

Building Political Muscle for Kids: A Case Study of Child Advocacy in Oklahoma

Anne Roberts, Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy
Catalina Herrerías, University of Oklahoma

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a case study of child advocacy in the legislative arena in the State of Oklahoma by a private, not-for-profit advocacy organization. Specifically, this article (1) describes the events leading to the creation of the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA), (2) presents an effective strategy developed by OICA to engage a wide range of public and private stakeholders in an exercise to establish a children's legislative agenda for state legislators in advance of their legislative session each year, and (3) articulates the essential lessons learned during the process of formulating the children's legislative agenda. The approach discussed in this article is one of legislative advocacy as a way of benefiting large groups of children and youth across service settings.

Improving the lives of children takes more than saying the right things, kissing the right babies at a political rally, or showing up in the right places. It takes a focused agenda based on facts. It takes boldness. It takes action. It takes child advocacy. National Association of Child Advocates 2000

Introduction

"Children are our most precious resource" is a commonly asserted truth uttered by political figures and not necessarily during an election year. The tireless efforts of child advocates at the local, state, and federal levels have collectively made important inroads to the capitol houses, county commissions, and city councils across the United States. Denny et al. (1989) accurately assessed that among others, advocacy groups had begun to recognize the significance of "developing effective, long-range strategies for influencing legislative policy making on federal and state levels (276)." Yet for every child advocate, there are countless other special interest groups who are competing for attention to and priority for their issues, as well as vying for scarce dollars.

Background

The concept of child advocacy is relatively recent and is an outgrowth of the children's rights movement. Hawes (1991) cites the children's rights movement began as early as 1641 with Massachusetts' "stubborn child" law. Others place its roots in the "child saving era" of the late 1800's to early 1900's (Cahill 1986; Herbert, Mould 1992; Litzelfelner, Petr 1997; Tompkins et al 1998). Some of the benchmarks of the children's rights movement include but are not limited to the National Child Labor Committee of 1904, the series of White House Conferences on children and youth beginning in 1909, and the creation of the U.S. Children's Bureau in 1914 (Hawes 1991). Other significant milestones include Aid to Dependent Children Program as part of the Social Security Act in 1935; federal prohibition of "oppressive child labor" in the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938; Brown vs. Board of the Education in 1954; the first child abuse reporting law enacted in Colorado in 1963; In re Gault, where the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1967 that juveniles are due equal protection under the law; and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (P.L. 93-247) and the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (P.L. 93-415), both enacted in 1974 (Hawes 1991; NACA 2000). Two more recent pieces of legislation affecting nearly

half million children in foster care were the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) and the Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L. 105-89) in 1997, which require permanency-planning efforts and shifts the focus from family preservation to permanency, respectively (Kadushin, Martin 1988; NACA 2000).

Child advocacy has no single definition, hence its implementation assumes different forms. Some define child advocacy as using public power and pressure toward improving the lives of children (Hawes 1991; Herbert, Mould 1992; Riley 1971). Others define advocacy in terms of interventions on behalf of children to avert harm or injury resulting from inadequate programs, services, or policies (Cahill 1986; Kahn et al 1973). Tompkins et al. (1998) characterize child advocacy as "...representing the personal and practical needs and requirements of children where/when the children and their natural advocates cannot ably represent themselves in fulfillment of those personal and practical needs (4)."

Schneider and Lester (2001) call for a new definition of advocacy that includes the use of understandable words and concepts, observable and empirically verifiable dimensions, specific boundaries to the activity, focused proactive engagement and actual doing, and applicable to every setting in which advocates find themselves.

Another aspect of child advocacy is the approach, which Litzelfelner and Petr (1997) say is either *case* or *class* advocacy. The latter is also known as *social* or *cause* advocacy. Case advocacy refers to speaking on behalf of or directly representing and supporting an individual; whereas, the class advocacy relates to working to effect a change on behalf of a group. Schneider and Lester (2001) refer to four types of advocacy: client, cause, legislative, and administrative. *Legislative* advocacy informs legislators at local, state, or federal levels about new problems and "...seek support and resources for disadvantaged persons, can raise public expectations about the rights and needs of all citizens (242)."

