

From Social Work to the Hill: Megan Blades on Tuberculosis Advocacy

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In this series, Pathways spotlights advocates of tuberculosis, the world's leading cause of death from an infectious disease.

Most Americans think tuberculosis is a relic of the past. Megan Blades is working to prove them wrong.

A Master of Social Work student, Blades was already being trained to think beyond one-on-one clinical work and engaged with broader policy. TBFighters gave her the cause to put that into practice. Since first hearing John Green talk about tuberculosis (TB) in 2019, they have traveled to Washington, D.C. twice, met with TB survivors and experts, and even uncovered her own family history with the disease, making the case that TB is not a disease of the past.

Blades first encountered TB through John Green's advocacy in 2019 and found herself captivated. "I know about it at this point, I can't stop knowing about it, so I might as well try and do something," they said. This led her to TBFighters, a community of advocates that grew out of Green's online following, and eventually to Capitol Hill.

[Hill Day](#), the annual event where TB survivors, experts, and advocates convene in Washington, D.C. to meet with legislators, is a central part to Blades' advocacy. They've attended twice, and this past year, they attended six legislative sessions in a single day, describing how the experience is defined by its energy. The first day is an intensive training process, five hours of learning the policy landscape, practicing for meetings, and connecting with advocates from across the country. The second day is the Hill itself. Something else that made this year special was that Michigan TB survivors joined her in the legislative rooms.

Her personal connection to TB deepened when they heard stories from TB survivors from her home state of Michigan. Among the survivors they met was a young Michigan woman her own age, whose TB traced back to something as ordinary as feeding a deer as a child. Blades found out this year that the bovine TB population in Michigan is growing. The patient had gotten it when she was younger, and it stayed dormant until she was about 19. Even after she had a positive skin TB test, doctors told her for months that there was another diagnosis. "It was just a very clear example of women not being listened to about their own health," Blades said, "but also of how doctors in places like the US aren't necessarily trained for [TB diagnoses] anymore."

The challenges patients face with TB treatment differ sharply depending on where they live, Blades noted. In the U.S., the biggest hurdle to overcome is getting the initial diagnosis. The gap between active infection and treatment can lead to lung scarring that is irreversible. Outside of the U.S., obstacles shift. Consistency with medication regimens is the central challenge, especially in communities where patients lack reliable access to food, transportation, and community support. “The medication makes you very malnourished,” Blades said. “And if you don’t have community support, it makes it even more difficult to continue your treatment the whole way through.”

For Blades, these moments underscore what they see as the two biggest public misconceptions about TB in the US: that it doesn’t exist anymore and that there is no cure. On the contrary, TB is very much present in the US, and it has been treatable since the 1940s.

On a day-to-day basis, Blades’ advocacy fits in well with TBFighter’s belief to do what you can when you can. Between classes, they hold congressional calls throughout the month, walking meeting attendees through the process of calling their legislators.

As a Master of Social Work student, Blades sees advocacy as inseparable from clinical work. Her program has taught her that helping people means engaging with systems that shape their lives. TB, they said, is the perfect example of a disease that is a policy and medical issue. When young people show up in legislative offices, they believe it sends a message. “If the people who are going to be next in line to fill these roles are caring about these things,” they said, “it’s more of a light bulb that’s going to be something important in the future.”

“It’s never too late to get involved, and it’s easy to get started,” they said. For students especially, Blades recommends [TBFighters](#) or [Partners in Health Engage](#) as accessible entry points, both as welcoming and flexible programs that are proof that you don’t need to wait to make an impact.