

Discussion Papers

Dissemination Lessons
Learned

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Assessing
the New
Federalism

*An Urban Institute
Program to Assess
Changing Social
Policies*

Assessing the New Federalism is a multiyear effort to monitor and assess the devolution of social programs from the federal government to the state and local levels. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies changes in family well-being.

Key components of the project include a household survey and studies of policies in 13 states, available at the Urban Institute's web site, <http://www.urban.org>. This paper is one in a series of discussion papers analyzing information from these and other sources.

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Executive Summary

The Urban Institute's *Assessing the New Federalism* (ANF) project was designed to document changes in the social safety net during a period of great change in the mid- to late 1990s and to help national and state policymakers make decisions based on the best available data and research. Accomplishing this goal required ANF to implement a multifaceted dissemination program.

This paper describes the strategies used by the ANF project to communicate research findings about the complex changes taking place in the social safety net as a result of welfare reform. During the period covered in this report, 1997–2004, electronic communications via e-mail and the Internet grew dramatically. This report describes how the ANF communications strategy adapted to these changes. It assesses the strengths and weaknesses of various strategies and identifies lessons learned for future work.

From a dissemination perspective, ANF posed interesting communications challenges.

- Covering all aspects of the social safety net (welfare and work, health, child welfare, child care, racial and ethnic disparities, immigration, and fiscal and budget issues) as well as the general well-being of families, the project was data-intensive.
- ANF aimed to be a nonpartisan source of data and research that all sides of the political debate would consider reliable.
- ANF wanted to reach a very broad range of stakeholders—elected officials, executive agency administrators, service providers, professional associations, advocates, the media, and researchers—at the local, state, and national levels.

ANF viewed the communications strategy as an evolving program. ANF consistently evaluated its activities and, as needed, made trade-offs to achieve project goals. For instance,

ANF decided that giving stakeholders access to research before its official release was a useful departure from the traditional “embargo” approach. Prerelease allowed ANF to maintain its objectivity by creating opportunities for all stakeholders to learn about the research before its release, to understand it, to interpret it independently, and to comment on it to reporters. As a result, the ANF communications strategy increasingly focused on mobilizing intermediaries who could turn the research into policy.

As the strategy evolved, ANF experimented with new tactics and technologies. Some tactics, like the print newsletter, failed and were discarded. Others, such as the “commentator strategy” and e-newsletter, proved successful and were continued. Evolution also meant reinterpreting ANF data and analysis in the context of current policy debates.

The breadth of topics covered by ANF, despite adequate funding, required making choices about how best to use the time researchers had available for dissemination and how best to get the data and analysis into the hands of key stakeholders.

The explosion in the capacity of ANF stakeholders to use technology allowed the project to find cost-effective ways of reaching target audiences. For instance, electronic communications proved an effective way to reduce the cost of printing and mailing publications and put materials in the hands of stakeholders faster. ANF also implemented contact management software to make it easier for staff to maintain a network of diverse stakeholders interested in a variety of issues over a broad geographic area. Without these tools, ANF dissemination activities would have reached far fewer people much more slowly and at greater cost.

ANF demonstrated that providing data online was a valuable resource for key stakeholders. Even for educated stakeholders, however, training was needed to use data resources.

ANF increased efficiency by using contact management software to identify the specific interests of stakeholders and reporters and to make materials directly available to them. The dissemination efforts sought to generate discussion on ANF perspective and data in areas that included child welfare, children of immigrants, and the role of public health insurance coverage relative to that of employer-sponsored coverage.

Publishing books and organizing release conferences was costly in both time and money, yet critical for the project's development. The books provided a focus for ANF researchers to synthesize the project's body of work and analyze it in terms of the current policy debates. The conferences gave ANF a venue to disseminate the story. Since the books and conferences had the support of the project's senior staff, they became priorities for the researchers. Such major events also drew the ANF staff together, with everyone playing a role.

ANF took place during a period of profound change in the social safety net. Just as the social safety net was undergoing great change, the rise of e-mail and the Internet was changing the way people communicate. This report describes how ANF responded to these changes. It shows that objective data has power and that policymakers from various political perspectives can share the same data to make policy. ANF's dissemination program leveraged the communications changes to help policymakers respond more quickly to policy changes—and we learned lessons in both communications and policy.

Dissemination Lessons Learned

In August 1996, Congress passed and President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). According to many observers, this welfare reform legislation represented the most fundamental change in the provision of social services in 40 years, expanding the role of state government in designing and implementing social services and making welfare temporary and conditioned on work.

Created in 1968 to assess the War on Poverty, The Urban Institute (UI) saw the need to track and analyze these dramatic changes in the social safety net. So did many others, including a number of private philanthropic organizations with an interest in social policy. As a result of that joint interest, UI established the *Assessing the New Federalism* (ANF) project. Supported by generous grants from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, John T. and Catherine D MacArthur Foundation, Commonwealth Fund, and Ford Foundation, ANF quickly became the largest project in UI history. Child Trends participated in ANF as a partner organization.

From its inception, dissemination was a central part of ANF's mission. The Urban Institute and ANF's funders understood that state policymakers and other stakeholders would need expert advice about the implications of the decisions they were now responsible for making. To this end, ANF funders allocated significant funds specifically to widely communicate research results.

This paper describes the strategies used by the Urban Institute's *Assessing the New Federalism* project to communicate research findings about complex social policy issues to various national and state audiences. During the period covered in this report, 1997–2004, electronic communications via e-mail and the Internet grew dramatically. This report describes

how the ANF communications strategy adapted to these changes. It assesses the strengths and weaknesses of various strategies and identifies lessons learned for future work.

