

National Center
for Youth Law



FEDERAL ADVOCACY TOOLKIT



FOR YOUTH

About this Toolkit

This non-partisan toolkit is intended to **help youth** take their first steps to engage in federal advocacy in the United States, on issues that matter to them, their peers, and their families.

It does not focus on a specific law or policy.

Policy and politics can sometimes feel complex and intimidating, and successfully advocating for changes in laws or funding can take a long time. For example, Medicaid is now a crucial part of the U.S. healthcare system, serving millions of children and families; however, it took persistent awareness-raising and advocacy before it became law in 1965.

We believe that your story and your voice matter. You are an expert on your own experiences. Your voice can influence policymakers and bring attention to issues that are having a real impact on your family and community. Every action, no matter how small, can help contribute to important, lasting change. The more young people, their peers, and their families are involved in the policy process, the more collective impact we can have on policy outcomes, and the more we can do to build a world that centers and supports children and families. From the [civil rights movement](#) to [climate change](#) to [immigration reform](#), young people have been at the forefront of driving political change. With this in mind, we invite you to take some time to think about what issues matter to you, and get involved in ways that feel right and manageable to you.

Please note: (1) The information provided in this toolkit does not, and is not intended to, constitute legal advice; instead, all information, content, and materials are for general informational purposes only; (2) If you are going to be advocating about specific legislation as part of a tax exempt organization or group, it is important to know whether and what lobbying regulations and rules may apply. The organization may offer guidance. For organizations that want information on lobbying rules, Bolder Advocacy has attorney-trainers who are available every weekday to offer free technical assistance via email at advocacy@afj.org or via phone at 866-NP-LOBBY (866-675-6229).

Prioritizing your Safety and Well-Being

Advocacy isn't one-size-fits-all. Everyone comes into advocacy with different backgrounds, experiences, concerns, comfort levels, and life circumstances. The following are some considerations as you decide what advocacy opportunities are right for you.

Safety

When engaging in advocacy, always prioritize your safety. For example, if attending an in-person event or protest does not feel safe for you — physically or emotionally — consider other ways of sharing your voice. For example, you could create posters or flyers for others to use, or email your representatives. Additionally, as a young person, there are other safety considerations you should keep in mind, such as checking in with a parent or caregiver about your plan, going to in-person events with friends, and learning the signs of potential unrest.

Well-Being & Self Care

Advocacy is a marathon, not a sprint. It can take a long time and a lot of coordinated effort to create meaningful change. The issues you choose to advocate for may carry personal significance for you, which can make them emotionally heavy topics to carry. This means that an important part of effective advocacy is taking care of your own well-being. There are many strategies and practices you can implement to ensure that you are taking care of yourself, while advocating for others.

Resources

We put together a list of resources that can be helpful as you start your advocacy journey. On the next page you will find links to trusted websites that provide more information on topics like prioritizing your safety and well-being and strategies on social media safety.

Safety and Well-Being Resources

Taking Care of Yourself While Advocating For Others

(Mental Health America)

This website explains the impact that advocacy has on mental health and shares self-care tips and resources.

Preparing for Safe Advocacy

(Brave Movement)

This website provides a free downloadable PDF to help you create an individualized safety plan.

Know Your Rights: Student Walkouts and Protest at School

(ACLU Maine)

This resource outlines your rights as a student to protest on a public school campus.

Know Your Rights: Free Speech at Colleges and Universities

(ACLU Northern California)

This resource outlines your rights as a student to protest on a university.

Social Media: Best Practices Guide for Youth

(Georgetown Juvenile Justice Initiative and the National Juvenile Defender Center)

This resource shares strategies on how to best utilize social media to advocate for specific issues.

How to Strengthen Your Digital Safety

(Right to Be)

This resource shares strategies on how to protect your data and stay safe on digital platforms.

Whether you are advocating online or in-person, it's important to ensure the information you put out is accurate. See here for some websites you can use to fact-check information.

