

Free the Vaccine for COVID-19: an Advocacy Innovation Lab

The Issue: What's the Problem We're Addressing?

It's hard to imagine the day we read the headline "COVID-19 Immunizations Begin." However, history shows that it's only a matter of time until we have a vaccine for COVID-19. This day will arrive. And in that there is hope.

The problem is this: when we do have a vaccine, will everyone have access to it? Without affordable access for everyone, across the globe, the vaccine can't really do its job. Already governments around the world are investing billions in tax-payer funds into the research and development of diagnostic tools, treatments, and a vaccine for Covid-19. Since the SARS outbreak, the National Institutes of Health alone has spent nearly \$700 million on coronavirus research and development. This virus is now a pandemic, following those of Ebola and Zika, yet experience tells us once the vaccine is discovered, pharmaceutical corporations will want us to pay again to acquire it. **This means that payment will likely be demanded for a life-saving medicine already paid for from public funds. It also means that not everyone will be able to afford access.**

More urgently than ever the global need for collaboration and solidarity is being felt by people who had never before paid attention to these issues. Almost everyone, everywhere is waiting for drugs and vaccines that can change lives, history and the current narrative. And an urgent question needs to be answered: how do we ensure access for all?

Communities Served

People from all backgrounds, ethnicities, levels of status and wealth have been impacted by Covid-19. We are all vulnerable, but not all of us equally. Our goal is to ensure the vaccine is freely accessible to everyone in the world. Our primary targets include: 1) university faculty and administration who can pressure their institutions to be socially responsible in patenting and licensing of publicly funded medicines like vaccines and diagnostics developed in university labs, 2) Ministers of Health or other funding bodies, and 3) Pharmaceutical CEOs.

When we win, the people who will benefit will be residents of entire nations, often those historically written off by pharmaceutical providers because they are too poor to profit from. When we win, uninsured or underinsured residents of wealthy nations will also be able to access a life-saving drug regardless of immigration status. When we win everyone benefits because flattening the curve isn't enough - we can only eliminate the curve after enough people are vaccinated to protect societies.

Strategy: How Does it Work?

The social-political landscape has fundamentally shifted. We won't win through old methods – holding up signs at a traditional crowded protest march is no longer an option. So we're finding new, better ways

that work in our current context through our "Advocacy Innovation Lab." While the virologists are working in their lab developing a vaccine, we're working in ours making sure that vaccine is freely available.

We are implementing a global program designed for the time of physical distancing with live weekly online courses on innovative advocacy and best practices in access to medicines advocacy at two different times to cater to different time zones around the world. From more than 300 volunteers we have formed "Salk Squads" of 4-6 people (named after Jonas Salk who gave the vaccine for polio to the world).

Each week, Lab participants meet online for training and lessons from special guest experts who have successfully fought for equal access to medicines and experienced leaders in artistic activism. Then the participants, that are regionally-based, conduct weekly missions that will either build their skills or pressure key targets in the direction of our goals. They are experimenting with narratives, graphics, and new ways to use social media, encouraging health officials to pledge to support equitable access to new diagnostics, treatments and the eventual vaccine for Covid-19. They are testing social distancing performances that encourage people to pressure their governments. Over the 4 month cycle, hundreds of actions will be implemented, and each group is guided to reflect and refine their actions in order to learn from them and share with others.

Their advocacy tactics and results are shared within regional groups where they are collaboratively evaluated and refined with an assigned mentor. Successful tactics are shared across all the regions so they can be iterated upon and eventually deployed globally. We are learning new ways to promote equity in access to medicines from this massive number of experiments and assessments moving at a faster rate than we have historically been able to mobilize due to the increase in the number of student activists, the increase time at home to dedicate to virtual activism training all the while developing and building a grassroots movement ready to implement them. We are already providing weekly updates and eventually methods, case studies and best practices will be shared with the public to encourage use by anyone.

Impact

Already the impact of the campaign can be felt in our participants where, a few days after meeting, hundreds of people are remotely coordinating, planning and working together to ensure global equity in access to medicines. Within days of our announcement we had over 600 sign up. Shortly after over 300 volunteers committed to work on the campaign weekly for the next four months. They are from 29 countries on every continent (except Antarctica!). They are young (79% are under 45), 66% identify as women, 60% as activists, and 36% as artists or designers.

We believe in this campaign's future impact because, while it is a new and innovative concept in massive, rapid online organizing based on creativity and experimentation, it is built on many years of work by organizations with excellent track records.