As the director of communications for ANF from August 1997 through June 2004, I draw considerably from personal experience in this summary of the project's dissemination strategy and activities. It also includes valuable perspectives and insights from other Urban Institute staff.

Data used to develop, evaluate, and evolve the dissemination strategy comes from six sources:

- a survey of ANF stakeholders taken in June–July 2003;
- an analysis of press clippings from January 1, 2001 to August 31, 2003;
- the Flesch Reading Ease score and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score;
- WebTrends, software used to track use of the ANF web site;
- ANF's compilation of the best examples where its data and research were used to make policy; and
- polling data and analyses from ANF funders summarizing the information needs of stakeholders, assisting the project to frame research and make it available in appropriate formats.

For more on these data sources, see appendix A.

From a dissemination perspective, ANF posed interesting communications challenges.

- The project was data-intensive. Examples of the data collected include the National Survey of America's Families (three rounds of a large, national, household survey with representative samples in 13 states), a database of welfare rules in all 50 states, and qualitative data gleaned from site visits to the 13 states.

- The project was conceived when it looked as though not only welfare, but also other key elements of the social safety net, would be devolved to the states. From the beginning, therefore, it was designed to capture the well-being of low-income families at the state level across a broad range of indicators. The range of topics included all aspects of the social safety net (welfare and work, health, child welfare, child care, racial and ethnic disparities, immigration, and fiscal and budget issues) as well as general family well-being.
- ANF aimed to be a source of data and research that all sides of the political debate would consider reliable.
- ANF wanted the research and data to inform policy while the project and the Urban Institute remained nonpartisan.
- ANF wanted to reach a very broad range of audiences. Stakeholders included elected officials, executive agency administrators, service providers, professional associations, advocates, the media, and researchers. At the local, state, and national levels, it included stakeholders who were interested in all aspects of the safety net.

ANF embraced many of these challenges and learned several lessons:

- ANF viewed the communications strategy as an evolving program. This meant establishing new objectives, evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and tactics, analyzing changes in the environment, and identifying new opportunities. This approach encouraged ANF to experiment with new tactics and technologies.
- ANF maintained its objectivity by creating opportunities for all stakeholders to learn about the research before its release, to understand it, to interpret it independently, and to comment on it to reporters. ANF learned that research does not speak on its own. To have

an impact on policy, the research must first be placed into context. What is the policy issue under discussion? Second, affecting policy requires that the research have a sponsor that can draw out the implications of the research for the policy issue. While ANF researchers could describe the research findings, the research needed to remain objective for researchers to make judgments on specific policy choices. As a result, much of the ANF communications strategy focused on mobilizing intermediaries who could turn the research into policy.

- ANF found that making research timely required several strategies and trade-offs. For instance, ANF had to delay release of the data from its national household survey to the broader public to give Urban Institute researchers an opportunity to analyze the data while it was still fresh. ANF's technical survey experts just did not have the capacity both to clean the public data and to help ANF researchers do their own detailed analyses at the same time.
- ANF demonstrated that providing data online was a valuable resource for key stakeholders. Even for educated stakeholders, however, training was needed to use data resources. Of all the publication formats, the short and concise "policy brief" met the needs of the broadest range of stakeholders, including elected officials, advocates, service providers, and association professionals.
- ANF found that electronic communications—an e-newsletter, the web site, and contact management software—were critical to communicating with and activating the broad range of targeted stakeholders. Without these tools, ANF dissemination activities would have reached far fewer people much more slowly and at greater cost.

Overview of Contents

The first section of this paper briefly reviews the evolving goals, objectives, and strategy underlying the ANF dissemination effort. It explores tensions between the goals, the research culture of the Urban Institute, and the ability of a national research organization to reach multiple state policy debates. The report describes how the communications strategy evolved to accommodate these challenges and how the work of ANF enhanced the Urban Institute.

Published research was the primary vehicle for communicating ANF's data and analysis to stakeholders. The second section describes the types of publications ANF created, the logic behind the various series of briefs, papers, and fact sheets, and how these publications were disseminated.

Dissemination of ANF research relied heavily on electronic communications, the subject of the third section in this paper. ANF took place when the Internet was radically changing the way people communicate. In many ways, the project was at the cutting edge of these developments through the use of an e-newsletter and a multifaceted, interactive web site.

Networking with national and state organizations to educate their members about new ANF data and analysis was a primary dissemination strategy. The fourth section of the paper discusses how ANF prioritized organizations with which to network. It also discusses the challenges of building both national and state networks while maintaining the Urban Institute's reputation for objectivity, the effectiveness of various mechanisms used to activate the networks, and the ability to integrate these new national and state contacts within the larger Urban Institute public affairs function.

ANF approached the media as a means to an end—educating key stakeholders—rather than an end in itself. News reflects public will; it rarely creates it. The fifth section discusses

ANF's evolving media strategy. It emphasizes ANF's "commentator strategy," an effort to roll the networking strategy into the media strategy to complement both.

Finally, this report assesses the impact ANF had on policy. Measuring the impact of research on policy is difficult. Just as Yeats asked "who can tell the dancer from the dance," ANF found that it is frequently difficult to tell what role the data and research played apart from the individuals and organizations that used the data.

The following sections describe how the dissemination strategy was implemented. While the analysis describes different aspects of the strategy individually, the strategy was designed so the pieces reinforce each other. The dissemination program was also conceived as a program that would evolve in relationship to external and internal factors.

A dissemination strategy reflects choices. ANF's choices were based on the use of internal resources—money and staff capacity—as well as external considerations—events and stakeholder capacity. The report will describe these choices, why ANF made them, and their ramifications.

