

# **Organizational Factors Influencing Advocacy for Children**

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This report is based on confidential interviews and focus groups with child advocates in Georgia, Massachusetts, and Washington. Direct quotations and illustrative examples that appear in this report are not referenced to maintain the respondents' confidentiality.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child advocates often face myriad challenges in their attempts to get their issues on the public policy agenda—competing ideas, organizational self-interests, limited resources, an indifferent (or sometimes hostile) political environment, competition from other interest groups for scarce public resources, and more. Yet despite such barriers, some groups are able to overcome these hurdles and make a difference in the lives of children and families. How do they do it? What are the organizational factors that enable nonprofits to engage in public policy advocacy? What kinds of organizations are most active in the policy arena? How do they define success in the policy world?

Based on extensive interviews and focus groups with child advocates in three states (Georgia, Massachusetts, and Washington), this study examines the organizational factors that enable nonprofit organizations in these states to participate actively in the policymaking arena. The study explores organizational structures (such as mission statements, leadership, and communication strategies) and resources that contribute to policy advocacy. The study also asked participants to define “success” in the policy environment.

Six types of child advocacy organizations were identified as actively engaged in state-level advocacy. These organizations had different structures and generally approached the advocacy process from different perspectives. For example,

- **Public-private partnerships for children** often originated from governors’ initiatives or people close to the governor. These organizations were composed of high-level and influential people from government, business, philanthropy, human services, and mainstream community groups, such as the United Way and Junior League. They tended to have relatively easy access to large donors, powerful networks, and political insiders, and often engaged in large-scale public education campaigns or media activities.
- **Human service organizations** were among the largest groups in the study, with most of their financial resources going toward the delivery of services. Because these groups often received government grants and contracts, they were very familiar with the history and evolution of human service policies, programs, and oversight agencies. Their boards of directors strongly represented the service community, and their advocacy work often focused on budget issues and regulatory reforms.
- **Advocacy organizations that represent children and families** tended to be oriented toward grassroots mobilizing activities. They advocated for a wide array of children’s topics—child care and early education, after-school care, health insurance for children, and so on—and were very deliberate in promoting racial and ethnic representation and community input on their boards. Although these groups probably had the least amount of direct access to influential policymakers, they had legitimacy in the policymaking arena because their members were both consumers of children’s services and potential voters.

- **Unions and professional associations** were both structured as membership organizations and operated through federate systems with federal, state, and local affiliates. Although the state-level units tended to be relatively small, their capacity could be enhanced through financial support and guidance from the national body. These groups promoted child care and early education reforms as a way to improve the quality of care and professionalize the field. These groups, particularly unions, often worked on children's issues through coalitions and strategic alliances. They were, however, very responsive to their members' needs and concerns.
- **Intermediary groups** provided an array of services and technical assistance (such as information, training, and lobbying) for smaller and mid-sized child advocacy groups. These groups operated on quite small budgets relative to other child advocacy groups and were a hybrid of a professional association and an advocacy group focused on children and parents. They championed a variety of policy issues affecting children and families and tended to function as a voice for underrepresented constituencies, such as minority children. Financially, intermediary groups appeared to be the most vulnerable, but they were an important resource for smaller groups trying to build their capacity.
- **Action-oriented think tanks** were a fairly new model for child advocacy at the state level. They provided policymakers with well-documented research materials and ran media campaigns to educate the public on children's issues. The work was done by highly skilled and politically savvy staff who often supplemented their research efforts with campaign-style advocacy work, seeking opportunities for media exposure and public mobilization. Financial support for action-oriented think tanks was tenuous and seemed to be based on picking the "right issues" to demonstrate "success."

Defining success sometimes reflected the respondent's role and responsibilities within the organization and the organization's policy goals. As one advocate put it, "If we did not have a variety of ways to define success, we would not be in this business for long." Most answers fell into one of three categories: (1) changing public policies and the political environment, (2) achieving positive social outcomes for children and families, and (3) achieving positive outcomes for the organization.

Conducting child advocacy involves more than generating good ideas. Nonprofits that engage in advocacy need organizational structures, financial resources, good leadership, and active constituencies to carry out their work. As a first step, child advocacy organizations and foundations need to answer the question "capacity for what?" to be strategic about building organizations that have political clout and can get salient policies and issues on the political agenda while increasing participation for underrepresented constituencies. This report, recognizing the diversity of organizational players in the child advocacy arena, offers a series of lessons learned that are targeted at child policy advocates, foundations, and the research community.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Child advocates often face myriad challenges in their attempts to get their issues on the public policy agenda—competing ideas, organizational self-interests, limited resources, an indifferent (or sometimes hostile) political environment, competition from other interest groups for scarce public resources, and more. Yet despite such barriers, some groups are able to overcome these hurdles and make a difference in the lives of children and families. How do they do it? What are the organizational factors that enable nonprofits to engage in public policy advocacy? What kinds of organizations are most active in the policy arena? How do they define success in the policy world?

A team of researchers from the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy at the Urban Institute investigated these questions, examining how the structure of advocacy groups and the presence of policy networks and coalitions influence the ways nonprofit organizations engage in advocacy campaigns for children’s issues at the state and local levels of government. The study looks at three states (Georgia, Massachusetts, and Washington), and explores several salient factors, such as the mission and purpose of the organization; its structure, leadership, and constituencies; and its financial and volunteer resources, to assess how these features influence the policy work of child advocates. The findings of this study provide a framework for developing capacity-building activities for organizations that want to promote policies and programs to improve the quality of child care and early education.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The current study builds on earlier work conducted by the Urban Institute in Georgia, Massachusetts, and Washington. The previous study investigated the range and diversity of approaches used to address the issue of child care worker compensation (De Vita, Twombly, and Montilla 2002).

## **MODELING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY FOR ADVOCACY**

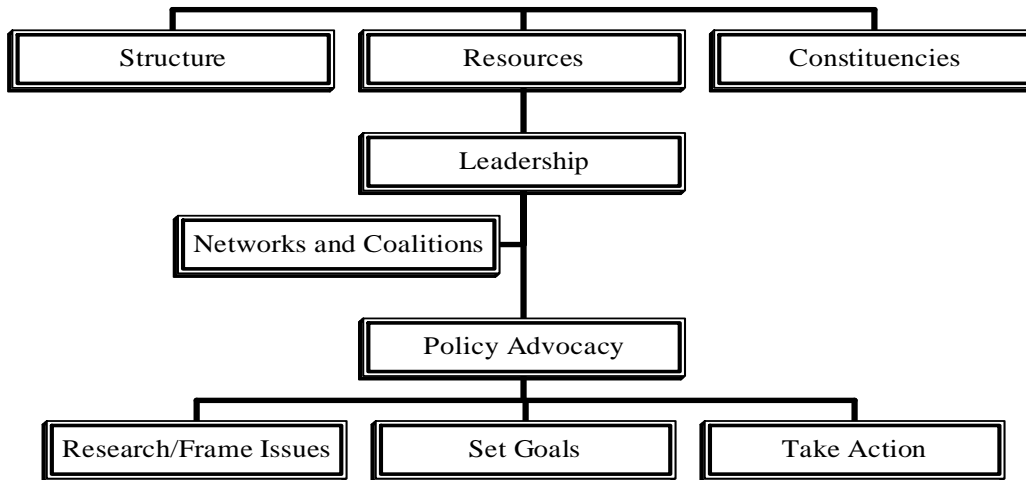
Advocacy to improve child care and early education occurs in many venues at the state and local levels: in state legislatures, the governor's office, education and human service agencies, child care centers and family care providers, community-based nonprofit organizations, business circles, and the philanthropic community. In this broad and diverse policy community, nonprofit organizations focused on children's issues often play a central role. Whether advocating for public and private resources for child care programs, initiating reform campaigns, or convening forums among stakeholders to develop new ideas and strategies, nonprofit organizations provide the civic infrastructure to improve the child care and early education fields (De Vita and Mosher-Williams 2001). Nonprofits provide the space in which citizens can deliberate, procure resources for common action, supply leadership to allocate resources strategically toward policy goals, and assemble alliances to enlarge and expand the basis of support for particular policy proposals. Yet the everyday work of building the capacity of organizations to educate and engage the public on children's issues, build coalitions, act as intermediaries between citizens and policymakers, and be vigilant over time and across the political spectrum is often overlooked when identifying organizational best practices.

