SAVING HOOSIER HEALTHCARE

HOOSIER ACTION’S FIGHT AGAINST MEDICAID WORK REQUIREMENTS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Statewide grassroots organizing and legal opposition pressured the state of Indiana to suspend a harmful proposal to implement work requirements in the state’s Medicaid program on October 31, 2019. With funding from Community Catalyst’s Health Justice Fund, Hoosier Action, implemented a campaign to ensure accessible and affordable care for all. This case study highlights the innovative organizing and campaign work of Hoosier Action, a member-led, multi-issue organization that organizes rural and small-town Hoosiers, as they worked to suspend the state’s Medicaid work requirement.

Hoosier Action worked collaboratively with diverse coalition partners across the state, focusing on securing community buy-in, raising awareness through community engagement, and elevating concerns to policy makers about the harmful impacts of work requirements. Hoosier Action’s work is not just a testament to their organizing prowess, but also to the care they took to engage with community members. They invested time and energy into training volunteers to hold conversations with people to address misinformation about the Medicaid program and to challenge the erroneous narrative suggesting that only some should be ‘entitled’ to Medicaid coverage.

As part of this work, Hoosier Action initiated conversations about racism and classism, and actively encouraged people to connect their needs to others’ in both rural Indiana communities as well as throughout urban Indianapolis. In organizing to defeat work requirements, Hoosier Action built a powerful grassroots movement, uplifting the voices of everyday Hoosiers who shared their own experiences to connect with their neighbors and mobilize a movement to protect Medicaid. In addition to building a grassroots movement, Hoosier Action’s organizing work – and specifically door-to-door grassroots organizing – surfaced the lead plaintiff for the lawsuit that successfully challenged the legality of the state’s Medicaid work requirements.

INDIANA’S HEALTHCARE LANDSCAPE: THE IMPLEMENTATION OF WORK REQUIREMENTS

In 2015, Indiana became one of a few conservative states to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. Over 400,000 Hoosiers gained health insurance coverage under expansion. The program provided not only critical access to healthcare, but also served as a vital economic backbone for Hoosiers across the state, protecting many families from being one minor medical emergency away from bankruptcy. However, in February 2019, Indiana became the second state in the nation to gain permission from the federal government to add a work requirement for adult Medicaid recipients. Indiana’s approved work requirement forced Medicaid beneficiaries to be working or engaged in work-related activities for at least 80 hours per month in order to be eligible for coverage. At the time of proposal, it was estimated that 50,000 Hoosiers stood to lose their health care coverage because they were unable to comply with the new burdensome requirements, or their coverage was suspended due to confusion over the new policy guidelines and bureaucratic errors.
Under Governor Holcomb, the state moved forward with its implementation of the new work requirement, asserting that fewer people would lose their health care compared to other states implementing similar requirements, because of written-in ‘exceptions’ to the work requirement. However, Hoosier Action understood, having heard from their members, that these new requirements were part of a pattern of policies designed to disenroll Hoosiers from health care under the guise of promoting self-reliance. A notable example of these types of policies includes a provision that requires Medicaid beneficiaries in Indiana to pay a premium to receive benefits, a policy unique to Indiana’s program. In addition to this, confusion and mis-categorization were widespread throughout implementation. The state would, more often than not, fail to inform people of the new reporting requirements. Even when the state attempted to notify people, these notifications came in the form of incredibly confusing and conflicting letters which, ultimately, resulted in people erroneously losing coverage. Knowing all of this, Hoosier Action knew that they had to build a powerful, diverse campaign centered on racial justice and community empowerment in order to defeat work requirements.

**HOOSIER ACTION’S RESPONSE: THE ‘SAVE HOOSIER HEALTHCARE’ CAMPAIGN**

With the implementation plan for work requirements looming, Hoosier Action immediately organized their community with the goal of getting the state to suspend these changes. Hoosier Action employed a number of strategies designed to combat misinformation and to engage with and empower Hoosiers – especially those who were directly impacted by work requirements – to rally together to defeat the proposal. Hoosier Action intentionally created a justice-oriented campaign, focusing on:

1. Creating a campaign agenda that was developed and informed by community members and coalition partners;

2. Organizing a wide-reaching community outreach and engagement program;

3. Incorporating a diverse array of opportunities and events for people across the state to engage; and

4. Utilizing an organizing model that not only included spreading information and recruitment, but also training and empowerment;