Dissemination Goals, Objectives, and Strategy

The 1998 ANF Dissemination Plan established the goal of the dissemination effort as integrating ANF research and data resources into the policymaking process at the state and federal level. The plan outlined three objectives for reaching this goal.

- Establish ANF data and analyses as credible by all sides of the policy debate.
- Reach a broad range of national and state stakeholders.
- Incorporate ANF data and research into state and federal policymaking activities.

To achieve all three of these objectives, a prerequisite was that stakeholders had to know what ANF underscored—to recognize the ANF brand.

Building Awareness of the ANF Brand

What is *Assessing the New Federalism*? The name of the project does not clearly define what topics ANF covers. The name refers to the relative balance of power between state governments and the federal government: for example, welfare reform clearly increased the power of the states to make policy on cash assistance and other parts of the safety net. But this concern with the balance of state and federal policy rather than the actual issues addressed by ANF—like health care, welfare, employment, or child care—was potentially confusing to many stakeholders, making it more challenging to develop quick name recognition.

In addition to the challenge of building awareness of *Assessing the New Federalism*, the dissemination strategy needed to consider how to identify ANF within the larger Urban Institute brand. The Urban Institute's reputation for serious, objective research enhanced the project's ability to promote its credibility. At the same time, ANF wanted to create its own identity as the go-to source for information on the changing social safety net.

ANF resolved this paradox by segmenting its brand-building efforts. ANF emphasized the ANF brand with intensive users of ANF data and research, policymakers and other stakeholders, so they would recognize and access the project's materials. For more general audiences, such as the media, the project took advantage of the more widely known Urban Institute brand. An analysis of press clippings shows that the media stories generally attributed ANF research to the Urban Institute, not to ANF. Stakeholders, however, knew to contact ANF directly for research and data on the changing safety net.

After an initial kick-off event, ANF sought to build its brand by issuing a press release to accompany each publication. This was labor intensive, but it served to identify and summarize

the key issues in each report. Followup with reporters and key stakeholder organizations enabled ANF staff to introduce the project and identify issues in which the stakeholders were interested.

During the first few years of the project, ANF research papers focused on the potential impacts of welfare reform. This included the implications for states—both pro and con—of making different choices in implementing various welfare policies. The creation of the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) in 1997 was explored in similar fashion. The research also tracked policy change and investigated diverse fiscal issues. The dissemination effort sought to influence stakeholders’ policy choices.

A Reputation for Objectivity

The survey of ANF stakeholders (see appendix A for more details on the survey) indicates that ANF efforts to establish a reputation as an unbiased source of data and analysis had mixed success. To test end-user attitudes about ANF bias, the survey asked respondents about the perceived partisanship and objectivity of ANF research. Fifty-four percent of those sampled considered ANF as somewhat (50 percent) or very (4 percent) liberal. Forty-three percent viewed ANF as nonpartisan.

Further investigation indicated that ANF bias was, largely, in the eye of the beholder. Those who considered themselves liberal were more likely to see ANF as liberal (67 percent), while those who considered themselves conservative were more likely to see ANF as conservative (57 percent). The majority of those who were nonpartisan considered ANF nonpartisan (51 percent). In other words, stakeholders who had an ideological bias were more likely to see an ideological bias in ANF. Overall, 60 percent of stakeholders were very satisfied with the objectivity of ANF publications.

The Dissemination Strategy Evolves

The ANF dissemination strategy began changing in 1999 as a result of several factors.

- **The National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF) data refocused ANF researchers.** NSAF provided state-level analysis and an exclusive window for research on low-income families and social programs. The data enabled ANF researchers to look at program participation and recipient characteristics in crosscutting ways.
- **Use of online communications was growing.** Access to e-mail and web sites was becoming ubiquitous. A digital divide put some ANF stakeholders, especially state and local advocates, at a disadvantage. Many people relied upon slow, dial-up access.
- **Distribution of publications was becoming expensive and burdensome** (see below).
- **State-level stakeholders increasingly wanted information on policy options.**

As a result of these factors, ANF established two new objectives for its dissemination activities—building a network of stakeholders and encouraging use of ANF materials in the policymaking process. To implement this effort, ANF began several processes that evolved over several years.

- Reduce print publications and replace with electronic communications.
- Systematize and automate communications with the network.
- Leverage media outreach activities to engage stakeholders directly.
- Encourage public access to ANF data.
- Synthesize research to tell a bigger story about the impact of changes to the social safety net and keep the data fresh and timely.

Publications

ANF produced a broad range of publications. Research from the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP), commissioned by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, made it clear that key state-level stakeholders—advocates and elected officials—wanted brief, policy-relevant materials. Many state legislatures are in session part-time, typically 4–6 months. Consequently, being a state legislator is a part-time job. Many state legislators with limited time must rely on committee staff or the legislative research office for substantive expertise. Their time was limited. In addition, term-limit legislation results in many new state legislators having little knowledge on social policy at just the time they are being asked to take more responsibility for developing health care and welfare programs. Finally, to be useful, state legislators need state-specific information.

Differing Needs among Stakeholders

For somewhat different reasons, advocates also wanted information distilled to brief, policy-relevant formats. Most state advocacy organizations do not have a full-time research staff. The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Kids Count network, conceived as research-based advocates, was one of the few with this capacity. Even with the Kids Count organizations, however, research needed to be distilled in ways that related to local policy debates and could be understood by local citizen leaders.

On the other hand, national audiences and executive branch audiences at the state and federal levels had different needs. National stakeholders had the capacity to use research with greater detail and needed the additional richness to be effective. Executive agency staff, whether at the federal or state level, were the most likely to be interested in the qualitative research

describing how different states implemented programs like the State Children’s Health Insurance Program, applications for child care, or work rules governing cash assistance.