De Vita and Fleming (2001, p. 1) define capacity as enhancing the "ability of organizations to fulfill their missions in an effective manner." In this study, we hone this definition to focus on organizational factors that enable nonprofits to engage in public policy advocacy. These factors include the mission and purpose of the organization; its financial resources and assets; leadership and staff skills; structural attributes, such as its

board of directors; and the constituencies associated with the organization, such as members, donors, and volunteers (see figure 1).

Leadership is a central component of the model because it serves as a turnkey between organizational resources and policy actions. Policy networks and coalitions are depicted alongside the other organizational factors because they are external to the organization, yet integral to the internal decisions about capacity and policy action. Coalitions, for example, may influence the framing of an issue or shape an organization’s priorities and actions.

**Figure 1. Organizational Model for Conducting Advocacy**



Enhancing nonprofit capacity for policy advocacy is not synonymous with succeeding in the policy process, but it can provide important linkages between internal organizational factors (such as resources and constituencies) and the strategies and activities that groups use to advance their ideas. Groups often use a combination of approaches—networking, media campaigns, research, direct and grassroots lobbying,

constituency communications, and mobilizing of supporters—to secure visibility for the organization and reap policy gains. These advocacy activities should be geared toward an objective: influencing revenue decisions, passing new legislation, or securing regulatory reforms. Thus, building an organization’s capacity to advance policy goals means that groups must use their capacity strategically so that policy successes are linked to political credibility and issue salience.

### **Mission or Purpose**

An organization’s mission statement is a good starting point for assessing capacity.

Mission statements provide a formal expression of why the organization exists and may articulate the group’s purpose, values, operating principles, or goals. Purpose statements are generally less formal than mission statements and provide insights into the organization’s programs and activities.

Mission and purpose statements do not necessarily facilitate or constrain an organization’s ability to influence policy or conduct advocacy (Minkoff 2001) because these statements do not always contain language about the importance of shaping policy as part of the broader organizational purpose. They are useful, however, because they assist the organization’s leadership in setting priorities and allocating resources. Mission statements that include policy goals can help promote a public image of the organization as a policy player.

### **Leadership**

Leadership is a critical component of the advocacy model. It “induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers” (Gardner 1988). Leadership can come from many individuals and can emanate from many different

experiences. The backgrounds, perspectives, interests, associations, and skills of the executive director, professional staff, board members, and community volunteers contribute to the organization's ability to influence public policy. Skills acquired through education, work, and volunteer experience can be valuable when conducting policy advocacy (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Policy entrepreneurs are a special breed of leaders and can be central actors in changing policy in government and the private sector (Kingdon 1995). These individuals are willing to invest their knowledge, time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money to advocate for reform. Policy entrepreneurs can be found at all levels of a nonprofit organization, but as executive directors they are particularly influential in raising, leveraging, and directing an organization's resources and activities toward policy goals.

In addition to securing resources, strong leaders increase the likelihood that the organization will participate in advocacy activities (Saidel and Harlan 1998) and, as the political environment changes, can provide continuity in the values that underlie the organization's policy work (Minkoff 2001). Internal organizational dynamics can also affect the level and types of participation found among board members and volunteers and impact the effectiveness of advocacy efforts (Shaiko 1999; Berry 2001). In essence, leadership connects the organization's capacity to its policy work, enabling it to set goals, frame issues, and take action.

### **Legal Structures**

Nonprofit organizations can be structured to take advantage of tax incentives and government regulations to engage in policy and electoral advocacy activity, but few human service organizations at the state and local level do so. Instead, they tend to

incorporate as 501(c)(3) charitable organizations—a structure that allows them to receive tax-deductible donations but constrains their use of resources for lobbying and political activity (Reid and Kerlin 2002). For example, 501(c)(3) organizations are restricted from engaging in partisan politics, such as endorsing a particular candidate or party, but they can (and many do) host candidate forums where candidates are invited to address children’s issues. Such forums can influence a candidate’s agenda and voters’ decisions. Charitable organizations can also engage in public education campaigns to raise awareness of a particular issue and can support or oppose ballot measures that would determine law or policy directly. However, many 501(c)(3) organizations do not understand the distinctions between political/electoral advocacy and policy advocacy and shy away from policy advocacy out of fear of violating the law (OMB Watch et al. 2002). Perhaps because of this confusion, few 501(c)(3) organizations exercise their legal option to add related 501(c)(4) organizations or political action committees to their organizational structures to participate directly in partisan politics.

### **Constituencies**

“Who does the organization represent?” This question takes on special importance in policymaking because the legitimacy of an organization may hinge on the answer. Groups that engage in policy advocacy need to be able to identify constituencies, affiliate them as members or donors, give them information, and recruit them to take action.

Diverse constituencies are hard to manage because they bring different preferences and values to the organization and to the policymaking process. Organizations with diverse constituencies—for example, low-income parents, child care workers, center directors, human service agencies, and others—must bridge these

differences if they want to speak as one voice in the policy process. Groups with homogenous memberships generally face less internal conflict and goal complexity than the ones that bring together a complex array of beliefs, interests, and professional motivations (Alexander 1998). Furthermore, Minkoff (1999) found that human service organizations rooted in the professional norms of the rationalistic casework model tend to be reluctant to enter the rough-and-tumble world of public policymaking.

### **Resources**

Stable funding helps groups operate efficiently and plan for the future (Gronbjerg 1993). Resources affect an organization's ability to conduct credible research; attract top-notch staff and leadership; communicate on a regular basis with members, constituents, and the general public; and mobilize a public response, when necessary, during budget debates, legislative sessions, regulatory hearings, and elections.

The size of the organization's budget affects the scope and intensity of its advocacy activities. Ideally, organizations would like to have unrestricted funds that can be used to build capacity or conduct advocacy as they see fit. But unrestricted funding is difficult to obtain. Many donors specify how their money can be used or place policy or programmatic demands on the organization.

Such funding constraints can have a ripple affect throughout the organization. For example, policy work often narrows around programmatic and grantmaking objectives rather than focusing on broad-based, grassroots actions. Nonprofits may become more cautious about the issues they take on, so they do not offend an important funder. Smith (1999), for example, suggests that a nonprofit that receives substantial government

funding is likely to temper or limit the scope of its demands on government.

Organizations with diverse budgets are better able to mitigate these constraining factors.

### **Coalitions and Networks**

Nonprofits that are active in policymaking often are part of coalitions or networks, but the roles that they assume in the coalition or network largely depend on their organizational capacity. Smaller organizations may join coalitions as a way to participate in policymaking without putting undue strain on their limited resources (Hula 1999); larger organizations with policy expertise and resources are likely to take the lead in directing coalitions' activities. Cohen and Sardell (2002) note that policy issues are often framed according to the dominant organizations' perspectives—a situation that can cause friction and divisions in a coalition. But large and dominant organizations may also play supporting roles when the issues are of less importance to them. Being part of a coalition or network expands the capacity of every organization, but it can especially benefit small- and medium-size groups through training, direct support, and experience in the policymaking process.

### **STUDY DESIGN**

Pursuing a policy agenda to improve the quality of child care and early education offers common political ground for a broad cross-section of individual and organizational players—child care workers, early education teachers, associations of child care providers, unions, parent groups, children's advocates, and more. All of these players have a stake in the issue, but each group has its own set of interests, assets, and limitations. By examining the capacity of these different organizations, it is possible to

better understand the factors that may lend themselves to collaboration or conflict on policies affecting children at the state and local levels of government.

Building on an earlier study conducted in Georgia, Massachusetts, and Washington (De Vita, Twombly, and Montilla 2002), we identified the key players in each state that worked to formulate programs and policies to improve child care worker compensation. We then identified organizations that were members of major children's coalitions in the state. Both single-issue organizations (e.g., organizations working primarily on child care and early education issues) and multi-issue organizations (e.g., those covering a wide range of children and family topics) were included in the study. Ten organizations in each state were invited to participate in the study.<sup>2</sup>

We conducted two rounds of site visits to each state and spoke with 59 people in 22 organizations. Depending on the size and structure of the organization, we interviewed the executive director, policy director, and a board member. We also conducted focus groups with staff, volunteers, or members. The interviews and focus groups explored a number of topics, including (1) how the organization determines policy issues and advocacy priorities; (2) what mechanisms were used to obtain input and feedback from staff, members, volunteers, and board members; (3) how resources facilitate or constrain the organization's advocacy activities; and (4) how the organization defines success in influencing public policy.

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<sup>2</sup> The sample design called for an equal number of single- and multi-issue organizations. All of the groups that were interviewed in the previous study were automatically included in the sample because they had already been identified as key players in the policy process. The remaining organizations in the sample were randomly selected to fill out the complement of single- and multi-issue organizations.

