A Case Study in Organizing and Mobilizing: How Families for Kids Grantees Galvanized Their Communities to Plan Child Welfare System Reform

Relevant Lobbying Regulations

- Organizing and mobilizing is an advocacy activity that refers to efforts to engage individuals and groups in collaborative efforts, coalitions, constituency development or community-building around a specific viewpoint, or to inform the public about a particular set of issues. These activities do not constitute direct or grass roots lobbying unless they aim to influence specific legislation.

Public Policy Problem and Advocacy Goal: Between 1982 and 1992, the number of children in foster care nearly doubled, rising from 262,000 to 442,000. Some experts were then predicting that the number of children in public foster care would reach 500,000 by 1994 and that only a small percentage of kids legally free for adoption would ever be placed in loving permanent homes; instead, most would be doomed to live out their childhoods in a succession of foster care homes.

To counter these disturbing trends, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation awarded $100,000 planning grants to 19 communities, with the requirement that they undertake broad-based “visioning” activities aimed at engaging representatives from every conceivable stakeholder group in structured discussions that would result in master plans for child welfare system reform.

Principal “Community Visioning” Organizing and Mobilizing Strategies: Town hall meetings and forums, public hearings, interviews with target group members, scientific surveys, retreats for lawyers and judges, focus groups, children’s art exhibits, toll-free numbers, media campaigns, radio call-in shows, presentations at regularly scheduled meetings of key groups.

Case Study Vignette: Over the course of a full year, the 19 different communities engaged a total of nearly 14,000 diverse stakeholders in a wide variety of “speakouts” and community expression events. In addition to judges, attorneys, elected officials, child welfare professionals, and others usually involved in reform, the visioning activities included hundreds of children, adult adoptees, parents, and community groups seldom heard from in previous reform efforts.

Visioning facilitators asked participants to comment on the five desired outcomes set to drive reform: one year to permanency, one stable foster care placement, one case work team, one assessment, and comprehensive family support. Stakeholders also helped grantees imagine what outcomes should look like in practice, defined strengths and weaknesses in the existing child welfare system, and recommended how best to bring about permanency for kids. Visioning events also allowed children and families to directly address child welfare professionals, telling them of personal experiences in the child welfare system.

After visioning mobilization was complete, grantee leaders in each locality grouped and prioritized community input thematically and converted themes into master plan program and policy objectives to guide reform. For the 11 communities that ultimately received large implementation grants, the master plans represented a true consensus of stakeholder and grantee views about reform.

Public Policy Outcomes: While the community visioning process itself did not attempt to influence pending legislation, reforms guided by the Families for Kids master plans did—a few years later-help shape state and federal permanency legislation and a presidential adoption initiative (during the Clinton administration).
Advocacy Lessons for the Future: Strong organizing and mobilization processes have the potential to not only achieve immediate advocacy aims but also create long-term working relationships. Certainly in the case of Families for Kids, community visioning created both a consensus about how to proceed with reforms and fruitful working relationships between child welfare professionals and community representatives that in many cases endured throughout the grant period.

Definitions

- **Legislation** is defined as action by a legislative body including the introduction, amendment, enactment, defeat or repeal of acts, bills, resolutions, appropriations, and budgets. Also included are the U.S. Senate confirmations of executive and judicial branch nominees and proposed treaties that need U.S. Senate approval.

- **Direct Lobbying** occurs when a nonprofit organization attempts to influence specific legislation by stating a position to a "legislator" or other government employee who participates in the formulation of legislation.

- **"Legislator"** refers to
  - members of Congress or their staff
  - state legislators or their staff
  - local legislative representatives (e.g., on county boards and city councils)
  - the public, in the case of a ballot measure
  - members of an organization (if asked to take action on legislation)

- **Grass Roots Lobbying** occurs when a nonprofit organization urges the general public to take action on specific legislation. Key indicators of grass roots lobbying:
  - Relates to specific legislation
  - Reflects a point of view on the legislation's merits
  - Encourages the general public to contact legislators

There are four statutory exceptions:

- Nonpartisan analysis, study or research – may have a point of view but must provide a full and fair exposition of the underlying facts to enable reader to form an independent opinion or conclusion on the subject and be widely disseminated and not limited to people on one side of an issue.

- Request for technical advice or assistance – a written request from a legislative body that is available to all members of the requesting body.

- Self-defense – communication on an action which could impact an organization’s existence, powers, duties, tax-exempt status, or the deductibility of contributions to the organization.

- Discussion of broad social, economic, and similar problems – discussion on general topics which may be the subject of specific legislation but must not refer to specific legislation or directly encourage action.