



THE OFFICIAL NEWSMAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

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Advocacy Conference: 720+ pediatricians, one message for Congress

by Devin Miller, Washington Correspondent

More than 720 pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists, pediatric surgical specialists, trainees and medical students joined the first virtual AAP Advocacy Conference from their respective screens with one goal: to speak up for children.

"You are making AAP history by being here," said Melinda A. Williams-Willingham, M.D., FAAP, chair of the AAP Committee on Federal Government Affairs. Dr. Williams-Willingham co-chaired the conference April 11-13 with Pam K. Shaw, M.D., FAAP, who leads the AAP Committee on State Government Affairs.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference that normally brings AAP members to the nation's capital was virtual. It also was the largest advocacy conference to date, with attendees hailing from all 50 states, Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C., and participating in over 360 virtual congressional appointments.

Advocacy Conference by the numbers

More than **720** attendees from all **50** states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico

290 pediatric subspecialists

281 trainees

54 state delegation leaders

More than **360** virtual Capitol Hill visits

The conference came at a pinnacle advocacy moment, as the country works to overcome the public health crisis and embarks on sweeping efforts that include ensuring children can be vaccinated against the virus safely.

"I can't overstate the urgency of the moment or the magnitude of the situation, nor can I express how grateful I am to each of you for being here to learn how to work effectively with our lawmakers to keep today's children from becoming a lost generation," AAP President Lee Savio Beers, M.D., FAAP, said in her opening remarks. "As the nation debates the best way to move forward, pediatricians need to be part of that discussion."

Over a span of two and a half days, attendees did exactly that. They dove into child health advocacy and added their voices to the discussion, making sure children's needs are heard as our country forges its path forward.

Abrams: Educate, advocate, agitate



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Abrams

Throughout the conference, attendees heard inspiring remarks from several distinguished speakers who spoke firsthand about the power of advocacy.

In an invigorating plenary address, Stacey Abrams, M.P.A., J.D., who served as Democratic leader of the Georgia House of Representatives for seven years prior to running for governor of Georgia, talked about her own experiences and urged attendees to do three things: Educate, advocate and agitate.

"An advocate's job is not to change someone else's mind. Your job is to change their behavior," Abrams said.

Attendees also heard from fellow pediatricians who have built careers in public policy and are working to advance priorities that support children, families and communities.

A dynamic panel discussion, moderated by Michael D. Warren, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, associate administrator of the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, featured several pediatricians who have positions in government: Yadira Caraveo, M.D., FAAP, a member of the Colorado House of Representatives; David E. Myles, M.D., M.S., FAAP, a council member for the City of Rockville, Md.; and Ankoor Y. Shah, M.D., M.B.A., M.P.H., FAAP, the interim principal senior deputy director for the Washington, D.C. Department of Health.

The panelists discussed what led them to pursue their careers in public service and shared advice for others who might be interested.

"It's OK to be impatient with what you think is best for kids," said Dr. Shah.



Dr. Gandhi

Keeping with the theme of pediatricians making a difference through public policy, attendees also heard from Pritesh Gandhi, M.D., M.P.H., who is chief medical officer at the Department of Homeland Security. He discussed the Biden administration's response to the number of children at the border and called on pediatricians to use their voices and hold government officials accountable to "leave no stone unturned in



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ensuring that we are building a system that protects the health and well-being of children."

Supporting the Vaccines for Children program

Every year, the conference culminates with participants visiting Capitol Hill to discuss a timely child health topic. Instead of trekking up and down the halls of Congress, attendees participated in virtual meetings during which they urged their lawmakers to support the Strengthening the Vaccines for Children Program Act. The bipartisan, AAP-endorsed legislation would build on the Vaccines for Children program, which provides vaccines for half of all American children.

The Academy is advocating for a strong pediatric vaccine delivery system and comprehensive efforts to ensure children can receive routine immunizations. Childhood vaccination rates have dropped drastically during the pandemic, and this bill would help make sure children can receive vaccinations in their medical home without their families facing financial or administrative barriers.

Equipped with advocacy skills and background on the issue learned from the conference, attendees brought their messages to Congress. Leaders were designated from each state to help facilitate the congressional meetings due to the unprecedented number of attendees. Throughout the day, attendees met with legislative staff, and more than 50 lawmakers joined the meetings to discuss the issue at hand.

A lot of work still must be done to advance the Strengthening the Vaccines for Children Program Act, but attendees laid important groundwork by sharing their own perspectives about what the legislation would mean for children and families in their state.

Time and time again, the conference reinforced the role of the pediatrician advocate and how personal stories can influence the decisions of those in power.

Before attendees prepared for their congressional meetings, U.S. Rep. Kim Schrier, M.D., FAAP (D-Wash.), one of the champions of the bill and the only pediatrician in Congress, left the group with these words: "Share those stories. That is what we remember at the end of the day. It's what we take with us; it's what we hold in our hearts and you can make a big impact."

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