Administrative advocacy is de-

scribed as either agency leaders who engage themselves or their organizations in advocacy activities and/or internal organizational advocates that work toward effecting change for employees or consumers.

Court appointed special advocate (CASA) is one example of case or client advocacy that began in Seattle in 1977 (Litzelfelner, Petr, 1997). These individuals, or CASAs as they are referred to, are citizen volunteers who are specially trained and carry very low caseloads (Poertner, Press, 1990). The National CASA Association statistics show that there are currently 926 programs, which include 26 active tribal programs with a total of 442,000 volunteers throughout the United States. Locally, the Oklahoma Association of CASA has 25 programs including three tribal ones and a total of 914 volunteers (Naukam 2000). Research has demonstrated that CASAs are effective in averting foster care re-entry, increasing the likelihood that a child is adopted, and providing continuity due to the service longevity of its volunteers (Litzelfelner, Petr 1997).

An example of class advocacy is discussed in an historical essay by Trzcinski (forthcoming), when a class action lawsuit (Terry D. et al., vs. L.E. Rader et al.) was filed by Legal Aid of Western Oklahoma, the American Civil Liberties Union, and the National Youth Law Center citing unacceptable conditions in the state's children's institutions. It took almost twenty years to ameliorate the alleged conditions in the lawsuit. Legislative advocacy is what numerous lobbyists and organizations accomplish across the U.S. when they present their special interests group's agenda to legislators and legislative staffers. The most easily recognizable form of administrative advocacy is found in the role of the ombudsman, which is found in social service organizations, health care facilities, and universities to name a few.

Schneider and Lester (2001) urge a focus on activity—what one actually does in the role of an advocate. They propose a new definition of advocacy as "...the exclusive and mutual representation of a

client(s) or a cause in a forum, attempting to systematically influence decision making in an unjust or unresponsive system(s) (65).” The activity of child advocacy is defined by Herbert and Mould (1992) as “Initiating needed changes to ensure the responsiveness and relevance of policies, procedures, programs, or practices of child-serving organizations and agencies; and/or encouraging the removal of organizational conditions or practices that are harmful to children (118).” This may include identifying new or expanded services needed by children, evaluating program effectiveness, building an infrastructure to support service delivery, or proactively influencing policy development and implementation at local, state, and federal levels.

Child advocacy must be proactive, and in so being must address challenges, such as:

- Finding a solution to fit the child rather than to fit the child to the solutions;
- Creating engineering capacities to help our child serving agencies to reassess policies, standards, procedures, and practices;
- Holding ourselves and others accountable to sustain appropriate goals and programs on the basis of children’s needs; and
- Attracting individuals and groups of parents, citizens, and professionals at all levels to pick up the gauntlet on behalf of children (Tompkins et al 1998: 55).

Cahill (1986) adds a cautionary note regarding advocacy efforts in the area of public policy and parent-child intervention in particular to be planful, deliberate, and sensitive in order to minimize the usual emotional minefields encountered. While advocates may not entirely agree on a definition or approach, child advocacy is clearly an essential component of ensuring that all children receive their fair share of attention, protection, and consideration in obtaining the necessary resources to meet their biological, educational, economic, and social needs.

The purpose of this article is to provide a case study of child advocacy in the legislative arena in the State of Oklahoma by

a private, not-for-profit advocacy organization. Specifically, this article (1) describes the events leading to the creation of the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA), (2) presents an effective strategy developed by OICA to engage a wide range of public and private stakeholders in an exercise to establish a children’s legislative agenda for state legislators in advance of their legislative session each year, and (3) articulates the essential lessons learned during the process of formulating the children’s legislative agenda. The approach discussed in this article is one of legislative advocacy as a way of benefiting large groups of children and youth across service settings.