What You'll Find in Our Toolkit

Federal Advocacy Basics

- **Federal Government Overview**
- **Advocacy Actions Overview Checklist**
 - Advocacy in under 5 Minutes
 - Advocacy in under 10 Minutes
 - Advocacy in under 30 Minutes
 - Advocacy in under 60 Minutes
- **Additional Resources and Information**

Tools & Templates

- **Personality and Advocacy Actions**
- **Federal Representatives Contact Sheets**
- **Advocacy Letter Template**
- **Writing to your Representatives: Step-by-Step**
- **Calling your Representatives: Step-by-Step**
- **Q&A with a Former D.C. Staffer**

Activities

- **Federal Advocacy Bingo**
- **Coloring Pages**
- **Share your Advocacy Stories and Connect With Us**



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief was developed by the National Center for Youth Law (NCYL). We are grateful to all the young people who we spoke to for providing their time and insights, and to the following individuals for their contributions: Chaitanya Verma, Dina Mirmotalebisohi, Jamie Le, Lauren Rodriguez, Genesis Ramos, and Mariyah Johnson.

Federal Government Overview

1. What is Federal Advocacy?

- Federal advocacy means speaking up to your elected officials and other leaders to help inform them about what laws and policies can better support families like yours.
- Using your voice can help impact decisions about issues like education, healthcare, climate change, and more.

2. Why Does it Matter?

- Your day-to-day experiences are impacted by laws and rules made by the federal government. Your advocacy is important to help make positive changes for your and your family's future.
- Advocating now can lead to better schools, healthier communities, and more inclusive healthcare settings in the future.

3. Easy Ways to Get Involved

- **Call or email your lawmakers:** It takes just a few minutes!
- **Sign a petition online:** Quick and easy!
- **[Join a student group](#):** Meet others and advocate together!

4. Tips for Busy Youth

- Advocacy doesn't have to take long—short messages matter, too.
- Find ways to get involved that you can try together with your family or friends, and teach them how their voices matter, too — sending art projects can be memorable and impactful!

"People believe that the youth of this country are insignificant. People believe that the youth have no voice. I say that we were the only people who could have made this movement possible."

— Alex Wind

Student activist and survivor of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting. Founding member of Never Again MSD.

Federal Government Overview



**Executive Branch
(President)**



**Legislative Branch
(House of Representatives
and Senate, i.e. “Congress”)**



**Judicial Branch
(Supreme Court and
lower federal courts)**

A Flourishing Start Podcast

Scan the QR Code for a 2-Minute Video

The QR code leads you to a clip from our podcast, *[A Flourishing Start: the ABCs of Child and Family Well-being](#)*, that explains how our federal government is structured. Even though this podcast is primarily geared towards parents and caregivers, this conversation is very relevant for youth interested in federal advocacy.



Season 3 Episode 4
[Federal Advocacy 101 for
Parents & Caregivers](#)

Where to start?



Before you engage in advocacy, you should start off by asking yourself some questions, like:

- What issues affect you and your community?
- How much information do you have about this issue?
- What type of advocacy role do you see for yourself?
- What types of solutions do you envision to address this issue?

Learn more about these questions through the UNICEF Youth Advocacy Guide [here](#).

Advocacy Actions Overview Checklist



Under 5 minutes

Identify your state representative	<input type="radio"/>
Identify your state senator	<input type="radio"/>
Identify your U.S. Representative	<input type="radio"/>
Identify your U.S. Senators	<input type="radio"/>
Call your representatives about an issue you're passionate about	<input type="radio"/>

Under 10 minutes



Make a list of 3 issues you care about	<input type="radio"/>
Read a book about advocacy or an issue you care about	<input type="radio"/>
Email your representatives about an issue you care about	<input type="radio"/>
Encourage your friends or family to share their experiences or perspectives on issues	<input type="radio"/>



Under 30 minutes

Make a sign or banner	<input type="radio"/>
Sign on to a letter of support from a non-profit organization that aligns with your values	<input type="radio"/>
Talk to your neighbor about an issue you care about	<input type="radio"/>
Post on social media about an issue you're passionate about	<input type="radio"/>

Under 60 minutes



Write a letter to your representatives	<input type="radio"/>
Register to vote if you are eligible	<input type="radio"/>
Mail your art piece to your representative	<input type="radio"/>



60 minutes+

Write a blog post or op-ed about an issue you care about	<input type="radio"/>
Attend a protest or demonstration	<input type="radio"/>
Attend a local council or school board meeting	<input type="radio"/>

HOW TO USE:

Identify how much time you have to advocate and choose an activity from that category. Once complete, check off the circle.

Reminder:

All types of advocacy actions can help make change.

