

Narrative Summary of the August 1–2, 2025 One Payer States Conference in Denver.

[View video of the meeting here.](#)

The One Payer States Conference brought together healthcare reform advocates, labor organizers, policy experts, and strategists from across the country for a deep dive into the growing movement for state-based single-payer systems. What emerged was a portrait of both extraordinary progress and formidable challenges—and a clear sense that the way forward will be state by state, one solid step at a time.

State Campaigns: On the Frontlines of Reform

Throughout the sessions, participants highlighted active campaigns in multiple states. In Colorado, Glen Mays and Lydia Guzman described how the legislature recently approved a \$750,000 donor-funded study to thoroughly model a statewide single-payer program—including coverage of long-term care and options for Medicare-eligible residents. That study, due at the end of 2026, represents the most comprehensive look yet at what a universal system could deliver in Colorado.

In Washington, Kathryn Lewandowsky and Andre Stackhouse outlined a dual-track strategy: pursuing legislation while simultaneously preparing a ballot initiative. Meanwhile, in Utah, Joe Jarvis previewed plans for a 2026 initiative campaign. Over on the East Coast, Dick Gottfried and Melanie D'Arrigo reported that New York's decades-long push for the New York Health Act has stalled—not because of voters, but because of resistance from public employee unions worried about losing their negotiated benefits.

California's presentation, delivered by Devra Dallman, traced the state's long, 30-year history of efforts—progress intertwined with setbacks, showing the persistence and obstacles faced even in progressive territory.

Labor and the Movement: Building Trust

Labor strategist Rose Roach delivered one of the most urgent calls to action: working with unions is not optional; it is essential. Unions are skeptical, she warned, not because they oppose healthcare expansion, but because many fear losing the hard-won health benefits they have negotiated for decades. Addressing those fears—whether through clear guarantees, board representation, or just transition policies for affected workers in the insurance industry—must be at the heart of organizing.

Strategy and Messaging: Meeting People Where They Are

Chuck Pennacchio emphasized the importance of coalition-building that extends beyond the traditional progressive base, while Jeanne Nicholson underscored the need to frame single-payer in terms that resonate with conservatives: *economic efficiency, family savings, and financial security*.

Former journalist T.R. Reid provided a roadmap for working with the media: don't wait for reporters to find you—seek them out with prepared stories, clear data, and compelling human voices. He also noted a political reality: ballot initiatives are breathtakingly expensive. In Colorado's 2016 fight, the insurance industry outspent advocates 10-to-1. A successful initiative may cost anywhere from \$20–25 million, making multi-state coordination essential so that opponents cannot concentrate all their firepower in one place.

Ballot Initiatives and Campaign Coordination

Indeed, Reid and others floated the idea of synchronized ballot initiatives across multiple states—perhaps in 2028—to spread out opposition resources and create a wave of momentum. This kind of cross-state strategy aligns with proposals from conference leaders to establish regional hubs and stronger national coordination tools, which Andre Stackhouse flagged as long overdue.

Challenges: Money, Politics, and Fragmentation

The conference did not shy away from obstacles. Funding is scarce. Opposition—in dollars and political muscle—is fierce. Public employee unions, whose buy-in is critical, remain wary. And the movement continues to be siloed by state, with organizations often working in parallel instead of in collaboration.

Participants also underscored technical hurdles: integrating with federal Medicare and Medicaid programs, addressing ERISA waiver requirements, and solving cross-border care for residents who fall ill outside their home states. The physician shortage, too, looms as a challenge, even with administrative simplification relieving some burdens.

Lessons and Takeaways

Across all panels, several themes crystallized:

- State-by-state remains the path forward. Like Canada, a single state success could catalyze national adoption.
- Messaging must meet people where they are. Simply preaching moral arguments is not enough; for many voters, financial relief is the real motivator.
- Labor engagement is indispensable. Without unions, single-payer cannot succeed.
- Coalition expansion is vital. Communities of color, working-class families, and conservative-leaning populations have to see themselves in the campaign.
- Resources must be scaled up. Ballot initiatives are multimillion-dollar endeavors; sustained fundraising strategies are essential.

Final Note

If the conference carried one unifying current, it was urgency grounded in realism. Victory is neither near nor inevitable. Yet, in each state's stories and in every organizer's shared wisdom, there is momentum building—not just for healthcare as a human right, but for a movement learning how to win.

Here's a 3-paragraph version we can use in the newsletter.

The One Payer States Conference brought together advocates, policymakers, labor leaders, and organizers from across the country to strategize on advancing state-based single-payer healthcare. From Colorado's \$750,000 all-population study due in 2026, to Washington's dual ballot/legislative push, to Utah's 2026 initiative planning, states are testing multiple avenues to bring universal coverage closer to reality. Meanwhile, New York and California's long-running struggles underscored both the promise and political headwinds on the path forward.

Much of the discussion centered on building power through coalitions and labor engagement. Speakers emphasized that unions—while sometimes hesitant—remain essential allies, and that campaigns must address both their concerns about losing negotiated benefits and the broader impact of a just transition for workers in the insurance industry. Messaging also emerged as a key theme: economic arguments resonate most broadly, especially with conservatives and working families, while personal stories and plain language help reach audiences often excluded from policy conversations.

Despite real momentum, participants candidly acknowledged the obstacles—enormous campaign costs, fierce industry opposition, political resistance, and organizational siloing across states. Still, the prevailing sentiment was one of determination: a state-level victory, backed by stronger national coordination, could create a breakthrough moment much like Canada's system, which began in a single province. To win, advocates agreed, will require deeper outreach, sustained resources, and a clear commitment to meeting people where they are.