

Med students learn how to be advocates for health care in 2021

Watch the AMA's daily COVID-19 update, with insights from AMA leaders and experts about the pandemic.

Featured topic and speakers

In today's COVID-19 Update, a special preview of the AMA webinar "Your Voice, Your AMA: Health Care Advocacy and the New Administration," airing on Jan. 27 at noon Central for medical students to learn more about advocacy and how they can get involved in 2021.

Register for the webinar.

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Speakers

- Todd Askew, senior vice president, advocacy, AMA
- Jenny Young, director of membership, Medical Society of Virginia
- Reilly Bealer, government relations advocacy fellow (GRAF), AMA

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's COVID-19 update. Today, we're bringing you a special preview of an AMA webinar airing on January 27th called, "Your Voice, Your AMA: Health Care Advocacy and the New Administration" and discussing how medical students can get more involved in advocacy in 2021. I'll be the moderator for this upcoming webinar and I'm joined today by the three panelists. Todd Askew, AMA senior vice president of advocacy in Washington, D.C. Reilly Bealer, the AMA's government relations advocacy fellow or GRAF in Washington, D.C., and a rising third year medical student at the Elson Floyd College of Medicine at Washington State University. And Jenny Young, director of membership at the Medical Society of Virginia in Richmond, Virginia. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. The panels have all asked for me to call them

by their first names today. Todd, can you start by explaining the goal of the upcoming webinar and why it's so important to hold this event right now?

Askew: Sure. Todd, absolutely. This is a great opportunity and a great time for medical students to become involved in advocacy, that's really who we're targeting here. As a medical student at the beginning of your career, this is a great time to begin to make advocacy part of your practice, part of the way you care for patients throughout your career. Also, obviously right now, we have a lot of people that are very engaged in the political process right now, coming on the heels of the inaugural. We have a new president, we have a new Congress, so people are paying attention. So it's a great time to reach out and encourage medical students and young physicians and everybody really to make advocacy part of their regular practice.

Unger: And there's such a flurry of activity now, going on. Have you ever seen anything like this Todd?

Askew: No, it really is. This is an exciting time to be an advocate. It's an exciting time to be in Washington, but really in this virtual world, it's an exciting time to engage in the process from about anywhere. And we're going to talk in the webinar about how we think the new administration will impact health care policy and kind of what the future of health care policy is going forward.

Unger: Thank you. Reilly, you decided to spend a year as the AMA's GRAF and devote yourself to advocacy full time. Can you tell us where did you get this personal passion for advocacy and why do you believe students should get involved?

Bealer: Definitely, Todd. And for me, advocacy is not a specific definition and I'm sure Todd Askew and Jenny can talk about this more. It's more of a vague concept with many different ways to perceive it, whether that's collaboration, education, reconciliation and activism, advocacy is what you make it. And I want to see all of our students participate in the process because we need their voices. And for me, drivers of advocacy come from your personal values, your views of the world and your personal experiences of yourself and within your community. For me, I experienced housing insecurity at a very young age while dealing with a chronic medical condition.

Bealer: So I understand what it's like to not be able to access health care and as well as dealing with issues that many of the population doesn't have to struggle with. Like transportation, being able to get to an appointment when you're working eight to five in and physician's office is only nine to four. It's important that we advocate for all patients. And I don't see practicing medicine and taking part in advocacy and policy efforts as separate entities. As a physician, we take a role in healing all of the patient, not just their physical symptoms, but their emotional, spiritual, environmental, social issues as well.

Unger: Jenny, you've been working with students for a long time now. Why do you think students should get involved?

Young: Great, thanks, Todd. As you mentioned, I've been with the Medical Society of Virginia for almost nine years, and we have found that the medical students are an incredible advocacy group and kind of force. One of the big reasons is the legislators are making changes to the health care system that are going to affect a medical student much more in their profession than it will say, an almost retired physician. We've also found that, especially on medical education and scope of practice issues, having students just have a basic general conversation with a legislator or their aid about what is residency, what is medical school, what is GME funding it's really important because the normal lay person, or even legislator may not understand the complexities that come along with medical education.

Unger: Jenny has your approach changed due to the pandemic? I mean, how do you advocate in this environment?

Young: Absolutely. So we are actually in Virginia in the midst of our general assembly session, which is 100% virtual, which I'm sure most states in the country are dealing with. So we really have been trying to have the communications with the legislators via Zoom, which is not without its glitches. However, one thing that we also really try to do is partner with our medical student leaders and make sure that they have the opportunity to testify in committee meeting hearings, as well as really talk to the important key legislators that are voting on the specific issues. This year, we're dealing with a lot of scope of practice battles. And one thing this also just highlights is the importance of year-round advocacy.

Young: So one of the great things about partnering with the AMA or partnering with your state medical society is they can help to connect your school chapter with your legislators. So you actually start to build a relationship. So when you do reach out to your legislator during that session, or when you need their help on a boat, they know you are, they know what your school chapter stands for and you're not just a random name or number that comes over their phone or email. They remember that relationship and connection.

Unger: That's probably pretty important right now in this virtual environment. Todd, when you think about advocacy, how has the pandemic environment changed that right now for the AMA?

Askew: Well, I think in terms of the physical act of advocacy, the Congress is, they are meeting, but hearings are mostly virtual. Most access to the Capitol grounds is closed off to non-staff. And so essentially we are all virtual in our advocacy activities. A lot of this has relied on the relationships that were established before the pandemic hit and being able to call on those individuals, those members, those staffers and reach out to them and have that communication without having the other environment where you're tracking somebody down in a hallway or sitting in a hearing room. So

having those established relationships, I think, has been a really important component that said, once you do get into this virtual environment and you have them, on your screen sort of, you have them, they're a 100% paying attention to you in that moment.