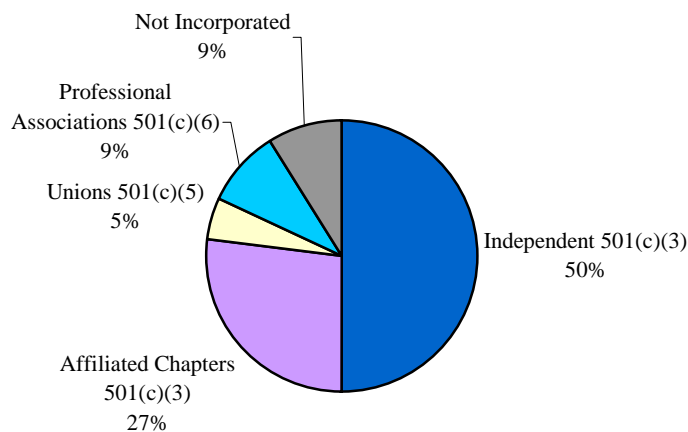
## EXPLORING CAPACITY

As figure 1 illustrated, numerous factors influence the capacity and ability of nonprofits to engage in advocacy activities. A review of the 22 nonprofits that participated in the study shows their diversity in terms of structures and resources.

### Structures

About three-quarters of the nonprofits in the study are incorporated as 501(c)(3) organizations (see figure 2). Half of them (11 organizations) are state or local organizations; one-quarter (6 organizations) are chapters or affiliates of national organizations. Many child-oriented nonprofits seek 501(c)(3) status as a fundraising strategy to attract tax-deductible donations, but this type of incorporation limits the amount of direct and grassroots lobbying that they can undertake and prohibits partisan electoral advocacy. For many 501(c)(3) groups, advocacy is a secondary activity, and for some, an afterthought to the central work of the organization.

**Figure 2. Types of Nonprofit Organizations**



Source: The Urban Institute, *Organizational Factors Influencing Advocacy for Children*.

Three organizations in the study are incorporated as 501(c)(5) or (6) groups—a designation obtained by professional associations and unions. Donations to these organizations are not tax deductible. This type of legal structure, however, is conducive to advocacy work because it allows considerable latitude in the types of activities that can be undertaken and puts no restrictions on the amount of money used to support the work. For example, 501(c)(5) and (6) organizations may engage in lobbying without restriction, communicate with their members about partisan matters, and engage in certain levels and types of election advocacy with the general public.

The remaining two groups in the study are relatively small and new organizations, working within larger nonprofits that serve as their fiscal agents.

### **Missions**

Nineteen of the 22 organizations in the study had mission or vision statements posted either on their web site or on GuideStar, a database of charitable organizations in the United States. These publicly available statements ran the gamut from very general statements regarding the well-being of children to detailed descriptions of the organization's activities, audiences, and desired results. About two-thirds of the organizations with mission or vision statements (13 groups) had their statements posted on both their web site and GuideStar; however, in more than half of these cases, the statements differed. The organization's web site usually provided more detail than GuideStar, although the general spirit and sentiment of the two postings were usually compatible. This comparison suggests that organizations do not have a single, fixed mission statement, but rather expand or contract their message to fit available space or an intended audience.

All 19 organizations had some language in their mission statements suggesting that they engage in advocacy or public policy work. Three-quarters of the groups (14 organizations) used the terms “policy” or “policymaker,” and half (10 organizations) used the terms “advocacy” or “advocate.” Only 4 organizations used terms such as “lobbying,” “affecting legislation,” or “regulation” in the mission statements.

References to the “softer” side of advocacy, namely public education and networking, were also popular. Seven organizations used terms such as “educate” or “increase public awareness.” Six groups emphasized their ability to form “networks,” “collaborations,” and “alliances.” In contrast, four groups used “active” words such as “mobilize” and “coalitions.”

Although it is difficult to generalize from this limited sample, it seems that smaller groups with fewer financial resources may be more likely than larger ones to use more active and direct terms. Most groups, however, seem to prefer generic terms such as “policymaking” and “advocate” to characterize their activities in the public arena. In essence, they do not hide their advocacy efforts but use language that is fairly benign.

### **Staffing**

Organizations that participated in this study have a wide range of staffing patterns. More than 90 percent of the organizations reported at least one full-time, paid staff member, but the number ranged from 1 to 300 employees. Most groups operated on a fairly small scale. About two-thirds had fewer than 10 full-time staff members. The typical (or median) number of staff was 6. Only three organizations in the study had very large staffs of more than 100 full-time employees. Except for these three very large groups, no child advocacy organization in the study had more than 35 full-time employees.

Use of part-time staff and consultants varied among organizations, but these additional workers did not appreciably increase the overall size of the organization's staff. About 60 percent of the organizations said that they hired part-time workers, but among those with part-time staff, the median number of part-time employees was three. Similarly, about three in five child advocacy groups said they used consultants, but again, the median number of consultants hired was two. Hiring temporary help during peak periods of demand was not very common. Only 9 of 22 organizations indicated that they engaged in this practice. In total, nonprofit groups that actively engage in advocacy have relative small paid staffs.

The typical worker is female, middle-aged, and white. About three-quarters of the employees in these organizations were women, and roughly two in five were between the ages of 35 and 54. Younger people were more likely to be found in the larger child advocacy organizations. Similarly, a majority of staff (about 60 percent) was white. Larger organizations with more full-time employees tended to have more diversity on their staffs in terms of gender, age, and race/ethnicity. Job tenure ranged from 1 to 10 years, with the average employee staying for 3 years. This profile suggests that the child advocacy field is dominated by small organizations with fairly frequent staff turnover—characteristics that might inhibit sustained and well-coordinated advocacy efforts.

Given the small and transient staffing of many child advocacy organizations, coalitions and strategic alliances can be quite important because they supplement and add continuity to an organization's public policy work. One popular approach was for several organizations to share the services of a paid lobbyist. This strategy enabled smaller

groups to stretch their scarce resources and expand their influence. It also provided child advocates an opportunity to coordinate their messages or at least minimize conflicts.

### **Volunteers and Boards of Directors**

In addition to paid staff, volunteers are an important resource for many nonprofit organizations. They expand an organization's capacity, keep costs down, and build stronger linkages with the community and the organization's constituency. Because such benefits can accrue to both large and small organizations, it is not surprising that roughly 80 percent of the child advocacy groups in our study used volunteers. The number of volunteers ranged from 1 to 300, but the median was 8, with each volunteer giving about 14 hours per month, on average. The most common policy-related activity for volunteers was meeting with policymakers. Among those organizations that provided detailed information on the use of volunteers, about 80 percent said that their volunteers met with policymakers. Volunteers were also likely to perform community outreach and administrative functions. On the other hand, less than half of the responding organizations said that volunteers were asked to perform fundraising tasks.

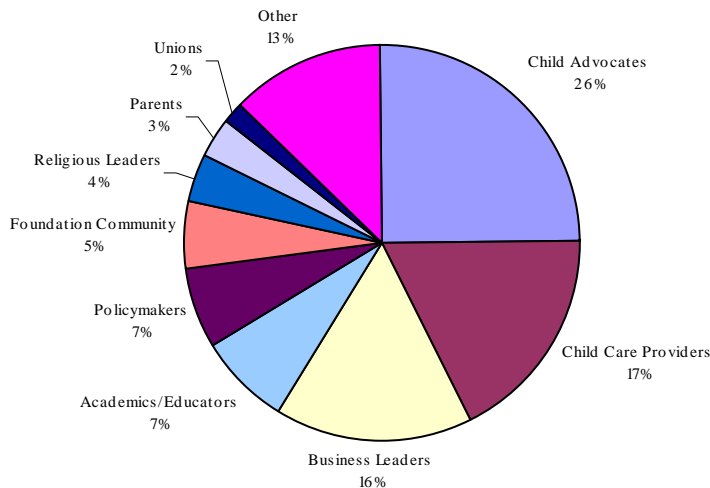
If volunteers supply added labor, board members serve as decisionmakers, helping to guide an organization's structure, policies, and programs. All but two of the child advocacy organizations in the study indicated that they had a board of directors. Boards ranged in size from 3 to 39 members, with the average board composed of about 17 people. A board member typically serves for two to three years.

Women and whites were prominent. About two-thirds of the board members in the study were women, and just over 70 percent were white. Although a few organizations reported no people of color on their boards, most had some minority

representation. On average, African Americans were more than twice as likely as Asians and Hispanics to serve on child advocacy boards.