Advocacy Actions In Under 5 min



Under 5 minutes

Identify your state representative	<input type="radio"/>
Identify your state senator	<input type="radio"/>
Identify your U.S. Representative	<input type="radio"/>
Identify your U.S. Senators	<input type="radio"/>
Call your representatives about an issue you're passionate about	<input type="radio"/>



Scan the QR Code:
[This clip shows how you can call your representative.](#)

Resources and Tips



- You can find your elected officials using your home address through this website: <https://www.commoncause.org/find-your-representative/>
- To call your Senators and Representatives, you can use any of these resources:
 - Call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard and it will connect you with any member's office; all you need is your ZIP code
 - 202-224-3121
 - You can also contact your member of Congress by phone, by calling 866-426-2631
- You can also use websites like [5 Calls](#), which aggregates issues and provides the numbers for your representatives based on your address



Advocacy Actions In Under 10 min



Under 10 minutes

Make a list of 3 issues you care about	<input type="radio"/>
<u>Read a book about advocacy or an issue you care about</u>	<input type="radio"/>
Encourage your friends, classmates, or parents to share their experiences or perspective on issues	<input type="radio"/>
Email your representatives about an issue you care about	<input type="radio"/>



Scan the QR Code:

[This clip shows how you can make a list of 3 issues important to you.](#)

Resources and Tips



- Visit your local public library and check out free books tailored for youth about advocacy or community involvement. Ask your librarian for suggestions.
- Social Justice Books provides a book list on social justice and activism. Visit: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/organizing/>.



- Find your representatives' emails, contact form, or phone numbers through their websites, which you can find through [Common Cause](#)
- You can also use [Democracy.io](#), which will find your representatives based on your address and allow you to message them directly.

Advocacy Actions In Under 30 min



Under 30 minutes

Make a sign or banner with a friend or parent	<input type="radio"/>
Talk to your neighbor about an issue you care about	<input type="radio"/>
Post on social media about an issue you're passionate about	<input type="radio"/>
Sign on to a letter of support from a non-profit organization that aligns with your values	<input type="radio"/>



Scan the QR Code:

[This clip shows how you can post on social media about an issue you care about.](#)

Resources and Tips



- The free version of Canva includes a wide range of templates, graphics and tools for creating various visual content. See www.canva.com.
- It doesn't need to be complicated; a piece of a paper and markers is a great way to make a sign or banner.



- Defend Youth Rights offers a Social Media: Best Practices Guide for youth activists [here](#).



- The National Center for Youth Law often has "action alerts" to sign onto. Contact us to ask about our active actions: info@youthlaw.org.

Additional Resources and Information

Check out the resources below to learn more about advocacy, how laws are made and ways to get involved.



Learn more about how our laws are made

- This online resource provides a basic outline of the numerous steps of our federal law-making process: www.congress.gov/help/learn-about-the-legislative-process/how-our-laws-are-made.
- This online resource allows you to track bills currently being considered in the United States Congress: <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/>.



Attend a protest

- ACLU “Know Your Rights: Protesters’ Rights” pocket guide – Outlines what to bring, how to interact with police, and emergency hotline numbers: www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/protesters-rights.
- ACLU “Know Your Rights: Student’ Rights”- Outlines your rights on campus: <https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/students-rights>.



Call or email your Senators & Representative

- Find your Senators and Representative through Common Cause [here](#).
- Websites like [5 Calls](#) and [Resist.bot](#) aggregate different petitions and issues and directly connect you to your representatives.



Mail art to your Senators & Representative

- Search for your rep and find their the mailing address on [here](#) to ensure they receive it.
- Learn more about art activism and its impact through the Americans for the Arts toolkit on Art Activism [here](#).



Take care of yourself

- Headspace offers a free “Box Breathing” [tutorial](#) you can play on your phone before, during, or after advocacy tasks.

Additional Resources and Information

Join a national youth-led advocacy organization

- Here are some youth-led advocacy organizations. Many have chapters at schools:
 - [GenerationUp](#): Advocates for education policy that supports every student and cultivates environments where students and educators thrive.
 - [WhatWeAllDeserve](#): Advocates for economic justice to ensure that everyone has access to basic needs resources.
 - [NAMI on Campus](#): Advocates to end the stigma around mental health and advocate for improved access to mental health services.
 - [Young Invincibles](#): Advocates for various issues, including affordable and accessible education and health care.
 - [Advocates for Youth](#): Advocates for youth bodily autonomy through equitable reproductive and sexual health access.