Creation of the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy

The emergence of child advocates and child advocacy organizations did not occur in a vacuum. Historically, pressing issues, dramatic events, and even tragedies have been catalysts for change and thus the rallying point for advocacy. This was true in the late 1800’s with the case of Mary Ellen, who was severely abused by her foster parents (Kadushin, Martin 1988). Advocates sought protection for her under the prevention of cruelty to animals’ law, claiming she warranted protection as a member of the animal kingdom. While there have been numerous examples of advocacy on behalf of children since then, Litzelfelner and Petr (1997) indicate that it was not until the creation of the National Joint Commission on the Mental Health of Children in 1969 that the term *child advocacy* enjoyed widespread use.

In the early 1980’s, an informal group of child advocates was meeting weekly at the Oklahoma State Capitol called the Coalition for Children, Youth and Families. This group consisted of between 25-30 representatives from different youth services organizations, the Conference of Churches, and others. They followed legislation and the issues of the day, provided information to legislators and their staffs, and sought support in areas that impacted their scope of interest (Carter 2000). National attention turned to the Oklahoma

juvenile justice system in February 1982 through a series of much publicized investigative newspaper articles by the Gannett News Service, widely broadcast television coverage, and congressional hearings alleging maltreatment of children in Oklahoma's institutions under the auspices of the Department of Human Services (DHS) (Carter, 2000; DeJames, 1988; Kemper, 2000). The Gannett Foundation's affiliation with the local Channel 5 television station is what helped bring the national perspective into the picture. Gannett's exposé entitled *Oklahoma Shame* involved numerous interviews and the review of hundreds of documents. This series "...alleged that Oklahoma's institutionalized children had been:

- Bound and manacled for extended periods.
- Hospitalized with serious injuries, including broken bones from attacks by adult attendants.
- Coerced into performing homosexual acts with state employees.
- Recruited to join a prostitution ring.
- Provided with illegal drugs by supervisors.
- Thrown into solitary confinement for weeks at a time (DeJames, 1988, p. 2)."

Moreover, DeJames (1988) wrote that DHS with its \$1.2 billion budget,

... answered to no one—not the governor, the legislature, nor any oversight authority, even though it received more than half of the state budget. Because funding for DHS came from earmarked sales tax revenues, the Department did not have to rely on the legislature or governor for program or fiscal approval. As a result, there were only minimal fiscal or operational controls in place. Nor were there checks and balances by outside agencies or internal or external monitoring for compliance with forms and standards. Finally, since Oklahoma did not participate in the federal Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act, DHS had no federal monitors looking over its shoulder (p. 1).

The Coalition for Children, Youth and Families was outraged about the situation

of children in the Department's custody. "We believed what was going on. No one had the power in the past to do anything about it. We were all in agreement with *Oklahoma Shame* and Terry D.... convinced we had horrific institutions and little money going into community services (Carter, 2000)."

One of the group members wrote a letter to Channel 5 asking what the television station was willing to contribute to ameliorating the problems experienced by children in Oklahoma that they exposed to the world at large. The Gannett Foundation, through their affiliation with the television station, asked the group to send them a proposal. Max Glenn, chair of the Conference of Churches, and Eva Carter from the Council for Adoptable Children, developed a proposal to establish a formal private advocacy organization—the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy.

Begun in 1983, the OICA was provided \$150,000 in startup funds by the Gannett Foundation, and Eva Carter was appointed as its first executive director (Carter, 2000; Johnson, 2000). Another significant contribution was made by the Kerr Foundation, who gave the OICA the use of their beautiful downtown offices at no cost for two years, following Kerr's move to a new location (Carter, 2000). Thus was born this statewide, independent organization designed to assess and express the needs of children and youth in Oklahoma.

The fledgling organization's first major initiative was to host a "Fall Forum" that would include the heads of all the agencies to examine the most pressing issues that were affecting children. The timing was critical as some of the major institutions in the state were being closed as a consequence of Terry D. This meeting represented the first time that diverse agencies, their staff and leadership had especially come together to discuss programs, services, and strategies that were needed to avert a recurrence of the issues that prompted the Terry D. lawsuit (Carter, 2000).