5. Incorporating a racial justice framework and directly countering racist narratives around Medicaid.
A core part of Hoosier Action’s strategy was to look beyond their immediate constituency and plug into work already in action across the state. When Hoosier Action began organizing against the implementation of work requirements, they learned that several Black-led organizations based in Indianapolis, including Concerned Clergy and the NAACP, were already sounding the alarm about work requirements. Recognizing that it would be essential to build strong partnerships between Black-led organizations and Hoosier Action’s multiracial, but majority white, rural small-town base, Hoosier Action took steps to build a relationship with these organizations. Hoosier Action relied on existing relationships to cultivate a relationship with these new partners. After meeting with various coalition leaders to build a relationship, Hoosier Action was, ultimately, invited to join the coalition. The individual organizing strategies of Concerned Clergy, the NAACP, and Hoosier Action complemented each other, allowing for greater collaboration between coalition members. Concerned Clergy and the NAACP primarily focused on administrative advocacy and petition signing while Hoosier Action focused on grassroots activation. Hoosier Action intentionally joined an existing collaboration of organizations rather than launching a new coalition, avoiding the redundancy and the resource-competition that can too often plague advocacy campaigns.

Hoosier Action worked in solidarity with the NAACP and Concerned Clergy, and embedded a racial justice and equity framework into their organizing efforts. Black-led organizations, including the NAACP and Concerned Clergy, and leaders of the Indiana Black Caucus emphasized, from the moment work requirements were proposed, that Medicaid work requirements were racist in both their rhetoric, which framed enrollees in government programs as lazy, and their intent, as this program would disproportionately harm Black Hoosiers. Hoosier Action engaged in conversations with predominantly white, rural communities about the way that pervasive racist narratives around social programs such as Medicaid were intentionally driving a wedge between white communities and communities of color, especially Black Hoosiers.

More specifically, through conversations with people across rural Indianapolis, Hoosier Action challenged the ‘scarcity mindset’ that often pits communities against one another under the assumption that resources are limited. For example, Hoosier Action focused on addressing the racist, anti-Black ‘welfare queen’ narrative by highlighting how this false narrative was part of a larger strategy to divide people across racial lines in order to take healthcare and economic safety nets away from all Hoosiers. Hoosier Action was explicit about the harmful impacts that work requirements would have on people, their family members, their neighbors, and the healthcare system. They helped to connect the struggles of Black people in Indianapolis to the lives of white, rural people from small towns such as New Albany, Martinsville, Spencer, Franklin, Bloomfield, and Bedford.
Hoosier Action employed many community-informed outreach and engagement tactics that provided a stark contrast to the state’s largely impersonal approach to communicate about work requirements. For example, for many struggling Hoosiers, their home mailboxes are a place where bills and debt pile up. Hoosier Action knew that in order to truly reach people, they couldn’t mirror the state’s approach of sending impersonal mail. To combat misinformation and build support for the Medicaid program, Hoosier Action instead opted to launch a door-to-door canvassing program. Canvassing is a tactic that involves going to community members’ homes and having face-to-face conversations, often times training a neighbor or peer to hold the conversation to ensure stronger trust from the outset.

Hoosier Action trained community members from rural counties including Monroe, Owen, Lawrence, Greene, and Brown to ground their conversations in their own lived experiences, encouraging neighbors to understand how work requirements were harmful to their specific community. In order to tackle pervasive racist Medicaid narratives, Hoosier Action trained their volunteers to engage curiously and hold open-ended conversations during canvasses in order to surface any racist sentiments and help people work through them. Hoosier Action simultaneously also engaged in high density canvassing; by going to densely populated areas and events, such as the local Walmart or weekly farmers markets, Hoosier Action was able to meet community members where they were. Hoosier Action connected with over 10,000 people in the course of their eight-month campaign which resulted in thousands of stories collected and postcard petitions signed, as well as identifying and cultivating several core leaders.

A crucial aspect of Hoosier Action’s campaign was engaging and building leaders from the community - empowering everyday people to advocate for the healthcare they deserve. To achieve this, Hoosier Action first recruited community members through a number of outreach events such as the canvasses highlighted above. From there, Hoosier Action held events that enriched and empowered the community members. These events included trainings on topics including: how the legislative process works, how to contribute to a story collecting program, and how to make an effective organizing ask. Hoosier Action committed to having a consistent presence in the community by holding events like their "Save Hoosier Health Dinner and Work Parties" regularly, ensuring that Southern Indiana community had regular opportunities to share their experiences while being trained in organizing tactics. Hoosier Action provided dinner alongside trainings, identifying a variety of roles for interested volunteers from data entry, phone-banking, text message campaigns, making signs, and writing letters to the editor. Throughout the course of their campaign, Hoosier Action held over 100 meetings throughout Southern Indiana to help educate, connect, and train everyday Hoosiers to be advocates for change.