Start with your local community

- There are also many ways to advocate in your local community. Some places to start include:
 - **Your local school board meetings:** By law, most school board meetings are open to the public and your local school board may also have opportunities for student board members.
 - **Your local city council meetings:** Most city council meetings are public, sometimes with the option to attend them virtually.
 - **With a local nonprofit organization:** You can use websites like [Idealist](#) to find volunteer opportunities with local organizations that are often engaged in advocacy.



Advocacy isn't one-size-fits-all. Everyone comes into advocacy with different backgrounds, experiences, concerns, comfort levels, and life circumstances. Always prioritize your safety and well-being.

Personality & Advocacy Action

There are lots of ways to advocate! What's the right fit for you?



I love to be out in the community and help bring my neighbors together!

You're a natural organizer! Try attending an event or demonstration, and INVITING others to join you, or speaking up at a local council or school board meeting about an issue important to you.

I am creative and love art projects!

Art is a great advocacy tool! Try making a sign, banner, or art piece expressing your values. You can put them in the window of your home to share out your message.



I am chatty and not shy about telling people what I think!

Use your voice to make change! Try making calls to your representatives about the needs you are seeing in your community. Gather up some friends and phone bank together, teaching others how to speak their minds, too.

I am quiet and public speaking isn't my thing, but I follow news closely and have lots of opinions to share!

Put pen to paper! Try writing a blog post or op-ed about a topic you care about, or emailing your reps about issues you're tracking and thinking about.



I have a big group of friends and family that I stay in touch with, but we're spread out in different states and cities.

Tap into your broad network and lean on your communication skills! Share information to raise awareness about important topics, and circulate email sign-ons and [petitions](#) on key issues.



Federal Representative Contact Information

How to use:

Use these templates to fill out contact information for your federal representatives (1 Representative and 2 Senators). You can use this [link](#) to find your representatives based on your address.

EXAMPLE:

House Representative	
Name: Lateefah Simon	
Phone:	(202) 225-2661
Address:	1023 Longworth House Office Building
Contact form:	https://simon.house.gov/address_authentication?form=/contactform
Website:	https://simon.house.gov/

House Representative	
Name:	
Phone:	
Address:	
Contact form:	
Website:	

Senator #1

Name:

Phone:

Address:

Contact form:

Website:

Senator #2

Name:

Phone:

Address:

Contact form:

Website:

Advocacy Letter Template

HOW TO USE:

Use this advocacy letter template as a starting point to reach out to your federal elected official. Be sure to customize it to reflect the specific issues you would like them to address, why the issues matter to you and your community, and how they can address them.

You can send a letter via email (or through their contact form) or traditional mail. If you decide to send a physical letter you can address the letter as such:

For your Representative:

The Honorable (full name)
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D. C. 20510

For your Senator:

The Honorable (full name)
United States Senate
Washington, D. C. 20515

In a physical letter, you can begin your letter with a greeting like this:

The Honorable _____
United States [House of Representatives/Senate]
Washington, D. C. [20510/20515]

Date: MM/DD/YYYY
Dear [Representative/Senator] _____:

Advocacy Letter Template

Dear Representative/Senator _____:

My name is _____ and I am a constituent from [your hometown]. I would like to bring your attention to the urgent issue of [what is the issue/bill number]. I am writing because I (support/oppose/am concerned about)[the issue].

I (support/oppose/am concerned about) [the issue] because [why the issue is important to you, your family, or your community]. I strongly believe that our elected representatives have a crucial role to play in addressing these challenges.

To address [the issue], I believe in the following:

1. (What is your request and proposed solution? Explain why you believe this action is necessary and the potential benefits it would bring.)
2. (Provide relevant information and evidence to support your request.)
3. (If applicable, share your personal, your family's, or your community's experiences that highlight the urgency and importance of the issue)

Because of this, I hope that you [specifics on what action you'd like them to take, e.g., vote on the issue/fund the solution]. I appreciated your support in [the issue].

Thank you for your (support/generosity/time/attention/etc).

Sincerely,
[Your name]



Writing to your Representatives: Step-by-Step

1. Write your letter(s)

- Use the [template](#) above, to write your letter(s) to your representative(s), being sure to highlight why the issue is important to you and your family.
- Make sure to proofread your letter before sending.