Scarcely a year before the creation of the OICA, the combination of the Terry D. lawsuit and the harsh, continual news-

paper coverage about the conditions in Oklahoma's public children's institutions provided favorable conditions for the passage of a comprehensive bill. Known informally as the "McCorkell legislation" named after its primary author and sponsor that, among other things, created the Oklahoma Commission on Children and Youth (OCCY)—a public child advocacy organization to provide oversight and leadership on children's issues (DeJames 1988). Both the OICA and OCCY have collaborated on numerous child advocacy efforts since their inception.

Early on, the OICA made a critical decision to look not only at the issues within the juvenile justice system in Oklahoma, which was the reason for its creation, but more importantly, at issues highlighting prevention—specifically early childhood and child abuse prevention (Carter 2000). A major thrust was to develop legislation to create the Office of Child Abuse Prevention, which is housed in the Oklahoma Health Department and to obtain \$5 million in funding. Numerous options were considered, attempted, and failed to obtain the needed financial support. Eventually, the legislature approved \$2 million for the effort. There were other initiatives, one to reduce low birth weight babies, another to address the high cost of psychiatric care for children and mothers having to give up custody of their children in order for the state to assume financial responsibility for the high cost of care estimated to be as much as \$1,000 per day. While various public and private agency heads periodically met to discuss the status of care for children, a more systematic approach was needed in order to more effectively influence a legislative agenda for children and youth in Oklahoma.

A New Plan of Action for OICA

With the appointment of Anne Roberts as the executive director for OICA in 1990, a new plan of action began to unfold. Roberts immediately began to connect with other advocates at the State Capitol to determine the best course of action in order to advocate for children in the legislative/public policy arena. Many groups

were observed seeking to address the needs of children and youth, some of whom shared concerns, others with different priorities, and yet others with overlapping issues. There were child advocates for child abuse prevention, childcare, child support, education, intervention and treatment, juvenile justice, mental health, and welfare/public assistance. The groups varied widely in their levels of knowledge and experience regarding the legislative process, as well as the amount of resources they could commit to their advocacy efforts.

Roberts made several observations. First, many groups employed an approach of a one-day blitz at the State Capitol during the legislative session to advocate for their particular issue. There appeared to be little awareness of both the lengthy process of policy-making or the extensive nature of budgetary appropriations. Second, each group tended to work in isolation and developed their own plans with little information, understanding, or input from anyone outside of their immediate circle. Third, legislators conveyed a sense of confusion by the sheer number of groups calling themselves "child advocates" and the wide range of requests for support.

Some of the groups were successful in securing state-appropriations for projects they supported. Clearly, some successes came at the expense of other groups who lacked comparable levels of resources or experience. Most strikingly, there were few discussions between the groups that acknowledged the inextricable link of some of the issues or the need to prioritize and strategically plan a unified course of action as a means of more effectively influencing the legislative process. A more coordinated, informed, and holistic approach to the development of a public policy agenda to meet the needs of children and youth was desperately needed.

The Fall Forum on Children's Issues

What began as an idea to bring together various groups with diverse interests to explore the feasibility of collaboration and more targeted advocacy efforts, developed

into an effective strategy that would be instrumental in helping to shape an informed, concrete children's legislative agenda on an annual basis. The senior author had numerous conversations with members of the many issue-specific groups and received favorable to skeptical responses. Each person queried agreed that although hundreds of conferences and seminars were held each year around unique child-related topics, there was no opportunity nor mechanism for advocates and other interested professionals to learn how other issues impacted their own. Neither was there available training about advocacy in the political arena, including the legislative process, working with the media, or building a legislative campaign. With few staff or financial resources, Roberts called upon many of the groups and organizations for assistance and cooperation in sponsoring a Fall Forum that hoped to engage others in more effectively working on children's issues.

The first Fall Forum using this new format was held in October 1990, and there were 200 advocates in attendance. The goals of the event were twofold: (1) to provide an opportunity for advocates to learn about the most pressing needs of Oklahoma's children and youth, and how their own area of interest was connected to the overall solutions; and (2) to build and prioritize a children's agenda that advocates would commit to collectively work on in the next legislative session.