C4AA has helped thousands of people create successful advocacy campaigns around the world, and helped organizations and funders create visionary strategies that combine the best practices of arts and activism. Their research and publications demonstrate the astonishing impact of putting innovation, culture and creativity at the core of change.

UAEM has the depth of technical knowledge on alternative R&D mechanisms, licensing and global health. With over 100 chapters in more than 20 countries across the world, UAEM students work has successfully influenced policies at universities in order to ensure that products of biomedical research and development are made available to and affordable to the people who need them most.

Recent campaign victories:

- Some sampling of the press and actions from the first week mission include: BBC's Newsday featured UAEM North America's Executive Director, Merith Basey, being featured on BBC's Newsday. [Listen here](#) (37 minutes in). In the UK, one of our Salk Squad members spoke about the campaign on [her university's radio show](#), in addition to [publishing an op-ed in the Cambridge Globalist](#). In Melbourne, the message got out with a [letter to the editor in The Age](#). In Accra, creative activist solo protest was featured on the [Ghana Broadcasting Company \(GBC\) online](#). In Ottawa [an op-ed in the Tyee](#) was published. Other participants are connecting with local radio shows, contacted journalist friends-of-friends, found ways to get messages to national TV shows through social media, and generally found lots of creative ways to get to the press.
- [Medical students with little prior experience in activism](#) are working with artists and creatives for the first time. Together they are approaching COVID researchers and institutions with the #opencovidpledge, using clever tactics to align the stated principles of those institutions with a pledge to freely share of their discoveries with the world.
- Students in Colombia and Ecuador and competing to be the first university in the Americas to sign the Open Covid Pledge
- Universities in Canada involved in vaccine research are engaging with our Free the Vaccine team on this issue

Innovation: What makes this approach distinguishable from other efforts?

This project is specifically designed to respond to this moment, facing its uncertainty with a movement that thrives on innovation, action, and collaboration. This is unique and groundbreaking for the access-to-medicines movement, which for the last decade has been heavily technical in their search for solutions to the access challenge.

Our entire program is aimed at propelling innovation in advocacy by emphasizing rapid, crowd-sourced experimentation and creativity. While traditional advocacy methods can rely on fact sheets and petitions, research shows that narrative, surprise, and creativity is equally and if not more so effective in the cultural and social change that propels policy change. And yet few advocacy groups know how to use those tools.

Center for Artistic Activism has been helping advocacy groups do this work for over a decade, and this is the largest, most concerted effort to date to apply the research and methods to a global campaign.

We are reaching and mobilizing people confined to their homes but desperately wanting to have agency to collaborate and use their diverse skills to ensure everyone has the care they need. This could be remembered as a moment in history that is about fear, isolation and suspension. This project counters with hope, collaboration, and innovation.

Suitability: What makes our organizations the right ones to address this issue?

This project is a partnership between the Center for Artistic Activism and Universities Allied for Essential Medicines.

C4AA has led dozens of workshops, in 20 countries with 2000+ people helping them use their creativity and culture to affect power. They've moved public health campaigns forward and conducted groundbreaking research on the impact of creative activism. This campaign is built on the successes of a similar anti-corruption program with artists, activists, and investigative journalists in the Western Balkans and West Africa.

UAEM has grown from a North American movement, with its origins in the HIV/AIDS movement, to a truly global one, encompassing regions with contrasting needs and contexts, working collaboratively towards a global objective of making medicines accessible to all. The COVID-19 crisis has revealed hard truths about the world's preparedness in face of a global pandemic including responses that feed social inequalities and increased oppression of marginalised communities.

Long-Term Vision: If we're successful, how will the issue be impacted?

We're training hundreds of people in how to become the cutting-edge, creative activists of the future. We're expanding the access to medicines movement at a critical moment in the movement's history when 1 in 3 people in the US cannot afford their prescriptions drugs in the US alone. Each will have the tools to develop or further innovative campaigns through UAEM or beyond and build movements with everyday people, through accessible tactics, that embody local cultures, vibrancy, and life.

Our vision is to empower citizens to respond to the biomedical access and innovation crisis by advocating for the most promising global biomedical R&D system that works for all favoring people over profit. What must replace the current model is an ethical, people-centered, needs-driven R&D system where publicly funded research leads to needed and affordable treatments.

COVID-19 is undeniably shaping our future. **Let's make this the catalyst: transforming the way we research and develop medicines and improving millions of lives with it.**

For more information see freethevaccine.org and contact rebecca@c4aa.org or Merith merith@uaem.org.