Board members represent a diverse cross-section of professional backgrounds, although more than 40 percent had connections to the child advocacy and child care communities (figure 3). Many board members were executive directors or staff members of other children’s organizations in the state. One-quarter of all board members in the study were identified as child advocates, and 17 percent were child care providers. Business leaders represented about 16 percent of the board members in the study, although half of the organizations had at least one businessperson on their board. Only a few organizations had parent representatives or union leaders on their boards.

**Figure 3: Professional Background of Board Members**



Source: The Urban Institute, Organizational Factors Influencing Advocacy for Children.

The main function of these boards is strategic planning. About 80 percent of the organizations said that strategic planning was their most important or a very important function. Evaluation and oversight functions and fiduciary functions were also assessed as very important roles for child advocacy boards. Only half of the organizations indicated that fundraising, community outreach, and political contacts were considered the most important or a very important function for their boards of directors. These data suggest that board members play a fairly traditional role of planning and oversight in child advocacy organizations rather than assuming tasks that would more directly benefit the organization's advocacy work.

### **Financial Resources**

Funding can make a difference in how advocacy work is structured and pursued.

Repeatedly, respondents in our interviews reported that both the size of their overall advocacy budgets and restrictions on the use of certain types of revenue shape the type, level, and intensity of their advocacy work.

Using data from the Form 990 that organizations filed with the Internal Revenue Service in 2000–2001, we found that organizational revenues ranged from less than \$25,000 to over \$14.5 million. Average revenues were approximately \$3 million and the median about \$1 million.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, the data do not allow us to determine what proportion of these funds were allocated for advocacy work, but the overall size of the organization's budget can be seen as a proxy for organizational capacity. Interestingly, organizations in the study were either small (that is, they had revenues of less than \$500,000) or large (with revenues of \$1 million or more). Five of the 10 large

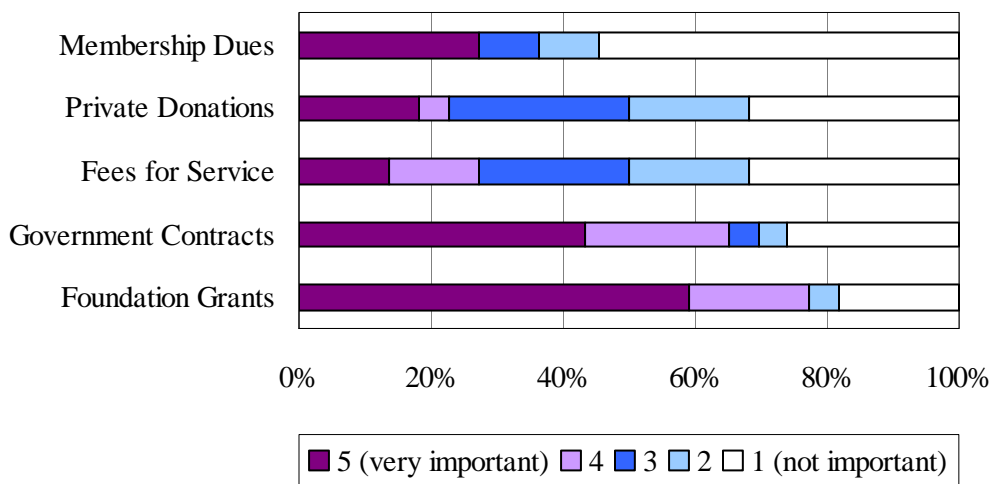
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<sup>3</sup> Three organizations did not file Forms 990 during this time. The financial analysis is based on the 19 organizations that filed returns.

organizations were located in Washington, 4 were in Massachusetts, and the remaining organization was in Georgia. This striking distribution of financial resources by size and state may suggest the relative emphasis that states and communities place on establishing mechanisms to provide a strong and diverse voice for children’s issues.

Most respondents indicated that their organizations tried to diversify their funding bases, but foundation grants and government contracts were overwhelmingly the most important sources of support (figure 4). Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported that foundation grants were “important” or “very important” sources of income, while 64 percent said that government contracts were “important” or “very important” sources of support. Fees and donations from individuals were considered “somewhat important” by about half of the respondents. A few groups, such as labor unions and professional associations, rated membership dues as “very important,” but for the others, it was not an important source of income.

**Figure 4. Importance of Income by Source of Support, 2000**



Source: The Urban Institute, *Organizational Factors Influencing Advocacy for Children*.

Funding from foundations and government tends to be tied to programmatic work (Covington 2001; Smith 1999), often making it difficult for organizations to develop the capacity for advocacy. Nonprofits, therefore, need to be skillful in matching their advocacy activities to donor requirements. For example, government grants and contracts cannot be used for lobbying, but these funds can sometimes support public education campaigns. Foundations, on the other hand, fund a wide range of advocacy activities, although only a handful are supportive of grassroots mobilizing and direct lobbying activities. Sometimes general support or well-funded programmatic activities can free up other resources within the organization to build advocacy programs.

### **USING CAPACITY STRATEGICALLY**

Staff, volunteers, board members, and financial resources are all parts of an organization's capacity. Yet some organizations are more adept than others at coordinating and using these resources to strengthen and enhance their infrastructure and advocacy work. How much capacity an organization needs depends on the political goals it hopes to achieve. Some goals require long and intensive advocacy campaigns, while others might be attained more quickly. Because political goals differ, capacity needs will also differ. Nevertheless, our interviews with executive directors, board members, staff, and volunteers suggest that there are important intervention points through which organizations can build and strengthen their advocacy programs.

### **Strong Executive Directors**

Executive directors are a focal point for leadership in nonprofit organizations. They shape the organization's programs and policies, guide the allocation of resources, and work with their board of directors to develop strategic plans.

In these study sites, strong leadership in the policy process evolved from different personal and professional experiences. The leaders had diverse educational backgrounds, including degrees in child development, public policy, English, and divinity. Some had worked in state legislatures; a few had no experience in the policy arena before coming to the organization. Most executive directors, however, were seasoned veterans of advocacy work who brought many years of experience either in child advocacy or other policy areas.

About one-quarter of the organizations in the study had strong executive directors overseeing the public policy activities, but these leaders played different roles in their organizations. One style of leadership was the public persona. These executive directors were embedded in political circles and highly visible to both policy elites and the community. The executive director in such organizations was the central figure for establishing political connections and maintaining networks to move the organization's agenda forward.

In one organization in Massachusetts, the president of the board of directors reported that the group's executive director conducted most of the organization's lobbying and advocacy activities. Although the executive director works with a part-time lobbyist, most of the advocacy activities are the executive director's responsibility. According to the board member, if the organization needs a particular senator or representative to move a bill forward, the executive director sets up a meeting between the legislator and someone in the organization to discuss the issue and promote the group's position.

A second model of leadership promotes collaborative partnerships. These leaders are effective working with decisionmakers in the state, mobilizing their members and constituencies to harness volunteer energy, and building relationships.

As one executive director in Georgia said, “There are three things that always impact public policy: relationships, relationships, and relationships.” Given this philosophy, this organization has built strong working relationships with several state agencies and participates in many state agency-sponsored working groups. It has its members contact state legislators to get support for the organization’s positions and works with the media to gain wider exposure of its issues. It also uses e-mail alerts to communicate with members and other child advocates across the state to generate support for children’s issues.

Finally, some leaders build organizations. This type of executive director develops a policy team and creates structures to aid the policy process. The executive director creates systems and structures to provide support for advocacy work.

After explaining the various roles of the staff, policy committees, and board of directors in researching and recommending an advocacy agenda, an executive director in Washington noted that it was important to maintain organizational structures and outreach. “We spend 30 to 40 percent of our time on these internal processes. If we didn’t do it, our policy agenda would not be rooted in reality and we wouldn’t be an organization with the credibility to speak on these issues.”

The role of the executive director can be defined through job descriptions, employment contracts, and organizational bylaws. Some organizations explicitly vest responsibility for policy work in the executive director; others leave the role undefined and open to interpretation. However, strong executive directors in the study consistently indicated that they worked with their boards and staff, created feedback mechanisms, and listened to their constituents in making decisions about policy priorities and advocacy strategies. While dynamic leaders cannot be cloned, organizational structures can foster or confine different types of leadership styles.