Throughout this last decade, the OICA has experimented with and fine-tuned the Fall Forum's two-day event into a workable format that achieves its goals. The gradual addition of new staff members has contributed creative ways to approach our task, yet the basic framework has remained the same.

Day One of the Fall Forum

The opening day of the Forum provides participants with information on specific topics through keynote addresses from experts in a specific child-related field in the form of either a panel of state level policy makers or nationally recognized speakers. Depending upon the theme for any given year, the morning may focus on

an issue from a national or state-level perspective. For example, when welfare reform was unfolding and the federal government increased their expectation of the state's responsibility, a series of panel discussions concerning the implications of the new requirement on Oklahoma was discussed from various views.

Another year when the juvenile justice system was under scrutiny, each of the discussion panels included a young person who had been impacted by the system. The panels were followed by an open microphone discussion with the audience. For several consecutive years, the Forum hosted a Youth Speak Out, where 10-12 young people spoke candidly about issues important to them. This powerful experience served to remind the adult participants of their true purpose in attending the Forum, and challenged them to remain actively engaged in the process.

For the 1997 Fall Forum, the OICA partnered with the Oklahoma Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to bring Connecticut Supreme Court Judge Charles D. Gill to speak. Judge Gill is the co-founder of the National Task Force on Children's Constitutional Rights. This organization believes that the U.S. should ratify the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by all 192 members of the U.N. except for Somalia and the United States. The partnering with AAP allowed for Judge Gill to speak to several hundred pediatricians during Grand Rounds at Children's Hospital prior to his presentation at the Fall Forum. Moreover, his keynote luncheon address at the Forum was also provided as a Continuing Legal Education Seminar, thus providing a professional development opportunity for attorneys.

In the most recent election year, the Forum slated a Legislative Leadership Roundtable moderated by the League of Women Voters. The Senate and House Leaders from both parties participated, and presented information on the direction each party and each chamber would pursue on behalf of children in the coming year. Senate representatives included Appropriations Vice Chair Cal Hobson (D)

and Assistant Minority Leader James Williamson (R). Participants for the House of Representatives were Speaker Loyd Benson (D) and Minority Floor Leader Fred Morgan (R). Each panelist made a presentation and accepted questions from the audience, which had been written on 3"x5" cards found on seats. A keynote address by Tamara Copeland, President of the National Association of Child Advocates in Washington, DC, provided the bridge to the afternoon program.

During the afternoon of the first day, the Forum provides training opportunities in various aspects of advocacy. This component varies year to year, but usually provides a choice of concurrent workshops on topics such as coalition building, working with the media, involving congregations as advocates, increasing public awareness, and the legislative process. In preparation for the Children's Agenda for 2000, the afternoon session was titled: State of the State on Children and Youth and consisted of four concurrent workshops during two different time periods. Thus, a person could attend two issue-specific workshops in the afternoon. The first four issues were child abuse prevention, children's mental health, school and adolescent health, and juvenile justice/delinquency prevention. The second four issues were child abuse intervention, substance abuse, maternal and child health, and early childhood development.

Each one of the workshops had four facilitators who filled the roles of resource person, legislator (State Representative), legislative staffer, and agency representative. For example, in the children's mental health workshop, the resource person was a representative from the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill of Oklahoma. The legislator was one of the State Representatives who has been a long-time advocate for children's issues; and the agency representative was the Director of Children's Services for the Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services. The facilitators for each of the workshops were knowledgeable and well informed concerning the current issues pertaining to their topic area. Moreover, they were committed professionals who

were actively involved in the advocacy process.

A secondary goal of the Fall Forum that has gained importance over the years is to involve as many legislators as possible. This is important for two reasons: (1) to allow legislators to see that children's issues have a large and strong constituency, and (2) to allow participants to see that legislators are our partners in working on behalf of children. The workgroups provide an ideal opportunity to accomplish this goal. The OICA is a non-partisan statewide organization that seeks to address children's issues from a non-partisan approach. As such, it is important that legislators from all parties and all parts of the state are invited to participate in the Forum. This is one of the more challenging aspects of putting the Forum together. Denny et al. (1989) study of legislators' attitudes suggests that legislators involved with specific issues tend to have positive beliefs pertaining to those issues. At the end of Day One of the Forum, workshop participants have a more thorough understanding of the range of issues that impact their specific areas of interest.