2. Mail or email your letter

- If mailing the letter, be sure to list the correct address information for your representative and the correct return address, if you'd like a response to your letter. Also be sure to use the appropriate stamp. For a letter, you can usually use a standard First-Class Mail stamp, [depending on the weight of your letter](#).
- If emailing, find your representative's contact information [here](#).

3. Follow up

- You may or may not receive a response from your representative. If you do not receive a response, you can follow up with another letter or you can call your representative.
- If they have taken action on the issue, you can thank them. If not, you can respectfully express how this will impact you, your family, or your community.

4. Keep going!

- Don't get discouraged if your representative does not take action in the way you would like. Advocacy is ongoing and can take a long time. Find ways to recharge and connect with friends and/or family who care about the same issues.

Calling your representative: Step-by-Step

1. Find your representative and their contact information

- Use this [link](#) to find the representative for your district and their phone number.
- Federal congressional representatives have a number for both their DC and district offices. You may be more likely to reach a staff member when contacting their local district office, but try both!

2. Prepare what you'd like to say

- You can use the letter [template](#) above to build out what you would like to say once you reach a staffer or you can use a script, like this [one](#) from the ACLU Illinois.
- Be sure to highlight why the topic is important to you, your family, and your community. Personal stories are what can move hearts and minds for lawmakers.

3. Call

- Once you call, you'll most likely reach a staff assistant or intern. You may also need to leave a voicemail.
- If you'd prefer to leave a voicemail as opposed to talking to a person, you can call after business hours.

4. Keep going!

- Don't get discouraged if your representative does not take action in the way you would like or if you can't reach someone the first time you call. Keep calling. Every individual advocacy action is a step toward making lasting change!



**"There is always light.
Only if we are brave enough to see it.
There is always light.
Only if we are brave enough to be it."**

— Amanda Gorman
*Poet and activist. First National Youth
Poet Laureate.*

Q&A with Former D.C. Staffer

Klarissa Reynoso served as a federal staffer for two Congress members and has more than four years of experience meeting with parents, caregivers, youth and other community members on issues they care about. We asked her to share memorable advocacy stories and words of encouragement for people looking to advocate. Check out Klarissa's responses below.

Can you share words of encouragement to people who are advocating for the first time with their federal elected officials?

Remember that the systems try to divide us to distract us. Before you blame your neighbor, take a look at the systems that are holding us down collectively. Take a moment to educate yourself and then take that anger, anxiety, frustration, creativity, and joy and share it with the world through communal action. Lean on your neighbors, educate each other, and listen to each other. Activism revolves around bringing us together and uniting our voices for change. Your voice is important and deserves to be heard.

Is there anything you would like to share with people who want to engage in our democratic process with federal elected officials?

Give yourself grace! We want to create a world where we are loved. When we cannot do that, it can feel daunting. But we are stronger as a community that is tied together through compassion. So be compassionate with one another and with yourself. Rest, when you need to rest. Cry, when you need to cry. And when you are ready, protest, march, call your representatives, write letters, read, share information.

Q&A with Former D.C. Staffer

Everyone juggles many tasks for themselves and their family. What are quick but effective ways that they can engage to express their concerns and advocate for change with their federal elected officials?



Our world today can be extremely overwhelming. When we turn on the news or open our social media accounts, we're immediately flooded with negative stories from around the world. For many of us, this brings feelings of empathetic doom or sadness. Having time and space to channel that anxiety and worry into action can help us feel like we're contributing to positive change.

Some simple options might be signing petitions; they often take just one to two minutes to fill out. Making lawn signs with your loved ones can also be a fun and creative activity for all ages, and it's a great way to express what you want to share with the world.

You can also invite friends and caregivers to join you while you call local politicians, or host watch parties at your home for city council meetings.

When we learn about what's happening in the world — and understand that we can advocate for others and for ourselves — that is advocacy education.