### **Boards of Directors and Policy Committees**

The roles of boards of directors vary widely from one organization to the next. The vast majority of child advocacy groups in the study defined the role of their boards in traditional ways—strategic planning, evaluation and oversight, and fiduciary responsibilities. Less often, boards were used to gain visibility in the community, seek political access, or raise financial resources. One organization in Georgia, for example, had a powerful board with outstanding fundraising potential; a group in Washington created a board that facilitated political leverage. But for the most part, nonprofits that engaged in child advocacy activities seem to view their boards as internal support structures rather than external assets and facilitators.

Matching board member skills, experience, and backgrounds to the organization's needs and self-interests can foster external relations. For example, human service organizations that advocate for children may seek some board members with influential ties to government agencies or political parties. Grassroots organizations may look for prominent business or religious leaders who are supportive of the group's goals.

Although boards of directors sometimes help identify policy issues, about half of the child advocacy groups in the study had developed policy advisory committees to assist the board and the executive director in this function. These committees operated in a variety of ways. One organization in Massachusetts, for example, had a particularly active committee that was well integrated into the organization's decisionmaking process.

The policy committee is responsible for assessing and monitoring critical issues in the field, and the executive director then presents summaries of these assessments to the board at bi-monthly meetings. At the end of the year, the chair of the policy committee, the executive director, and the organization's policy director meet to determine the organization's new policy agenda. The board receives a full report, along with a review of the

organization's past goals and accomplishments and a plan of action for the following year.

This type of structure places significant responsibility on the members of the policy committee to track proposed legislation, regulations, and policy developments, but it also creates opportunities for consultation and feedback among the policy committee, the policy staff, executive director, and board. Many child advocacy groups in the study were too small and informally structured to take advantage of this type of structure, but it can serve as a model for larger organizations that are looking for a decentralized but well-integrated approach to developing a policy agenda. For all organizations, regardless of size, information and policy expertise are essential for setting priorities, formulating an action agenda, and getting their message out.

### **Communication Tools**

Like all nonprofits, child advocacy organizations need to reach out to and communicate with their members and constituents—such as child care professionals, early education teachers, parents, social workers, and others. Communication, therefore, is an essential tool for building organizational capacity and receiving feedback from members and constituents. This dialogue can occur around any number of areas—setting priorities, developing policy positions, targeting messages, mobilizing supporters, and more.

Child advocacy groups in the study used different mechanisms to foster communication. Some groups convened forums (or town meetings) to discuss the group's priorities and involve concerned citizens and parents in the advocacy process. Others conducted surveys of their members or public opinion polls, which were used to frame the organization's policy agenda. Such activities add credibility to the organization's advocacy positions and indirectly add to the group's capacity by expanding its

membership or constituency. A group in Georgia provides an excellent example of how it received feedback on policy positions and mobilized members for action.

This advocacy group organizes its work around geographic districts, using local venues where members meet, voice their concerns, and keep abreast of policy issues. These meetings provide headquarter staff with local perspectives and help the organization frame policy positions to ensure a wide cross-section of membership support. When the organization wants to take action on a specific piece of legislation or policy, the executive director calls on the “district representatives” to mobilize members in their areas. The organization’s leadership prepares a list of “talking points” for members to use when making calls to policymakers, and district representatives train their members to convey these ideas. This structure helps to ensure that a unified message is coming from the group’s members and constituents.

Technology plays a big role in communication activities, but learning to use technology well is still a challenge for many child advocacy organizations. Many of the respondents indicated that their organizations used newsletters and e-mail messages to communicate with members and constituents, but what is less clear is how well the groups harness and exploit these communication tools. This is a particularly difficult challenge for groups that represent minorities and people with low-incomes, who may lack access to e-mail and the Internet. Language and cultural differences may also complicate communication activities, and measuring the impact of these communication activities is often very difficult to achieve.

One executive director in Massachusetts said that after her newsletters and e-mails are sent, there is no mechanism within the organization to receive member or constituent comments. Consequently, it is unclear if the members are reading the information, how they feel about the issues, whether they are contacting their representatives, and, if so, what message is being sent. Uncoordinated and contradictory information can dilute the message that child advocates want to send to policymakers.

Generally speaking, organizations lack adequate feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of their communication activities.

## **FINANCIAL CHALLENGES AND ADAPTATIONS**

Financial support is the lifeblood of an organization. Although money does not guarantee success, it influences the type and level of activity that can be pursued. The relationship between advocacy and funding is complex, and organizations had very different experiences in securing money for advocacy work. Three themes were commonly heard.

First, respondents said that there was not enough money earmarked for advocacy, which limited the infrastructure that could be built to conduct advocacy campaigns.

Because some activities are expensive and require a long-term commitment, resources become an important factor in fulfilling a group's priorities. For example,

As one executive director in Massachusetts said, "National funders present difficulty because they do not understand that this work is going to take a long time. Trying to manage the requests of national funders to attend meetings, as well as the requests from other groups seeking technical assistance, and at the same time get the job done is very difficult. To some degree the local funders are more manageable because they understand the political landscape in the state, and they understand this effort is going to be long-term. Sometimes there is a lack of appreciation for the work."

Second, donors bring their own set of values, interests, and preferences to the grantmaking process. The challenge for nonprofits is to match the organization's mission and the donor's interests and preferences. Groups adapt to changing policy and funding environments by creating "marketable missions"; that is, presenting their work in a way that is relevant to the policymaking and philanthropic communities. One child advocacy group in Georgia was formed because advocacy leaders and concerned funders agreed on a common agenda to promote better child care and early education. Another organization

dissolved because its board of directors decided to hold steadfast to its original priorities rather than shift focus to attract new donors. In some cases, organizations make small but significant shifts in their missions to respond to changing policy and funding environments. For example,

One organization that had an established track record in child care issues said that it expanded its focus to include early education issues. This shift in emphasis was to respond to both changes in the policy environment and specific donors' interests. Without this shift, the organization believed it might become marginalized in the policy arena and might lose funding from important donors.

Groups are also challenged to structure their advocacy and policy positions in response to donors' interests and demands. Government funding for children's programs may shift as new administrations assume office or may be cut back during budget shortfalls. Hot-button issues must be carefully handled. For example, business interests may support children's policies, but not if they require new taxes.

One group said that it pulled back from publicly supporting a particular policy proposal after it received a phone call from one of its corporate donors who opposed the proposal because it was linked to a new tax. The donor strongly suggested that future support for the organization might be tied to the group's advocacy stance on this issue. Rather than risk losing financial backing for its other activities, the organization decided that it would not take a public stand on the issue.

Because funding is integral to survival, organizations are constantly challenged to prove that they are relevant. Creating and maintaining a marketable mission is an ongoing process. These cases suggest that the interactions and synergy created between an organization's mission and its funding streams help shape the organization's activities and frame its capacity required to get the job done.

Finally, nonprofits can adapt to resource constraints through strategic alliances. Both large and small organizations find it difficult to stretch their dollars for advocacy

work. Advocacy activities that take a long time to mature—such as media campaigns, or organizing and mobilizing constituencies—can be especially costly. Several groups in the study shared the services of the same lobbyist as a cost-savings strategy. On issues of common concern, the lobbyist speaks for all organizations, thereby lending greater strength to the message. If one organization has a special interest that needs to be represented, the lobbyist speaks on behalf of that single organization. This strategy was especially helpful to smaller nonprofits that cannot afford to hire their own lobbyist. However, a few child advocates expressed concern that if the lobbyist represents many diverse clients, legislators become confused regarding which group(s) is being represented. In this situation, advocates feared that children’s issues are likely to take a backseat to more powerful interest groups and not be heard in the legislative process.

## **GROUPS THAT ARE TAKING ACTION**

There are many different ways of affecting change for children, and each child advocacy organization must determine which strategies and tactics to follow. Will it be proactive or reactive to policy ideas? Will it take the lead in forming coalitions or simply be supportive of such efforts? Will it focus on influencing legislators and administrators or emphasize grassroots mobilizing and public awareness campaigns? Will it supply background research to understand the issues or will it try to get out the vote?

The study found that organizations generally do not engage in all of these actions, although they may use different approaches under different situations. Instead, an organization chooses the strategy that best fits its purpose, interests, and organizational capacities. What emerges is an informal type of specialization—that is, certain types of

advocacy groups are more likely than other types to target specific audiences and to engage in specific types of advocacy activity. Together, the organizations present a mosaic of child advocacy efforts in a state or local area. The challenge of building effective networks or coalitions on behalf of children is to understand the capacity of these various groups and determine how to maximize and coordinate their individual strengths while buttressing their weaknesses. Sometimes it also means reaching out to new players to broaden the voice on children’s issues.