Day Two of the Fall Forum

The second day of the Forum has been described as the "roll-up-your-sleeves" day. It is the agenda-building day, when advocates offer their solutions to the needs of children and youth, and then negotiate with other advocates to prioritize the items. Traditionally, the participants meet in workgroups according to their areas of interest or expertise. Whereas on the first day, participants were able to attend two different issue groups, on the second day, participants usually select one of the issues on which to focus their work. A small number of individuals spend a brief amount of time in various issue groups in an attempt to get an idea of the different discussions and strategies.

Workgroups are staffed by a facilitator and two legislators (one senator and one representative). In general, each group begins with an educational overview of the issue, including Oklahoma facts and figures, programs currently addressing the issue, funding levels, and recent legisla-

tion impacting the issue. The facilitator then takes over his or her respective group to lead the participants through a brainstorming session to determine the most pressing needs remaining to be addressed. After identifying the needs, the group will attempt to develop solutions to those needs, and to prioritize which items to address. The goal of each group is to select their two top items to be placed on a ballot that includes two priority issues from every workgroup. Participants learn that what they experience in this process is very similar to what legislators experience as they try to convince their colleagues to give favorable consideration to their ideas. It is also pointed out that if they cannot agree on the priorities, they may negotiate with each other to address one of the priorities in the next year. The goal is to find common ground and to provide a strong, united voice to move an agreed-upon issue forward.

At the end of the group sessions, the facilitators bring the two priorities from their respective workgroups to OICA staff at the Forum. A ballot is prepared on-site that contains the priorities from each group. The ballots are duplicated quickly and distributed to the participants after lunch. Each item is read for clarification and necessary modifications. There have been times when more than one group emerged with the same or similar priorities; therefore, the same item appeared twice on the ballot. If there is consensus, the items are combined.

Over the past ten years, various methods have been used for the voting process. The most effective method has been to give each participant five votes that must be distributed on five different items on a single ballot. No participant may use more than one ballot. There are no proxy votes, and participants must be present to vote. Each ballot must be signed, and the ballots are turned in to OICA staff before participants may leave the room.

While the votes are being tabulated, participants attend workshops or other program activities. In some years, there has been a keynote speaker for a concluding plenary session. In others, a series of concurrent workshops have been provided.

Most recently, the concluding session included a demonstration of new technology that enabled advocates to access legislative information both from the OICA website and from various government homepages. At the end of these activities, the group is reconvened to announce the results of the tabulations, which makes up the Annual Children's Legislative Agenda.

Following the Fall Forum

As executive director of OICA, the senior author took the lead in presenting the items on the agenda to various legislators. Many of these legislators were those who had participated in the related workgroup at the Forum, most of whom were asked to sponsor legislation accordingly. This was a manageable approach when the legislative agenda was four to six issues. The senior author kept advocates across the state apprised of the progress of the Agenda and encourages their attendance at committee hearings and floor votes. She was able to prepare fact sheets, action alerts, and briefing papers to assist advocates in their efforts to communicate with their own Senators or Representatives.

In 1997, however, the Agenda contained ten items—clearly too many for one person to accomplish effectively. A method was needed to keep advocates more actively involved with the legislative process, and to identify and recruit advocates who would assume the responsibility for some of the detailed issue work. Subsequently, the OICA hosted an informal follow-up meeting about one month after the Forum to accomplish this task. It was anticipated that 50-75 people would attend this first of its kind event. Instead, nearly 200 people demonstrated their enthusiasm and commitment by attending. At this meeting, participants were once again separated into workgroups reflecting the issues on the Agenda. Each workgroup had a facilitator and instructions for planning a legislative campaign to accomplish their Agenda item. Within each group, participants assumed specific tasks, such as developing talking points, preparing mailing labels, writing a sample letter to the editor, and setting up meetings with

various legislators.