The following examples illustrate how ANF policy briefs were used to educate policymakers and support policy change.

- In December 1999, ANF released the policy brief “Most Uninsured Children Are in Families Served by Government Programs” (Kenney, Haley, and Ullman 1999). As a result of outreach to domestic policy staff, the Clinton administration used ANF research to justify changing the privacy rules of the School Lunch Program in early 2000. The changes permitted administrators to share the names of children participating in the School Lunch Program with administrators of the Medicaid and SCHIP programs. This greatly improved outreach efforts.
- After a staff briefing on ANF research in June 2002, Senator Kent Conrad introduced an amendment to give states the option of exempting welfare recipients caring for disabled family members from work requirements. Passed unanimously by the Senate Finance Committee, Conrad’s proposal relied upon a special run of NSAF data by ANF that documented the difficulty families face combining work and care for a disabled relative.
- The administrator of the Child Care Bureau in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) sent each of the 50 state child care administrators a copy of our brief “Navigating the Child Care Subsidy System” (Adams, Snyder, and Sandfort 2002) with a cover letter explaining its value.
- HHS used analysis from “Three Years into SCHIP: What States Are and Are Not Spending” (Kenney, Ullman, and Weil 2000) to develop regulations for allocating

unspent funds in the program. Congress revised the allocation formula to give states more time to expand their SCHIP programs without losing federal funding.

Researchers also had the capacity to use more detailed data and analysis. The research audience included think tanks as well as university faculty.

Five Types of Publications

ANF developed five regular types of publications to meet the information needs of its various audiences. (In addition to the publications described below, ANF produced two books. For more on these, see below.)

Policy briefs popularized a new approach of relating research to policy in a few quick, readable pages. Policy briefs focused on a specific, policy-relevant issue. These 3,500 word documents were designed to be read in less than 30 minutes. They used simple statistical tools, emphasizing charts and graphics rather than tables. The statistical concepts were generally limited to simple correlations. Combining brevity and a narrow focus also enabled policy briefs to be timelier. As a result, the questions addressed by the policy briefs related closely to the questions advocates and policymakers ask.

ANF issued its first policy brief in January 1997. There were two series of ANF briefs. The “B” series of briefs analyzed data from the National Survey of America’s Families. The “A” series analyzed other data sources. Early titles in this series discussed the potential impact of welfare reform on policy.

While the Urban Institute and others had used policy briefs previously, ANF adopted the approach as a standard vehicle for presenting data to both national and state audiences and became widely identified with distilling intricate research into such a readable format.

Occasional papers were more detailed, traditional research reports. They probed topics more deeply, required more complex analysis of the data, or reported on qualitative data. Most papers that described how the safety net adapted to welfare reform, based on site visits to the 13 focal states, were published as occasional papers. The first occasional paper was issued in July 1997.

Two rounds of **state reports** were issued. The first round of state reports summarized the results of site visits to each of the 13 focal states by ANF researchers. These papers described the social safety net in each state on the eve of welfare reform. ANF prepared four reports for each state: two separate occasional paper-length documents for health programs and social service programs and two policy brief-length summaries. This was clearly overkill. ANF researchers reported that people interviewed for the second round of state reports told them that these papers were of primary interest to researchers, including university classes. A lack of timeliness contributed to this result. Since the first round of state reports focused on the structure of the safety net before welfare reform, the reports were primarily of historical interest by the time they were published.

In the second round of site visits, ANF produced two more focused reports, *Recent Changes in Health Policy for Low-Income People* and *Recent Changes in Welfare and Work, Child Care, and Child Welfare Systems*. While these papers provided useful background, they did not seem to have a direct impact on policy.

Discussion papers had lower production values (unlike other publications, discussion papers were not typeset). Discussion papers generally involved more experimental methodologies or evaluated our own work. While discussion papers were posted on the web site and promoted in the ANF e-newsletter, few were printed.

ANF issued three sets of *Snapshots of America's Families*. Snapshots were designed to announce the first findings from each round of the National Survey of America's Families in a timely fashion. Snapshots looked at a broad range of topics, including health insurance coverage, poverty and work, family structure, family environment, and child well-being. Snapshots were descriptive; they did not include any statistical analysis of the data.

In addition to these publications, ANF issued two books by ANF senior researchers that synthesized their work to tell a bigger story. *Welfare Reform: The Next Act* (2002) was timed to provide perspective for the anticipated welfare reauthorization debates. *Federalism and Health Policy* (2003) synthesized a large body of research on health insurance coverage, Medicaid, the State Children's Health Insurance Program, the 1996 Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and the health care safety net, but it was not tied to a specific legislative agenda. Conferences were held in conjunction with the release of both books. These books provided a useful summary of ANF research. Within the ANF structure, there may have been no other way to compile this material.

Published by Urban Institute Press, both books sold well by academic press standards. *Welfare Reform: the Next Act*, sold over 4,500 copies; *Federalism and Health Policy* sold over 1,500 copies.

Did ANF Publications Find Their Audience?

All ANF materials demanded a sophisticated reader. The Flesch Reading Ease score, a tool for estimating the readability of a document included in Microsoft Word (see appendix A for more information), indicated that both occasional papers and policy briefs were more difficult to read than "standard writing." Except one occasional paper, all ANF reports analyzed had a Flesch-

Kincaid Grade Level score, also included in Microsoft Word, of 12.0. In other words, they were written at the level of someone with at least a 12th grade education.