To understand these dynamics, we identified six different types of state-level child advocates<sup>4</sup> (see table below). This typology provides a framework for analyzing the key players in the child advocacy field and the actions that they are likely to pursue.

**State-Level Child Advocacy Groups by Type and Common Activity**

<b>Type of organization (number in study)</b>	<b>Common activities</b>
Public-private partnerships for children’s issues (2)	Conduct public education and media campaigns
Human service organizations engaged in advocacy (6)	Focus on budget and regulatory reforms
Advocacy organizations representing children and parents (4)	Mobilize support at the grassroots level
Unions and professional associations (5)	Professionalize the workforce
Intermediary groups (4)	Provide technical assistance to small- and mid-size groups
Action-oriented think tanks (1)	Conduct action-oriented research to mobilize public support

Source: The Urban Institute, Organizational Factors Influencing Advocacy for Children.

<sup>4</sup> Although incorporation as a 501(c)(3) organization (that is, as a charitable nonprofit) presents some restrictions on the types and amount of political advocacy that an organization can undertake, formal incorporation is less of a factor in understanding the group’s advocacy strategies and actions than is its structure, capacity, and leadership.

### **Public-Private Partnerships for Children’s Issues**

Examples of advocacy groups that were spawned in response to public-private partnerships were found in both Georgia and Washington. A governor’s initiative or the actions of people close to the governor brought together high-level and influential people from government, business, philanthropy, human services, and mainstream community organizations such as the United Way and the Junior League to address child care and early education issues. These public-private partnerships resulted in different types of relationships. In one case, the partnership was used to leverage financial support, and in the other, it created a new advocacy group with close ties to government.

Both groups framed the issues of child care and early education around quality concerns and stressed the need for investment in the well-being of future generations. These arguments were typically based on the findings of new research on brain development and their implications for early learning and school readiness. In addition, business interests saw child care and early education as part of an economic development strategy—a way to create a “business friendly” environment for current workers and to invest in the skills and productivity of the future workforce.

Because of the influential individuals who convened these partnerships, this type of child advocacy organization had relatively easy access to large donors, powerful networks, and political insiders. Although the budgets of these groups were modest, they were well positioned to leverage money and influence when necessary. These partnerships often engaged in media activities and public education campaigns to increase awareness of early learning and quality care. They conferred and coordinated with other groups in the child advocacy community but tended to pursue their own

agendas. These partnerships tried to be proactive in setting the stage for policy discussions of child care and early education.

### **Human Service Organizations Engaged in Child Advocacy**

The human service organizations in the study are among the largest groups in the study. Their budgets generally were over \$2 million, and they often received contracts from government to provide services to low-income families. Service delivery tended to be their primary activity, but advocacy was an important component of their work. Because of the importance of government funding to their operations, these groups generally focused their advocacy on budget and regulatory reforms. Their boards of directors strongly represented the service community—including, for example, representatives of state and local service agencies; religious providers, such as Catholic Charities, that offer children’s services; and sometimes community members.

Advocates in these organizations were concerned about the access and affordability of child care and early education for low-income children and families. They focused their work on subsidies for low-income families and reimbursement rates for providers who serve low-income populations. They frequently participated in discussions of quality care, including the training and compensation of child care workers. These groups were especially dedicated to advocacy on behalf of low-income people and minorities. Many of these advocates have had long careers in the policy arena.

Several of the human service organizations that conduct advocacy had a policy department and a policy director, which allowed them to focus on policy issues. Staff had substantial expertise in children’s issues and may have had experience in working for state or local government agencies. They used direct lobbying, bolstered by research, to

influence legislators and policymakers at both the state house and government agencies. These groups tended to be well integrated into large human service coalitions (with larger groups taking the lead role), particularly when budget issues were at stake.

The main assets of human service advocacy groups were their knowledge of the history and evolution of human service policies, programs, and oversight agencies; their dedicated staff; and their ability to keep information flowing among organizations, community-level constituencies, and policymakers. Their use of client testimony before legislatures can be powerful and persuasive. They were, however, vulnerable to government budget cuts, and their funding was often uncertain. In part, their advocacy flowed from organizational self-interest, but they were dedicated advocates for low-income populations and served a vital function as the conduit between government programs and people in need.

### **Advocacy Organizations for Children and Parents**

Advocacy organizations representing children and parents were somewhat smaller than the human service organizations but nonetheless had budgets averaging around \$1.7 million. These groups often covered a wide array of children's topics—child care and early education, after school care, and so on. Some delivered services, but they saw their role primarily as advocates.

Groups that represented children and parents typically engaged in training, research, public education, and constituency organizing activities. Although they usually did not have sufficient organizational capacity or resources to develop mass media campaigns, some groups were effective in placing op-ed pieces in local newspapers to help build a statewide and grassroots awareness of policy issues.

These advocacy groups tended to be very deliberate in promoting racial and ethnic representation and community input on their boards. Parents and community leaders were more likely to be active in this type of advocacy organization than in either public-private partnerships or human service advocacy groups. This diversity, however, may exacerbate internal conflicts as organizations try to accommodate different points of views. One group experienced such tension among its board, staff, and community over goals and objectives that the organization eventually restructured itself.

Financial uncertainty is a constant concern. As one respondent put it:

“When we do fundraising, we raise between \$500 to \$1,000 for every hour that we invest [toward] implementing an after school program. In contrast, we raise \$50 to \$100 for every hour that we spend on organizing parents or doing advocacy work. It’s clear to us where the easiest return on our investment is. However, we don’t go for the easy. We need to represent parents.”

Mobilizing parents was particularly difficult, as several respondents noted. Except for a few deeply involved and highly committed parents, advocates faced numerous barriers in attracting and sustaining parent interest.

“Parent involvement is the biggest barrier because of language and culture differences. With families living in poverty, getting them to see the value of advocacy for education, or what it means for them and why it is significant is difficult.”

“Parents are too busy and stressed to do a night meeting. Also, by nature, the parent issue around child care is transient—the children get older or the parents solve their child care problem.”

Because children “graduate” from child care as they get older, advocates must continuously educate new sets of parents about the issues and try to sustain their interest when they no longer need child care services. On the other hand, groups that are able to mount mobilizing campaigns have a big asset: they can assemble affected parents and

other people for direct action, such as attending public rallies or hearings, participating in letter writing campaigns, or meeting with legislators to voice constituent concerns. These tactics give public visibility to both the issue and the organization. Although these relatively small grassroots-style organizations probably had the least amount of direct access to influential policymakers, they had legitimacy in the policymaking arena because their members were both consumers of children's services and potential voters.

### **Unions and Professional Associations**

Both unions and professional associations were structured as membership organizations. They generally operated through federated systems with federal, state, and local affiliates, and had formal structures, such as a constitution, bylaws, and formal committees, to guide their activities. Although state-level units tended to be relatively small,<sup>5</sup> their capacity may have been enhanced through financial support and guidance from the national body. As membership groups, both unions and professional associations were highly responsive to their members' interests, but they also were active in broader community coalitions working to improve the quality of child care and early education.

Public employee and service employee unions incorporated child care and early education issues as part of their broader agenda on family and workforce policies. They saw quality care and early education as (1) a low-wage industry that could be improved by attracting and retaining workers through training incentives and better wages and benefits and (2) a necessary service for working parents that enables them to function effectively and without distraction on their jobs. Within this framework, unions pursued a two-pronged advocacy strategy. First, they tried to organize child care workers as union

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<sup>5</sup> We were unable to obtain reliable and comparable information on unions in the study, so size and budget analyses are based solely on the revenues of professional associations.

members by promising to secure better wages and benefits through formal contracts, and second, they engaged in legislative advocacy to create opportunities for worker advancement, improve standards in the child care and early education fields, and enhance the availability and affordability of child care programs.

Unions were strategically positioned to pursue aggressive political activities such as direct lobbying, get-out-the-vote campaigns, and campaign contributions. They were financed through members' dues, but child advocacy activities must compete with other union activities to secure resources. Because unions found it difficult to organize the child care workforce, given the small size and high turnover rates of many child care centers, union members may have seen child care and early education as a lower priority than other policy issues. To compensate, unions often worked on children's issues through coalitions and strategic alliances. For example, they may have taken the lead in forming coalitions around tax issues, but played a supportive role on early care and education issues.

Professional associations, on the other hand, represented providers and directors of early education and child care programs. Like unions, they were responsive to their members' concerns. Most of the professional associations in the study were small with revenues of less than \$500,000. Only one had a budget of \$1 million.