Workgroups were asked to make a commitment to remain engaged in the process as Issue Task Forces. They were asked to elect a chair, develop a communications tree, and divide the work to be done. Further, they were asked to meet regularly throughout the legislative session to check progress and continue their work. The OICA staff provided as much assistance as possible, including monitoring the progress of individual legislation, handling mailing, preparing alerts, booking meeting rooms at the Capitol, and recruiting legislators to join, rather than just attend, the different meetings.

This venture was also successful in that approximately 150 advocates remained actively engaged, both in the legislative process and in building a grassroots network throughout the state that was capable of responding to calls for action. As a result, all ten items on the 1997 Children's Agenda were passed by the Legislature and signed by the Governor—providing long-term positive changes for Oklahoma's children, youth and families. There were eight items on the 1998 Children's Agenda, one failed, seven passed, but two were vetoed by the Governor. The 1999 Children's Agenda contained 13 major issues, with 12 of those successfully being passed. Out of ten major bills, eight on the 2000 Children's Agenda were enacted into law (OICA 2000). None of these successes would have been possible without the concerted efforts of child advocates who were willing to stay engaged in the process.

Lessons Learned

With the hard won successes of child advocates in the State of Oklahoma, four significant lessons have been learned:

1. There is strength in numbers.

Although OICA has become a trusted and well-respected source of information and advice on children's issues, legislators must hear from their own constituents concerning these important issues. Through the Fall Forum, OICA has been able to develop a network of trained and motivated advocates from across the state to help promote the Children's Agenda.

2. Experiential learning is unrivaled.

The Fall Forum provides a "learn-by-doing" vehicle for advocacy training that is available to any interested individuals or groups, regardless of their experience, skill level, or resources. No particular membership or affiliation is required. All that is needed is a sincere interest in children and youth. It is a great way to recruit and energize new advocates.

3. People support what they help to create.

In other states, child advocacy organizations work from an Agenda created by their Board of Directors, or from priorities set by the Executive Director. For parents and other private citizens, this method may create a barrier to their involvement, creating a myth that advocacy can only be done by experts. Oklahoma is a populist, pioneer state whose citizens have a long-standing distrust of centralized authority and prefer to take things into their own hands. The Fall Forum provides an opportunity, not only for public input, but also for the actual hands-on building of a unified Agenda.

4. Legislative change can be a multi-year process.

Child advocates must be there for the long haul. We must establish credibility, expand our network, continually sharpen our political skills, and know the legislative process. As Winston Churchill said, "Never, never, never, never, never give up!"

Conclusion

As a result of the annual Fall Forum and the process Oklahoma child advocates use to build and promote a unified agenda, the "world has changed" for Oklahoma children and youth. In the past ten years, funding has increased dramatically for programs to prevent child abuse, teen pregnancy, and domestic violence. The Medicaid program has expanded eligibility to cover children in families whose income is up to 185% of the federal poverty level. The child welfare and juvenile court systems have been strengthened, making the decisions about custody, child placement, and termination of parental rights based on specific criteria as compared to the

more global, nonspecific premise of the "best interests of the child." Oklahoma now boasts the first statewide system of alternative education programs, as well as a statewide Child Care Resource and Referral Network. All of these accomplishments were achieved through cooperation and mutual support, rather than division and competition.

According to Schneider and Lester (2001), mutual support or coalition building is a basic principle in advocacy, which helps to broaden the base of support necessary to result in change. They also posit that the use of a forum where issues and concerns are articulated before lawmakers is a cornerstone of legislative advocacy. The Fall Forum accomplishes this by raising awareness about specific issues and providing a structured opportunity for stakeholders to make decisions, negotiate, compromise, and agree on an agenda for children.

The agenda-building process and training opportunities provided at the Fall Forum works for Oklahoma. It is a clear example of a win-win situation—for advocates, for issues, for policy makers, and most importantly, for the children, youth, and families that comprise Oklahoma's future.

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