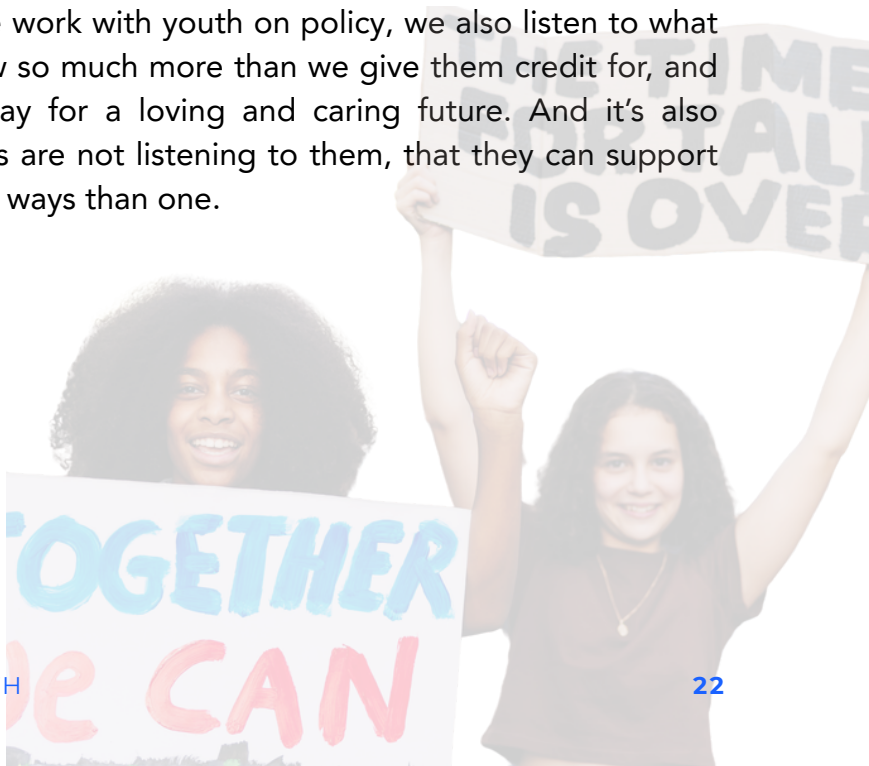
Q&A with Former D.C. Staffer

Can you share examples of how young people advocated with the elected official's office for which you served?

In both offices I worked in, young people visited us constantly, sometimes toddlers with their parents, sometimes college students, sometimes teens who just got out of school, all advocating for issues that have shaped Gen Z and Gen Alpha: gun reform, school safety, reproductive justice, environmental justice, immigrant rights, education rights, girls' rights, and more. Two moments stand out.

The first was opening more than 100 letters from a high school in our district, letters that revealed the need for gun reform and school safety. They were letters of personal stories and fears. The letters were powerful and later used as a way to share our policy aspirations with other congressional offices. The second was watching more than 200 youth climate activists flood a congressional office demanding decisive action on climate change. They came prepared with data, with stories, and with urgency, asking their leaders directly, "What is your plan?"

Being able to support youth and watch as they really took charge of their advocacy strategy was amazing. It's important that when we work with youth on policy, we also listen to what approaches they want to take. They know so much more than we give them credit for, and they are the ones that will pave the way for a loving and caring future. And it's also important that youth know, when systems are not listening to them, that they can support each other and share their stories in more ways than one.



