safe, respectful, affordable, quality abortion care, without pressure.

**FACT:** More than 60% of voters disagree with and are angry about the trend of recent state laws restricting access to abortion.

**FACT:** When voters hear about these anti-abortion laws, they want to know who is responsible for passing them and how those politicians can be held accountable, and how they can show their support for abortion access.

NIRH has conducted extensive polling and public opinion research on support for policies and positions that advance access to abortion and other reproductive health needs. Contact [localrepro@nirhealth.org](mailto:localrepro@nirhealth.org) for details.

## Message Recommendations

**Be open and specific about your support for reproductive freedom.** In addition to stating that you are pro-choice, talk about why you believe in reproductive freedom and are proud to support abortion rights, contraceptive access, and/or sexuality education, and discuss what equitable access to health care will mean for the people in your community.

**Educate your constituents about how state and federal policies are harming their communities.** Provide examples of the impact and intent of these harmful policies, e.g., “Politicians are trying to shame, pressure, and punish women who have decided to have an abortion.” Then talk about how your platform will support residents who need to access to reproductive health care.

**Use positive messages that emphasize women’s autonomy and values that underlie reproductive health care, such as control over their own lives and empowerment:**

“You should control your life at the most basic level: your body, your family, your life’s path — and that includes the right and ability to have an abortion.”

“We need to pass laws that respect and empower women. [I/Name] will ensure that everyone has access to respectful, quality, and affordable reproductive health care, including abortion.”

**Focus on the woman and what her experience should be like in accessing care:**

“When a woman has decided to have an abortion, she should be able to get safe, supportive, respectful care in her community, without shame or pressure.”

Instead of ...	Say ...
They, them	We, us
Women, families	A woman, her family
Choice	Personal decisions, important life decisions
Giving details about why a woman is having an abortion	When a woman has decided to have an abortion...
Pro-choice	Supporting abortion rights
Pro-life	Anti-abortion, opponents of abortion access
Demonizing government	Focus on “some policymakers” and anti-abortion leaders
Abortion should be safe, legal, rare	Abortion should be accessible, affordable, and available in a woman’s community, without shame or pressure



## Moving Forward

Every community is different, and NIRH encourages you to adapt this tool, and the resources in the Local Index, to your community's unique culture, opportunities, and challenges. NIRH is available to provide support and technical assistance to you as needed. Contact us at [localrepro@nirhealth.org](mailto:localrepro@nirhealth.org) with questions or for individualized guidance on using the strategies or choosing policies included in these tools.

<sup>1</sup> Analysis of voters' opinions on abortion restrictions and affirmative policies, NIRH/Perry Udem, 2016



THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH (NIRH) builds power at the state and local level to change public policy, galvanize public support, and normalize women's decisions about abortion and contraception. Through our partnership model, we provide state and local advocates with strategic guidance, hands-on support, and funding to create national change from the ground up. We build connections within and across states, arming our partners with the latest knowledge and best tools to advance reproductive freedom for the people in their communities.

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