Askew: And so it can be an effective tool. I don't know if it will last past the pandemic, but I think everybody has worked hard to make it an effective tool. And I think that's met with some success. In terms of the issues that we're lobbying on, obviously an entire new set of public health issues and dealing with the novel coronavirus and the needs of the health care system, in terms of PPE, for example, and the desperate search for PPE early, and even into the day, the advocacy for clear guidance for reliance on science, some things you would think shouldn't have to be said, but they have had to be said. And so it's these many issues related directly to the pandemic that we're all learning, we're all teaching and we're all advocating for them.

Unger: And it's been a particularly, very successful year for AMA's advocacy on behalf of physicians and patients. Reilly, you took on the role of the GRAF in a very strange environment. How has this environment, this pandemic, affected the way that you've approached your role as the GRAF?

Bealer: I work with Todd, but I've never actually met him in person due to the virtual world. It's a definitely new experience for me being all virtual and it has posed the challenges, but it's also been incredibly insightful and provided the opportunity to expand access to our resources and speakers, to students in positions. For example, at our National Advocacy Week in October, we were able to get amazing speakers like FDA commissioner, Stephen Hahn, and the majority Whip representative, Jim Clyburn, speakers, you wouldn't even imagine would be able to attend in person in the non-virtual setting. In addition, being virtual, we can expand access to students across the country. As you know, in D.C., Things are very busy and people may not have the time to meet with students or students may not be able to afford to fly to D.C. To do their advocacy work. So this gives us the ability to expand and offer more opportunities for students. For example, our medical student advocacy conference coming up in March is going to be all virtual and students get the opportunities to speak with their legislators via telehealth session or televisit session.

Unger: What I think is really neat too, about that Physicians of the Future Summit is about 70% more students can participate in this kind of virtual approach. We had almost 70% more submissions to our research symposium and research challenge. So a lot of opportunity in this virtual world, like you mentioned before, the kind of speakers that you can get and just expanded opportunities. So it's great to see you do that. Well, speaking of our upcoming webinar, we have students giving them an opportunity to submit questions in advance. Reilly, would you say that medical students are largely concerned about the same issues that physicians have or do they have unique concerns?

Bealer: I think students themselves are a very unique population and we don't all necessarily fit in the same box. However, students are considered the conscience of the AMA, at least our section is. And so we are really focused on equity, ensuring that these challenges that are going to face our health

care systems for years to come have solutions that don't just benefit one population that help those who've been historically minoritized and marginalized in society, making sure that we can analyze issues from unique perspectives, utilizing our own experiences and problem solving skills to debate and come together on a solution. And I also think that's what makes our organization so great is because we can have perspectives of students, perspectives of physicians, and we'll all work together on these critical, complex multifaceted issues.

Unger: Great. Well, last question. I want to just get your thoughts on the role of associations and state societies in advancing the issues that matter to physicians and students in this particularly unique year. Jenny, why don't you start?

Young: I think the big issue that we're working on in addition to, as I mentioned previously, scope of practice is burnout. And so the Medical Society of Virginia in particular has been working very hard on physician burnout for several years now. We actually were the first state in the nation to pass legal protections for physicians seeking help for their career burnout. And this year, the burnout that we've seen from the medical student perspective is enormous, that added stress and pressure on an already incredibly stressful time has really made us focus on increasing legal protections for medical student burnout in this year's Virginia general assembly session. And it's something that we're very proud of. And so far our bill has passed unanimously. So we look forward to having it go through the continued channels of the Virginia general assembly and be signed by the governor.

Unger: Todd, your thoughts.

Askew: I think it's been interesting so much of the time and advocates spend is trying to get your issue lifted up the agenda, right? And get the attention of those who have the power to advance what you're working on. In this environment, so many of the issues, both equity and COVID are right in the wheelhouse of physicians and within the resource kind of box that the AMA and other state and specialty medical societies fill. So we have a tremendous number of legislators coming to us and regulators coming to us, help me understand this, tell me the experience from the frontline. The government says, "We have plenty of PPE." And we can say, "No, you don't. Here's where the shortage is." The government has said, "Look, telemedicine may not work here." And we can say, "Yes, it can work here. Here are the changes you need to make in order to make it accessible for people."

Askew: And so that expertise I think, has been called upon by government at all levels in this time to help guide the response and the receptivity of policymakers to that messaging has been much more than I think it might have been in more normal times when some of the other more mundane issues perhaps would also be on their mind as well. So it's been a challenge, but it's been an exciting time to be able to play a part, both as professional advocates, but also the physicians and the medical students we represent all play a part in different ways in kind of meeting the moment.

Unger: And one of the key things I've really seen as effective is how the advocacy team at the AMA

has created that direct connection between people at the CDC and the FDA to connect directly with a physician audience and kind of tell them the facts and actually answer questions.

Askew: And I would say, it's not just the advocacy team. It's kind of like, who's in membership, we're all in membership. Well, we're all in advocacy too, because the legal team, Todd, the communications team, the MMX team that you had, it's been a real example of the power of organized medicine to make a real difference.

Unger: Yeah, there's really never been a better time for speaking with a unified voice than right now. I'm really looking forward to the upcoming webinar. You can watch that live webinar again, Your Voice, Your AMA: Health Care Advocacy and the New Administration. That event is on January 27th at noon Central time. And if you want to register, go to ama-assn.org/med-student-voices. Or if you can't remember that, click on the link in our YouTube descriptions. Thanks so much Todd, Reilly and Jenny for being here today and sharing your perspectives. We'll be back soon with another COVID update. In the meantime, please take care.

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