Professional associations generally framed the issue of quality care and early education in the context of early learning experiences for children, professional development for staff, affordability for parents, and financial stability for the industry. In the policy arena, professional associations worked through coalitions with human service organizations on a wide range of budget, training, and quality-of-work issues. They may

also have worked with community colleges to enhance the professional development of child care staff.

### **Intermediary Groups**

Intermediaries provided an array of services to other groups—information, lobbying, and sometimes training to build advocacy skills—but they operated on quite small budgets relative to other child advocacy groups in the study (\$300,000 or less). These organizations seemed to be a hybrid between a professional association and an advocacy group focused on children and parents. Like professional associations, they had members, generally organizations offering social services. Like advocates for children and parents, they championed a variety of policy issues affecting children and families—child care, abuse and neglect, foster care, and more. These multi-issue organizations functioned as a voice for small- and mid-sized service providers and underrepresented constituencies, such as minority children.

These groups seemed to be quite vulnerable along a number of dimensions. One organization said that it needed to reevaluate the meaning of “membership.” Another spoke of the group’s inability to secure government funding. Another respondent said that the organization would soon be out of business. Although these groups were coordinating and speaking for smaller and less well-represented constituencies, they frequently seemed to be struggling with their own identities, policy directions, or limited capacities to fulfill their missions.

### **Action-Oriented Think Tanks**

A new player at the state and local level was the action-oriented think tank. Based on public interest research models, this type of organization aimed at influencing state policy

on a range of issues that affect working families—health insurance, job creation, child care, and so on. This advocacy model is fairly new, and the one example in our study tended to support progressive policies. Child care and early education were promoted as essential parts of the public infrastructure that supports working families.

Action-oriented think tanks provided policymakers with well-documented research materials and often ran media campaigns. The work was done by highly skilled and politically savvy staff who may have supplemented their research efforts with campaign-style advocacy work, seeking opportunities for media exposure and public mobilization. The strategy seemed to be based, in part, on taking calculated risks that could potentially bring high-impact returns.

The board of directors in this organization reflected the political outlook of the group and included political leaders, union members, and community and religious activists. The mix of board members not only gave the group access to high-level policymakers, but also provided legitimacy as a voice for community-level interests.

Financial support for this type of action-oriented group was tenuous, however. As a young organization, it had not developed a secure base of support. It relied heavily on foundation support but got some funding from individual donors and unions. Picking the “right issues” and demonstrating “success” in the policy arena are likely to be crucial factors for the survival of this type of advocacy group.

## **DEFINING AND MEASURING SUCCESS**

An organization’s ability to define and measure success is an important indicator of the group’s performance and organizational health. Measures of success help establish

accountability and legitimacy in the eyes of the public, funders, members, and government officials. It can also provide a long-range perspective on the gains and losses that occur in the political arena.

Considering the importance of defining success, respondents in our study were asked, “How do you define success?” This open-ended question produced answers from many perspectives, reflecting the respondent’s role and responsibilities within the organization and the organization’s policy goals. As one advocate put it, “If we did not have a variety of ways to define success, we would not be in this business for long.”

Most answers fell into one of three categories: (1) changing public policies and the political environment, (2) achieving positive social outcomes, and (3) achieving positive organizational outcomes.

### **Changing Public Policies and the Political Environment**

The ultimate goal of most child advocates is to get favorable legislation passed (or regulatory action taken) that will improve the lives of children. It, therefore, is not surprising that many respondents spoke about legislative victories.

“The important fact is whether or not the legislation passed.”

“Success is getting legislation passed and getting money allocated to benefit children.”

But many other respondents were quick to temper these viewpoints. Several spoke of their efforts to prevent undesirable legislation or budget cuts for children’s programs—activities that are not always obvious at the end of a legislative session.

“This last year, success is protecting what we have and not taking further cuts.”

“Success is killing a bill that is bad for child care.”

“I don’t want to be measured by legislation alone. Budget cuts were a real threat.”

“Success is when you learn from your mistakes.”

Increasing public awareness of children’s issues was also seen as a way to affect the political environment. As one respondent put it: “Success is getting and keeping child care issues on the public policy agenda.” For another, success was “creating an environment to empower and mobilize people to take action.” Increased media coverage and more public debate on children’s issues were considered signs of success.

### **Positive Social Outcomes**

Another popular way of defining success was as positive social outcomes that affect the lives of children and families. Sometimes these ideas were expressed in broad terms that might be difficult to measure, such as “happier and healthier children.” More often, respondents referred to social indicators of changes, such as reductions in low birth weight babies, improvements in reading scores, fewer school dropouts, or more children covered by health insurance.

One respondent defined success as simply “when children are doing better and performing at higher levels,” but many others cited the difficulty of creating quantitative measures and tracking them over time. Some used program measures as a proxy for outcome, such as the number of children receiving early care and education, and the number of trained teachers and child care workers. Others referred to declines in staff turnover among child care workers or improvements in wages and benefits as measures of success. One respondent wanted comparative measures to see how her state’s human services were doing in relation to other states. Another organization had a logic model against which to measure change. This complex matrix matched statistical data with

various children’s programs. Organizations are faced with the difficult task of matching measures to goals and distinguishing between program results (outputs) and positive change for children (outcomes). Nearly all of the organizations in the study struggled with effective ways to measure positive social outcomes.

### **Positive Organizational Outcomes**

A third way of defining success was from the perspective of organizational outcomes. Did the group’s advocacy activities expand the organization’s capacity or increase its visibility? Had networks been formed or strengthened? Were more people attending meetings, conferences, and other programs? Was there greater diversity among participants by race and ethnicity so that people of color could voice their needs and frame solutions from their own perspectives?

Many of these outcomes can be easily quantified, but organizational success was also expressed in abstract terms. For example, leadership was considered one way of judging organizational success:

“Success is having a leader [the executive director] that people respect for his knowledge and expertise.”

“Success is developing leadership skills.”

Another measure was based on external confirmation of the group’s activities.

“We felt like they [legislators] were listening to us.”

“We had regular access to administrators and elected officials.”

“Is the media consulting us?”

And a third measure focused on creating better advocacy networks or systems:

“Success is the expansion of stakeholders.”

“Success is making a coordinated system,” so that all the stakeholders are talking together and the system works smoothly.

Several respondents discussed how they needed to expand their analytic capacity to be effective in the policy arena. A few organizations lacked a systematic way of collecting and analyzing data. Most had limited capacity to track legislation, monitor government budget proposals and appropriations, or produce statistical evidence to support their positions. As one respondent said, “We are making baby steps educating legislators about early education issues, but we need to be able to document things.” Success, for these groups, rests on the ability to attract technically skilled policy analysts and expand their analytic capacity.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Child advocacy organizations and foundations need to answer the question “capacity for what?” to be strategic about building organizations that have political clout and can get salient policies and issues on the political agenda while increasing participation for underrepresented constituencies. There are many organizational players in the child advocacy arena, and each has an important role to play and contribution to make.

Recognizing this diversity, we cluster the lessons learned from this study into three distinct categories. The first summarizes lessons for nonprofit leaders and child advocates who must tend to the day-to-day work of strengthening organizations to conduct policy advocacy. The second suggests ways in which foundations can strategically support the advocacy work of organizations working on children’s issues. The third identifies research that can help organizations strengthen the policy arms of their organizations.

### **Strengthening Organizations for Children’s Policy Advocacy**

Each of the organizations in this study made important contributions to improving the lives of children and families through public awareness campaigns and/or budget and policy advocacy. They tended to specialize in types of activities that were well matched to their constituencies, resources, mission, and political objectives. Organizations that are based on public-private partnerships generally have relatively easy access to influential donors and decisionmakers because they tend to be composed of powerful community interests. Professional associations represent the skilled providers who administer or run the various programs for children. Human service advocacy groups bring expertise in budget analysis and program administration. Grassroots organizations are effective because they provide a voice for the “average” or “forgotten” consumer and are able to mobilize these constituencies when action is needed. Unions, although potentially a powerful player on behalf of child care and early education workers, have not yet put their full weight behind these policy issues. Working together, these groups represent influence and knowledge, and provide a voice within communities and workplace settings. These organizational structures are the building blocks for expanding the capacity and influence of child advocates.

Along with leadership, funding is a critical component for building the capacity of nonprofit organizations. But funding can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it enables groups to maintain, expand, and intensify their activities and skills. It allows groups to engage in new strategies and activities, and can supply capital for investment in physical and human resources. But funding can also present restrictions and limitations. Heavy reliance on government grants and contracts can mute advocacy activities, but support from foundations and corporations can also come with proverbial strings

attached. These case studies uncovered several examples in which organizations had to manage contrasting views of funders, staff, leaders, and/or members. A diversified funding base can help alleviate dependency and unwanted influence, but it is unlikely to eliminate it entirely.