Together, these publications met the needs of the broad range of ANF stakeholders. Respondents to the end user survey found the policy briefs most useful. Sixty-eight percent rated policy briefs very useful, compared with 55 percent for occasional papers and 39 percent for Snapshots.

Looking at the survey across stakeholder groups indicated some interesting differences by constituency. Advocates, service providers, and association executives were more likely to find policy briefs very useful in their work than other stakeholders. Researchers were much less likely to find policy briefs very useful. In contrast, stakeholders affiliated with universities were much more likely to find occasional papers very useful.

Stakeholders generally found the first two rounds of Snapshots less useful than other ANF publications. Several factors may account for this. Because Snapshots covered so many topics, it was difficult to extract clear, meaningful themes to describe the findings. With no analysis, Snapshots tended to have a short shelf life. While they painted a picture of American families, Snapshots did not relate directly to social policy. Finally, Snapshots failed to develop a following because they were issued infrequently.

The end-user survey was taken before the release of the third round of Snapshots. The third round of Snapshots was shorter and more topical. This may have made them more useful to stakeholders. It also demonstrates how ANF adapted its strategy in response to feedback and the changing environment.

Timelines in the Policy versus Research Worlds

One of the greatest complaints about ANF publications was their timeliness. As one critic stated, “Researchers use two-year-old data to answer last year’s question.” This comment may reflect politics as much as substance, but it does articulate a challenge ANF faced in providing data to policymakers. Preparing data from the National Survey of America’s Families for analysis, for instance, took about nine months. Add the time it takes to crunch the data, write the results, and produce the document, and the delay from data collection to production was about 18 months. ANF researchers worked hard to shorten the time it took to bring data and analysis to market. ANF emphasized presenting data and analysis in the policy brief format at least in part to be timelier.

Ultimately, however, research did not follow a policy calendar. It came out when it was ready. ANF found it very difficult to maintain a release schedule. Research was routinely delayed. As a result, ANF did not begin to schedule material for release until reports entered the production process. At that point, staff developed the release strategy. This included determining the significance of the findings, whether there was an external event around which to schedule the release, whether more than one report could be released at the same time to tell a bigger story, and whether the report warranted a formal release to the ANF network.

The ANF end-user survey (see appendix A) found that 62 percent of the respondents were very satisfied with the timeliness of ANF publications. University respondents were more likely to consider ANF research timely, while government respondents were less likely to see ANF research as timely; 44 percent were very satisfied with the timeliness of ANF publications.

As mentioned above, ANF adopted several strategies to make the research timelier. First, ANF connected the release of research to external events whenever possible. For instance, ANF

timed the release of the first policy brief based on the NSAF for the third anniversary of the passage of welfare reform legislation. This brief provided the first look at the characteristics of families that left welfare. It was quickly followed by briefs looking at welfare leavers' engagement in work and participation in the Food Stamp program. These briefs were very influential. In February 2000, the White House cited the Urban Institute and NSAF data on car ownership to support changing the asset limits for the Food Stamp program to make it easier for low-income people to own a car and receive food stamps.

Second, ANF data provided a greater resource when it had a longer shelf life. ANF data on child welfare provides a good example. As child welfare agencies expanded their use of kinship caregivers (versus unrelated foster parents), ANF was the only data source to describe the frequency of kinship care giving, who the kinship caregivers were, and how the support they received compared to the support unrelated foster care givers received. This research maintained its relevance throughout the ANF project.

Third, timeliness was less of a factor where ANF built a body of knowledge on a topic. Work on the State Children's Health Insurance Program provides a good example. Researchers used NSAF data to understand changes in coverage and they used data from the site visits to the 13 focal states to understand the choices states made to implement the program. In September 2000, HHS used analysis in "Three Years into SCHIP: What States Are and Are Not Spending" (Kenney et al. 2000) to develop regulations for allocating unspent funds in the program. Congress revised the allocation formula to give states more time to expand their SCHIP programs without losing federal funding. In January 2001, New Jersey's successful petition for a Section 1115 waiver to provide family coverage under SCHIP for parents and pregnant women with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level relied heavily on the ANF brief

“Who Are the Adult Uninsured?” (Holahan and Brennan 2000). In October 2003, the Michigan State Legislature invited ANF author Ian Hill to discuss the State Children’s Health Insurance Program. The new research built on previous work and extended understanding of policy choices and the impact.

Fourth, ANF sought to keep the research relevant by periodically synthesizing findings from several reports. This took two forms. ANF briefs such as “Five Things Everyone Should Know about SCHIP” (Dubay, Hill, and Kenney 2002). summarized and interpreted what ANF knew on a topic in the context of the current policy debates. In March 2002, ANF released *Welfare Reform: The Next Act* to recap ANF research relevant to TANF reauthorization. To release the book, ANF organized a conference held at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The agenda reflected ANF’s focus on statewide implementation of welfare reform; it gave representatives of state and local organizations the opportunity to comment on the national research findings from ANF before a national audience. The conference attracted about 250 people from the DC policy community—congressional staff; government agency analysts; representatives of national advocacy, service, and professional organizations; and researchers. In addition to the conference, ANF distributed the book to key members of Congress and stakeholders around the country. That the book was timely, despite the use of “old” data, was demonstrated by good press coverage, including a summary of the introduction in the Council of State Governments magazine, *Spectrum*.

Electronic Communications

Initially ANF printed about 12,000 copies of each brief and paper, mailing every piece to our list of about 9,000 people via bulk mail. This proved expensive and wasteful. Using bulk mail delayed delivery of the publications. The vast quantities of material besieged even our most

interested audience. Shifting from print to e-mail—with links to the ANF/UI web site—contributed significantly to resolving this problem.