One powerful example is the story of Eva Bell, who attended her first Hoosier Action meeting in March 2019. As a mom raising her three kids on her own because her husband
had not been able to secure work yet, Eva’s experiences were paradigmatic of so many Hoosiers enrolled in the program. Over the course of the campaign, not only were Eva and her children nearly kicked off of Medicaid multiple times due to the state’s clerical errors, but Eva received conflicting information about whether she would be subject to the work requirements. Throughout the course of the campaign, Eva moved up the ladder of engagement by participating in door-to-door canvasses, by attending a weekend-long leadership development training, and by sharing her story for the first time publicly at the Hoosier Action campaign launch. From there, an organizer coached Eva to lead evening work parties. Eva’s story was shared at the campaign’s rally, press conference, and petition postcard delivery action in Indianapolis on July 1st, 2019, the day the work requirements program began to be implemented. In January 2020, Hoosier Action hired Eva as a full-time organizer.

PUBLIC EVENTS AND FORUMS

Hoosier Action relied on public events and forums to draw attention to the healthcare changes and the impact of work requirements, to recruit and train community members on grassroots organizing tactics, and to connect community members directly to policy makers. These public events and forums demonstrated the collective organizing power of the campaign. Hoosier Action’s events included:

- The Southern Indiana region-wide “Save Hoosier Healthcare” campaign public kick-off event, which was organized in partnership with key coalition members such as Medicare for All Indiana, Mother Hubbard’s Cupboard, and Indiana Recovery Alliance. This event highlighted the issue, shared consumer stories, and demonstrated the coordination and alignment among coalition members.
- Community forums where constituents met with their state representatives. In New Albany, Hoosier Action facilitated the meeting of 45 Hoosiers with their State Representative, Ed Clere. These constituents shared their stories and concerns and successfully secured Representative Clere’s opposition to the Medicaid work requirements, solidifying his position as a Medicaid champion.
- On July 1st, the same day the work requirements went into effect, Hoosier Action held a rally and press conference in Indianapolis that culminated in the delivery of a petition which consisted of 8,000 postcards and 2,000 online petition signatures demanding the repeal of work requirements to Governor Holcomb’s office. This rally served as a high-point in the campaign by demonstrating Hoosier Action’s on-the-ground organizing success, providing an opportunity to recruit interested community members, elevating consumer stories, and showing the state the widespread public will they had built in opposition of work requirements.
It was this broad reach and strong tie to communities across rural Indiana that led Hoosier Action to form a successful partnership with Indiana Legal Services, who, in partnership with the National Health Law Program, filed the lawsuit to block the state’s work requirements. The lawsuit purported that work requirements were fundamentally at odds with the purpose of the Medicaid program and therefore had no standing.

Indiana Legal Services had been struggling to identify impacted constituents, and after becoming aware of Hoosier Action’s community-centered work, reached out to collaborate. Because of Hoosier Action’s deep commitment to relate to as many people directly impacted by this program as possible, Hoosier Action engaged in a wide variety of creative tactics to identify Medicaid enrollees — especially those who were subject to the work requirements. These tactics included:

- Door to door canvassing
- Presentations for medical professionals and healthcare navigators
- Community outreach at food pantries
- Online advertising
- Peer to peer texting
- Phone banking
- Social media outreach to Facebook groups and on Facebook stories
- Public events

Drawing upon these deep community ties, Hoosier Action was able to identify those who would be harmed by work requirements and, ultimately, aided Indiana Legal Services in identifying a plaintiff for their case against the state.

Because of this case, work requirements were suspended in Indiana on October 31, 2019. Hoosier Action’s organizing work aligned with the legal strategy to create the necessary combination of grassroots and grasstops pressure for the work requirements to be suspended. By utilizing an organizing model that not only focused on disseminating information and recruiting membership, but also centered on empowering community members to be informed advocates and forming authentic relationships, Hoosier Action was able to create a movement that stopped a racist, punitive policy change.