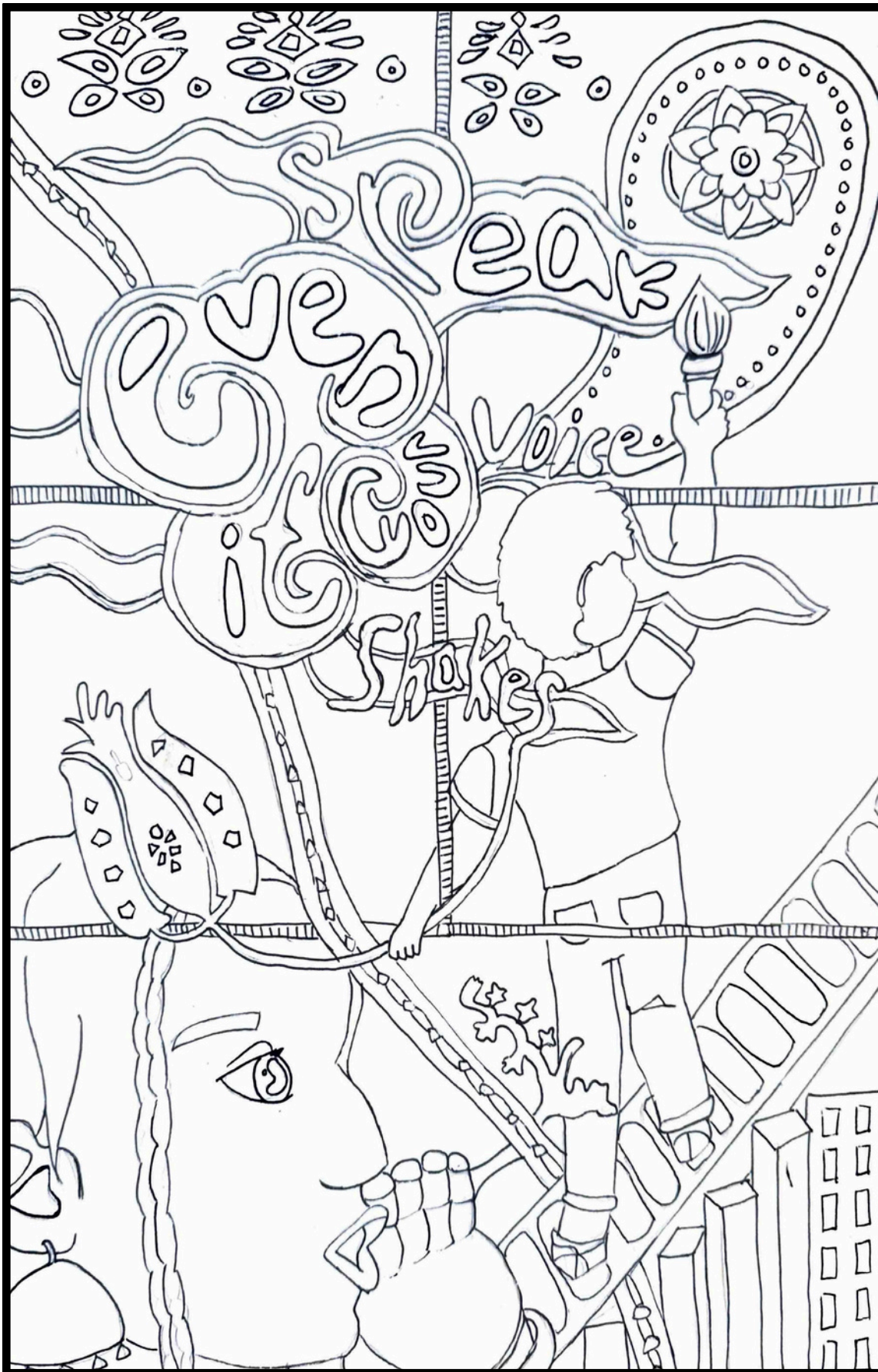
Federal Advocacy Activities **FOR YOUTH**