ANF began a quarterly newsletter in 1998 but stopped after eight issues. The newsletter went to everyone on our mailing list and provided brief updates on ANF research to people not receiving hard copies of the publications. The print newsletter was abandoned because it did not develop a following. ANF heard nothing from recipients—either pro or con—about the newsletter or its content. Rather than publish its own newsletter, ANF decided to leverage connections with stakeholder organizations to place materials in their publications. This approach enhanced the credibility of the materials, avoided duplicating the wheel, forged closer connections with stakeholders, and was less costly and labor intensive for ANF staff.

Hot Off the Press from ANF

During the late '90s, electronic communications were becoming more widespread. Just about everyone had e-mail, even if many people only used a dial-up connection.

To reduce cost, increase timeliness, and better segment the database, ANF surveyed our mailing list to see who wanted to receive notice of materials via e-mail and in what topics people were interested. People who did not respond to the survey were dropped from the list unless the UI center directors opted to keep them. This process reduced the mailing list to about 1,000 people (the quantity varied depending upon the topic) and print runs to about 2,000 copies.

Many people responding to the survey opted to receive notification about new reports via e-mail. In developing its e-newsletter, *Hot Off the Press from ANF (HOTP)*, ANF was one of the early adopters in the use of electronic communications to disseminate materials and drive the use of a web site.

HOTP operated on a few simple principles. HOTP highlighted new ANF research and activities. HOTP summarized the research in approximately 100 words so someone reading only the blurbs in the e-newsletter could get the major findings. ANF did not establish a regular timetable for issuing HOTP. Instead, it issued HOTP as new research was released. Regardless of the number of new publications from ANF, HOTP was never released more than once a week. To control its length, each issue of HOTP highlighted a maximum of three papers. HOTP included a headline for each highlighted publication at the top of the e-newsletter. A simple text layout without graphics made downloading easy for subscribers with slower Internet connections. ANF decided to subscribe people to the e-newsletter without asking them to opt-in. Whenever ANF researchers returned to conferences with participant lists or e-mails that included a lengthy list of recipients, these names were added to the e-newsletter list. Finally, ANF reached out to stakeholders to encourage them to highlight HOTP materials in communications with their networks.

The subscription list for *Hot Off the Press from ANF* began with nearly 3,800 names. After a year, subscribers had nearly doubled to 7,900. The second year saw an increase of 45 percent to 11,400. The third year, the list increased to just over 16,400, a 44 percent jump. Conversations with other national nonprofits indicate that this was one of the largest e-newsletter subscription lists in the social service field.

End users were very satisfied with HOTP.¹ Of those responding to the ANF end-user survey, 67 percent were very satisfied with the frequency and length of the e-newsletter. A full 70 percent were very satisfied with the job HOTP did summarizing the research.

¹ Response to the end-user survey was low. Out of about 16,000 people surveyed, ANF received just 538 responses, about 3.5 percent. This low response rate may be the result of adding people to the subscription list without their permission. Current best practice among e-mail list managers is to add new subscribers only when they request a subscription.

HOTP succeeded in its major objective—driving subscribers to the ANF web site. Even though web traffic rose overall from the late 1990s onward, ANF user sessions increased dramatically from 16,283 in August 1999, the month before HOTP was launched, to 26,480 in August 2000. By August 2001, the figure was 43,890. Analysis of WebTrends reports confirms that web site use spiked after sending out HOTP. Unfortunately, comparative data on web site use among similar organizations do not exist.

The increased use of the web site generally tracked growth in the number of HOTP subscribers. Other factors affecting use of the web site included the number of papers published in the month (and, thus, the number of issues of HOTP), the relevance of the research to policy topics in the news, and time of the year (the web site received fewer visitors in the summer).

ANF worked with a listserv host to distribute HOTP. At the time, the host offered no design services for HOTP. It also offered very few useable statistical measures of HOTP. There are now many more options available for designing e-newsletters. The design and list services also provide a much larger range of statistical services. These services allow users to track the number of bad addresses, the number of e-mails opened, and the number of click-throughs from the e-newsletter to a link it includes. With these measures, ANF would have been much more successful at gauging the value and use of the e-newsletter to subscribers.

Database Use on the Web

ANF operated its own web site within the larger Urban Institute web site. Publications were organized by topic on the ANF web site. Each report was summarized using the description from *Hot Off the Press from ANF*. By not posting press releases on the web site, ANF missed an opportunity to use the releases as a summary of the papers.

Each piece posted on the web site had to be placed individually into each category. New reports were added to the top of the list. This made old reports harder to find.

While access to the publications was based on a static web site architecture, ANF was a leader in developing an interactive capacity for the use of data resources. The Welfare Rules Database, State Database, NSAF Public Use Files, and, later, the NSAF files on SDA all let web site visitors manipulate the data to do their own research.

State Database

The state database, started early in the project, assembled publicly available data from a variety of sources in one place. Each of the 600 variables in the database included values for all 50 states over multiple years. Users could view data online, but they had to download the data to analyze it.

ANF discontinued the state database because it was so time-consuming and expensive to maintain. Researchers needed to monitor the release of all the variables, collect them from the original sources, program them into the database, and check the upload for accuracy. ANF did not have funds allocated for this work, and it conflicted with researchers' higher-priority work of analyzing NSAF and state site visit data. The project replaced the state database with links to the original sources of the data on federal and other web sites.

