Free the Vaccine for COVID-19 is a campaign to ensure equal access to treatments, testing and a vaccine for COVID-19.

The campaign is run through our Advocacy Innovation Lab, a platform, training ground and methodology that combines social justice organizing and creativity to advance advocacy work quickly and collaboratively, online.

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.

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?

The Goals

Goal 1

We will ensure that publicly-funded diagnostic tools, treatment, and the COVID-19 vaccine(s) will be sustainably priced, available to all and free at the point of delivery.

We will accomplish this by focusing our advocacy work on institutions, corporations and governments. 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 and other funding bodies, and 3) Pharmaceutical corporations. 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. Our second goal will help us accomplish the first:

Goal 2

We seek to grow the access to medicines advocacy movement, train people with new kinds of skills, knowledge and confidence to fight for equitable access to medicines, and share the Advocacy Innovation methodologies to help other advocacy organizations seeking to thrive in this new climate.

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 at two different times to cater to different time zones around the world. From more than 300 volunteers from 29 countries we have formed “Salk Squads” of 6-10 people (named after Jonas Salk who gave the vaccine for polio to the world).

Each week, Lab participants meet online and conduct weekly missions that will build their skills and pressure key targets in the direction of our goals. The squads 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. 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.

Outcomes We are learning new ways to promote equity in access to medicines from this massive number of experiments and assessments, which are moving at a faster rate than we have historically been able to mobilize. This astounding uptick in response rate is partially due to the increase in the number of student activists, and the increased time at home to dedicate to virtual activism training. 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.
These factors are contributing to the early successes, which differentiate this Advocacy Innovation Lab from traditional advocacy:

- **Fast**: At least 10 projects a week are implemented.
- **People-driven**: Remarkably diverse groups, from all over the world, develop their own tactics, and share and refine them together.
- **Experimental**: With its emphasis on innovation and creativity, the advocacy methods are iteratively designed and refined.
- **Responsive**: All aspects are responsive and audience-focused.

**Where We’re Headed**

Right now, in the weeks since we launched the project in March 2020, we have 300 diverse people committed to work on the campaign weekly for four months, through July 2020. They are from 29 countries on every continent (except Antarctic!). 66% identify as women, 60% as activists, and 36% as artists or designers. By July, these people will have created and deployed dozens of simultaneous advocacy actions, and we expect to see significant impact in the form of many more institutions who have pledged to keep COVID-19 treatments, testing and vaccines fully accessible, affordable and free at the point of delivery. At the end of these first 4 months, we will have dozens of trained, creative and motivated advocates around the world, and we already are fielding interest from hundreds more for the next round.

**How to Get Involved**

**Take Action**: We post short actions anyone can take on [freethervaccine.org](http://freethervaccine.org).

**Stay Updated**: Get short weekly emails, including new actions you can take, and inspiration from ongoing projects. Sign up for the newsletter at [freethervaccine.org](http://freethervaccine.org).

**Be Part of the Next Round**: Individuals and advocacy groups are encouraged to sign up for our newsletter to receive first notice when applications are open for the next rounds.

**Support It**: We are currently seeking funding in order to conduct a Fall session of the Advocacy Innovation Lab.

**Talk with Us**: We love to share what we’re learning, and are happy to discuss the project. Contact Merith Basey at [merith@essentialmedicine.org](mailto:merith@essentialmedicine.org).