The study yielded several lessons for advocates and nonprofit leaders to help strengthen the policy arms of their organizations.

- Know what you want to achieve, and build your organizational capacity to get it. Focus your policy work around your vision and by setting priorities. Assess political opportunities, and structure your organization to take advantage of both vision and opportunity.
- Turn your mission statement into a policy tool. Strengthen the policy language in your mission statement and use it to set organizational priorities, measure success, and project your image as advocates for children.
- Be clear and direct about funders' interests and your own organizational interests. Many differences can be negotiated.
- Build processes that will facilitate input from your primary constituency and use this information to determine your organization's policy priorities and action strategies.
- For state and local affiliates of national organizations, leverage your affiliate status to obtain targeted research, staff training, financial support, and political connections.
- Employ and build leaders with political and organizing skills. These leaders will be invaluable for networking, lobbying, and mobilizing for change.
- Set policy priorities that can guide strategic use of limited resources for advocacy activities and help define the role of your organization in coalitions.
- Avoid competition among allies. Collaborate for systemic changes that will reduce policy fragmentation. Mediate differences before they become a bargaining chip for politicians, especially in times of tight budgets.
- Recruit, train, and engage new supporters to invigorate your organization and bring new groups and ideas into the political arena.
- Know the political and policy environment that you want to affect so you can shape it, bend it, and find the potential niches for advancing policy objectives.

### **Funding Child Advocacy Organizations Strategically**

Many child advocacy organizations lack the capacity to conduct extensive or continuous advocacy work. They often lack the time, knowledge, staff, and financial resources to follow legislation, meet legislative leaders, conduct public education campaigns, prepare expert testimony, or otherwise engage in the political process. Given the number of child advocacy organizations that need financial support, foundations need a strategy to decide which organizations and what types of activities to support. Based on the findings of these case studies, there are six potential strategies to consider.

*1. Broadening Public Support.* Putting children's issues on everyone's agenda means broadening public support, particularly within influential networks and constituencies that do not generally address social issues. Foundations that want to educate the public on children's issues might look towards supporting public-private partnerships that engage in child advocacy campaigns. These partnerships are usually well-funded advocacy groups, especially when sanctioned by the governor's office. Because public education campaigns can be expensive, often requiring the purchase of media and communications services, the marriage of private and public funds can make a difference in supporting this work. However, grantmakers should be aware that these types of campaigns generally do not engage in direct and aggressive forms of advocacy.

*2. Helping Human Service Groups Become Less Reliant on Government Supports.* Foundations with an interest in funding social service programs for children might want to support human service organizations engaged in advocacy. Many of the grants and contracts that these human service groups receive are designated for programs and services. Finding resources to engage in advocacy is often difficult, yet advocacy is one

way to address the underlying causes of poverty and need. Particularly for organizations that advocate on behalf of low-income families, private funding can help offset the organization's reliance on government support and empower these groups to speak out on public policy issues. Community foundations that focus their grants on social services for low-income children and parents may find this approach appealing.

*3. Building Capacity of Small- and Mid-Sized Groups Through Intermediaries.*

Foundations interested in building the capacity of groups that work with small- and mid-sized organizations or underrepresented groups should consider supporting the work of organizational intermediaries. These groups provide a variety of services that can have a multiplier effect on organizations at the local level. They conduct research and disseminate information that can be used to motivate grassroots activities. They provide training in advocacy skills and sometimes lobby on behalf of smaller organizations or constituent interests. However, because of the vulnerable nature of the intermediary groups in this study, a careful assessment of the intermediary's capacity and potential for effectiveness is recommended.

*4. Deepening Support Among Voters.* Foundations interested in enhancing the voice and votes of parents and other grassroots constituencies should consider strengthening advocacy organizations for children and parents. These groups put advocacy first and do the day-to-day work of organizing underrepresented constituencies to speak directly with community leaders, politicians, and other decisionmakers. These organizations make an important contribution to democratic governance by bringing grassroots voices into the decisionmaking process, which too often is weighted in favor of people with the money and connections to influence political outcomes. Resources for

this kind of work are scarce. However, foundations can help bring new leaders to the forefront in their communities by funding outreach, training, and mobilizing of parents and community activists.

*5. Addressing Systemic Problems with Knowledge and Action.* Foundations that value the power of well-documented research and media campaigns coupled with grassroots action can consider providing start-up money or operational grants for action-oriented think tanks. These are fairly new organizations in the child advocacy arena, but they are often filled with energetic, dedicated staff who can set the stage for new policy ideas to take root in the electorate. With campaign-style tactics, they can seize political openings to move forward issues in multiple settings. Because these groups are heavily dependent on foundation funding and because they work on issues with a high degree of volatility, it is essential for funders and grantees to build a dialogue that leads to long-term operational support for systemic change.

*6. Strengthening Providers at Work and in Communities.* Unions and professional organizations that stress training incentives, wages and benefits for child care workers, and representation in the workplace are important groups for improving the dignity and respect for the early education and child care workforce. Especially in low-income areas, child care is viewed as both a vital service for working parents and an employment opportunity for women who are transitioning from welfare to work. Because foundations sometimes perceive unions and professional organizations as self-interested membership groups, their work is overlooked in the grantmaking cycle. Foundations might consider funding strategic alliances or coalitions that have unions and professional groups as key

players so they can lend their workplace experiences and organizational strength to children's issues.

Although there are many ways to match a foundation's interests with support for advocacy activities, this approach is relatively new for many foundations. A few general guidelines can help foundations fashion their work in this area.

- Establish a dialogue with the child advocacy community to learn their interests and needs.
- Be clear about the types of activities and policy areas that you want to support.
- Consider grants for general support that will allow organizations to pursue general capacity building strategies in the policy arena.
- At the start of the grant, discuss with the grantee several ways to measure successful advocacy by identifying political, social, and organizational outcomes. Check progress along the way.
- Understand that achieving "success" in advocacy work can be a long-term process and may require a multiyear commitment of support.
- Be flexible in your expectations and definitions of "success," because the political environment can change quickly.
- Help organizations capture their advocacy experience in different documentary forms (such as case studies) so this information can be shared with others.
- Facilitate collaborations and build networks among grantees and other child advocacy organizations.
- Support dialogue that leads to long-term support for systemic change.

### **Research to Strengthen Organizational Capacity for Children's Policy Advocacy**

The findings of this study highlight the strengths, challenges, and limitations of nonprofit organizations advocating on behalf of children and suggest several ways in which the foundation community can build the capacity of these groups. But there is more to learn

about these dynamics, and we offer suggestions for future research that can inform capacity building strategies and strengthen the policy voice for children's issues.

- Compile examples of political, social, and organization outcomes or performance measures that can be used by child advocacy groups.
- Examine the relationship between different types of donors (government, foundations, corporations, etc.) and child advocacy organizations in building capacity, setting priorities, and developing an advocacy agenda.
- Investigate to what extent and how child advocacy organizations are fostering new and young leaders within the field.
- Assess the impact of racial, ethnic, and gender diversity on boards of directors and front-line staff of organizations engaged in advocacy activities.
  - Study collaboration and conflict within the children's policy community and the effects of mediation and bargaining strategies on policy advocacy.
- Investigate the possible impact of regulatory policies that might expand or constrict the work of child advocacy organizations.

## **CONCLUSION**

Conducting child advocacy involves more than generating good ideas. Nonprofits that engage in advocacy need organizational structures, financial resources, good leadership, and active constituencies to carry out their work. Building the infrastructure to conduct advocacy takes time, effort, and forethought. As these case studies illustrate, advocacy work should be planned, nurtured, and promoted from within the organization, not simply emerge as a hurried response to external forces.

This study has described several different types of organizations that engage in policy advocacy. They can serve as models for other groups interested in advocacy, but an organization must tailor its approach and activities to local political conditions to be effective. Not every organization will be adept at every type of advocacy activity. Not

every type of advocacy activity will be successful in every political environment. Nor will foundations be able or willing to support the full range of advocacy activities. But the variety and combinations of approaches, structures, and activities found in these case studies provide a range of ideas that can be tried and adapted to local conditions.

Systematic studies of the organizational factors that influence and enhance advocacy are still in their infancy. This report provides initial insights to child advocates on factors to consider in building their capacity to undertake public policy advocacy.

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