Welfare Rules Database

The Welfare Rules Database (WRD) is a comprehensive, longitudinal, searchable resource for comparing cash assistance for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. It tracks changes in state cash assistance policy across time (1996 through 2003). The WRD provides a source of detailed

information about states' TANF policies that generally goes beyond the level of detail of the plans states submit to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

As with the State Database, maintaining the WRD was very time-consuming. Collection of the first round of data was funded out of the ANF grant. The federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) funded the second two rounds of data gathering. ANF may have found outside support for the WRD, but not the State Database, because the WRD provided a resource available nowhere else that a wide variety of stakeholders found useful.

National Survey of America's Families

The cornerstone of the ANF project was the National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), a survey of the economic, health, and social characteristics of children, adults under the age of 65, and their families. A related discussion paper, "Lessons Learned from the National Survey of America's Families" (Triplett and Wherry 2006), offers insights on designing a public survey to reach a broad low-income group. ANF made the NSAF public use data files available on the web site. The NSAF enables researchers to connect participation in a wide variety of public assistance programs to family structure, work, and well-being. For the 13 states for which the NSAF provides representative data, there may be no substitute for the NSAF. ANF felt that the project's commitment to empowering state stakeholders to develop policy based on the latest data and making the NSAF available in a consumer-friendly format would enhance research.

Internal ANF researchers began to use the NSAF data six to nine months after its collection; the public use data files became available about two years after collection. ANF held off making the data available to the public until later for two reasons. First, in using the data, ANF researchers identified and corrected problems with the data. This increased the accuracy of the public use files. Second, NSAF survey staff did not have the resources to support the needs

of ANF researchers and to vet the public use files simultaneously. By giving first priority to intensive support for internal researchers, the project made the ANF research as timely as possible.

As originally posted, use of the public files required knowledge of statistical software such as SAS or SPSS. Prospective users had to register on the ANF web site and sign an agreement to guarantee the confidentiality of the respondents. ANF did not have resources to provide technical assistance to support use of the public use files, though the project did provide a modest level of assistance to those who called.

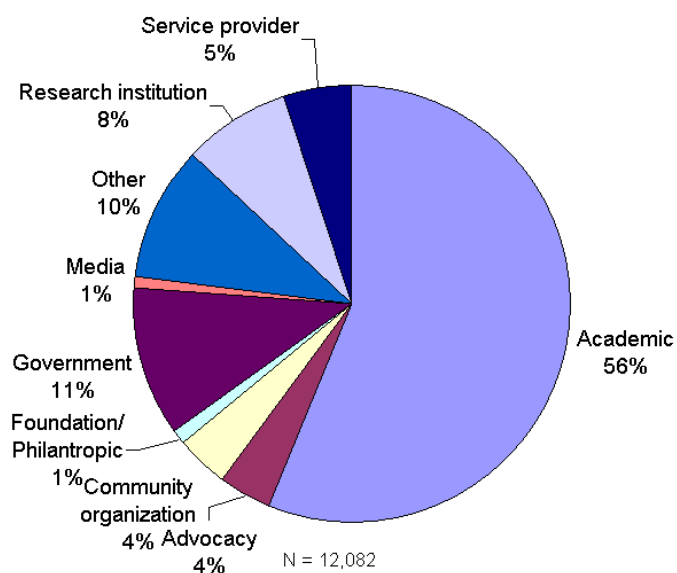
The project's first effort to make the NSAF data easier to use and, thus, accessible to a broader range of researchers, was to develop an online tool, the CrossTabMaker. The CrossTabMaker's limited functions and the lack of high-speed Internet connections for many end users at this time made use of the CrossTabMaker frustrating.

The second effort to make the NSAF data widely available was based on the Survey Documentation and Analysis (SDA) software developed by the Computer-assisted Survey Methods Program (CSM) at the University of California, Berkeley. This effort was much more successful. First, this software permitted users to have access to virtually all the NSAF data. Second, high-speed Internet connections were much more widely available. Third, the SDA platform, public-source software available from one of the major online data repositories, made the NSAF use similar to other databases. Fourth, ANF undertook an effort to train stakeholders in how to use the data. Through grants from the California Endowment and the United Hospital Fund in New York, ANF held three trainings in California and one in New York City.

While much simpler to use than the original public use data files and more accessible than the CrossTabMaker, SDA still requires a sophisticated audience. At the state level, state

agencies, statewide advocacy organizations such as the Kids Count groups, and university-based researchers have this capacity. Registrants for ANF data reflect this reality. Of the nearly 12,100 people who registered to use any of the ANF data resources, 64 percent were either from academic or research institutions (figure 1). Another 11 percent worked for government. In other words, only one-quarter of the registered data users identified themselves as service providers, advocates, community, media, foundation, or other users. Further, this list of registrants does not identify those who actually succeeded in their research efforts.

Figure 1. ANF Data Resources Registrants by Organization Type



ANF found that with training, community-based staff could use the simplified SDA-based NSAF files. ANF first trained members of advocacy, association, government, and service providers in New York City. Since registration for the data did not spike after the session, ANF staff concluded that the data available from the NSAF were not a compelling resource.

Initial training in California shed light on why. Californians explained that, to be useful, they needed the data broken down by regions within the state. To meet this need, ANF staff combined the three rounds of NSAF data into a single data file. This created sample sizes

sufficiently robust to create representative regional data sets. Based on this additional work, ANF delivered trainings in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Los Angeles. Sixty people attended. ANF immediately saw a spike in registration and received several calls from those who had been trained requesting clarification on how to use the SDA. This experience indicated that with sufficient training and the availability of sub-state level data, the SDA-based NSAF files could provide a useful resource to a broader stakeholder audience.