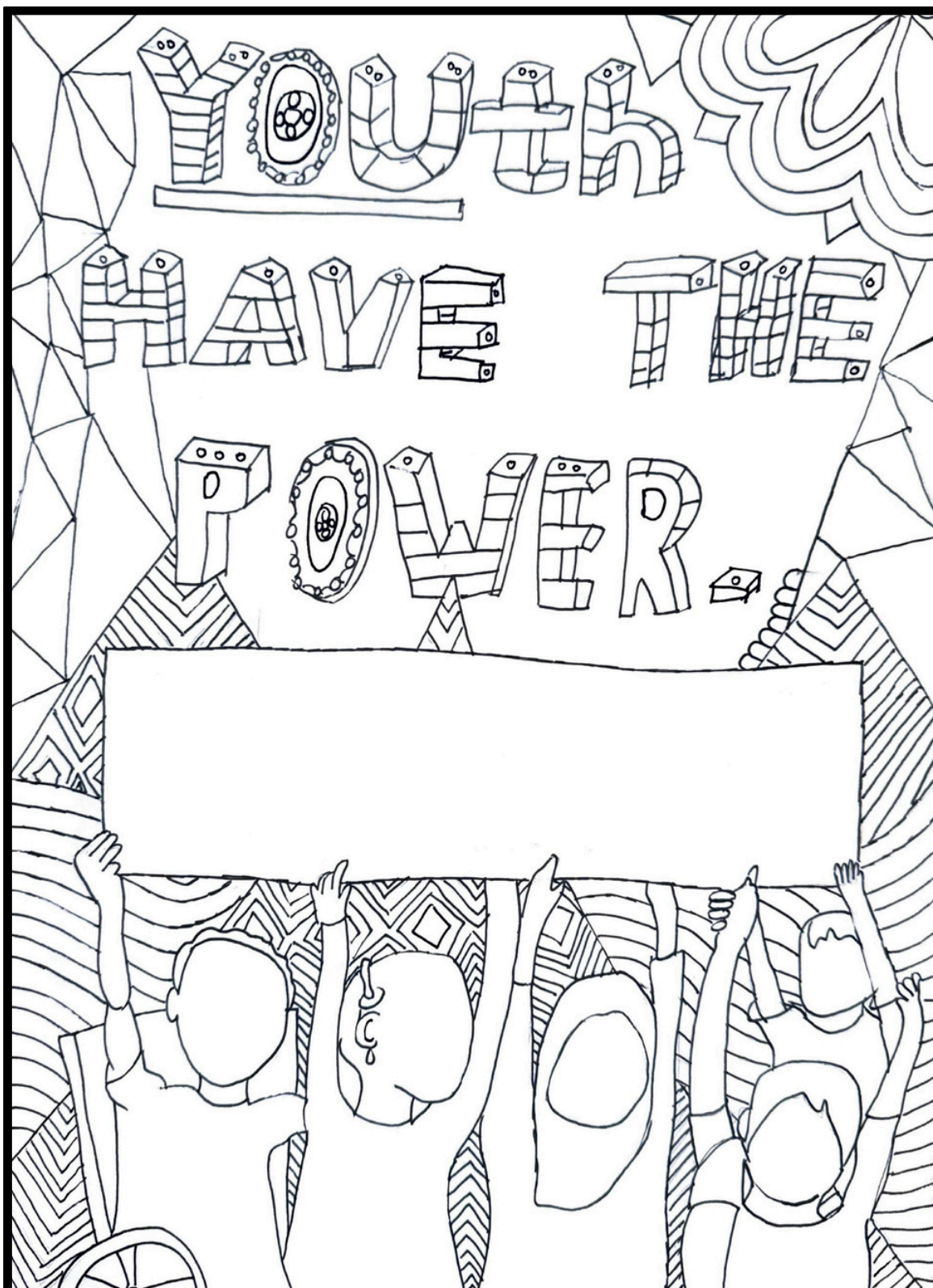


Federal Advocacy BINGO

 <p>Make a sign or banner</p>	 <p>Make a list of 3 issues you care about</p>	 <p>Talk to your friends or classmates about an issue you care about</p>	 <p>Attend a protest</p>	 <p>Email your Senators about an issue you care about</p>
 <p>Identify your state representative</p>	 <p>Identify your state senator</p>	 <p>Identify your U.S. Rep.</p>	 <p>Identify your U.S. Senators</p>	 <p>Email your rep about an issue you care about</p>
 <p>Write a blog post or op-ed</p>	 <p>Sign a letter of support from an organization that aligns with your values</p>	<p>FREE SPACE take a deep breath</p>	 <p>Ask your caregiver what they think about an issue</p>	 <p>Call your Senator about an issue you care about</p>
 <p>Attend a local council or school board meeting</p>	 <p>Talk to your friends or caregivers about voting, and why it matters</p>	 <p>Share your experiences with a nonprofit or on a podcast</p>	 <p>Post on social media about an issue you care about</p>	 <p>Call your representative about an issue you care about</p>
 <p>Join a youth-led organization</p>	 <p>Write a letter and send it to your representative</p>	 <p>Mail your art piece to a representative</p>	 <p>Read a book about activism, advocacy or issues you care about</p>	 <p>Make a video statement of an issue you support and send to your rep</p>

Coloring Pages





“Rooted in cultural patterns of survival and solidarity, such as Asian cloud motifs, South Asian paisley, African American and Appalachian quilt traditions, and South Asian adornment through jhumka earrings; these pieces honor youth as storytellers, justice-makers, and reflections of lived representation. By combining ancestral motifs with acts of creation — painting, speaking, and holding space — my work reflects how young people advocate for change even when their voices shake. To anyone reading this: **YOUTH have power. Do something.**” — Chaitanya Verma, Youth artist and advocate

SHARE YOUR ADVOCACY STORIES AND CONNECT WITH US!

Email us photos, videos, or reflections of your participation in advocacy at **health@youthlaw.org**

Connect with us on social media

[@ncylnews](#)

[@aflourishingstartpodcast](#)

Visit our websites

www.youthlaw.org

www.flourishingstart.squarespace.com