Except in California and New York, ANF did not have funding to provide training on use of the SDA-based NSAF (or any of the other databases). ANF sought funding for training from foundations in each of the 13 states for which ANF had collected representative NSAF samples. ANF coordinated this fundraising with organizations in the states that had become part of the dissemination network (see below). In some cases, ANF developed joint proposals with these organizations. With the exception of the California Endowment and United Hospital Fund in New York City, ANF could not raise the funding to deliver training. The state-based foundations either did not make grants in the size ANF required or were not interested in supporting this type of work.

ANF continues to receive about 40 new registrants for the data resources each month. Much of this appears driven by a popular undergraduate sociology textbook, *Hands-On Sociology*.² The textbook uses the SDA-based NSAF as a teaching tool.

² William Feigelman and Yih-Jin Young, *Hands-On Sociology*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2005). This book uses the NSAF online analysis system—both at this site and other sites—to teach beginning sociology students data analysis. *Hands-On Sociology* won the 2005 Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research Prize Competition for Best Instructional Module or Instructional Innovation in the Social Sciences and Social Science History.

Networking

If ANF research and data were the vehicles that carried ANF dissemination efforts forward, the network of organizations with which the project worked provided the fuel. This section looks at how ANF built a network that carried the research to key constituencies and encouraged them to use ANF materials in policymaking activities.

ANF faced several challenges in creating a network for its data and research. The Urban Institute had various distribution lists, but UI did not have an institutional network of organizations on which it relied to disseminate its work. Individual Urban Institute researchers also had networks of contacts. The lists included policymakers and other stakeholders to the extent that the researcher followed the policy process and had developed contacts with executive agencies, advocates, professional associations, and congressional offices.

ANF took the first steps to integrate these lists and code them by interest. First, ANF used contact management software (Act!) to create a network of approximately 3,000 key contacts. Contacts were added to Act! if they were considered capable of mobilizing others or were directly involved in policymaking. This database of contacts allowed ANF and the UI public affairs department to share contents of contacts with individuals, track mailings to groups of contacts, and create mailing lists by issue interest, type of organization, and state. This software enabled ANF to operate a large, diverse, far-flung network very efficiently.

Urban Institute contacts generally reflected the national policy focus of the Institute. That is, the contacts were generally Washington, D.C.-based. Statewide contacts were frequently academics rather than state policymakers and other state stakeholders. Given ANF's focus on state policymakers, building a network of state contacts was a primary objective.

Building State Networks

ANF decided to build a statewide network in each of the 13 focal states the project studied. Each state faced different policy challenges so staff needed input from the states to identify local issues. Local stakeholders were also needed to translate the data and research into the terms of the local debates. ANF was not in a position to determine which states might be most receptive to ANF data and research. Indeed, all states leveraged ANF materials on different policy issues. Finally, ANF funders wanted materials available to stakeholders in all the states.

To integrate ANF data and research into the national policy debates as well as to identify state stakeholders, staff targeted national organizations with the following characteristics:

- The organization was the largest or second-largest organization representing the constituency. Given ANF's limited resources, the decision was made to focus on large organizations that had the largest national policy footprint.
- The organization had an effective structure at the state level. This approach allowed ANF to take advantage of existing networks rather than building its own network.
- The organization had multiple means of communicating with its members, including member magazines, legislative networks, and conferences at which ANF researchers could speak.

Appendix B provides a list of national organizations targeted by ANF.

Devolution Initiative

Besides focusing on national organizations, ANF participated in two networks dedicated to following the impact of welfare reform on the safety net.

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation formed its Devolution Initiative around a series of grants. While the grants were not initially conceived as a unit, they all dealt with aspects of the changing

safety-net system. This network provided access to many organizations that ANF had targeted as top priority.

As the largest Devolution Initiative grantee, ANF was chosen to chair its Disseminators Network. This provided an excellent opportunity for ANF to work with the members of the Devolution Initiative to disseminate ANF research and data.

ANF also had access through its funders to the Kids Count network. Funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Kids Count represents statewide research-based advocates in all 50 states. Kids Count provided ANF with an instant network in the 13 focal states as well as the remaining states. The National Association of Child Advocates (now Voices for America's Children), a Devolution Initiative grantee, also provided national coordination and staffing for most of the Kids Count grantees.

Outreach Efforts

ANF sought to work with organizations on several levels. ANF encouraged organizations' government affairs offices to incorporate ANF research and data into their work. Since all these organizations had specific congressional agendas, they only used ANF data and research where it supported that position. For instance, the National Urban League used NSAF data in its June 2002 report *Negative Effects of TANF on College Enrollment*. The National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies used data from *Who's Caring for Our Youngest Children* (Ehrle, Adams, and Tout 2001) to launch its "Better Baby Care" campaign in February 2001. The use of contact management software made it possible to target appropriate information to each organization.

ANF contacted editors of publications at national organizations to encourage placement of stories based on ANF research. Where possible, ANF researched editorial calendars to

identify upcoming stories on which ANF research and data might be relevant. Magazines such as *Child Welfare* and *Policy and Practice* regularly published articles by ANF researchers. Since ANF staff generally devoted considerable time to the stories, this effort was labor intensive. It was not unusual for an article to take six to nine months from pitch to publication. This required that stories not be focused on time-sensitive topics.

Although ANF sought to have researchers participate in conferences sponsored by national organizations, this effort proved very time consuming. Negotiating with conference program organizers to develop workshops required much back-and-forth. Once a session was negotiated, ANF researchers were often hesitant to participate given their other responsibilities. Finally, sessions often were poorly attended. ANF determined that this was not an effective way to communicate about research and data.

Finally, ANF worked with national organizations to communicate directly to their members and affiliates. Most organizations had a specific policy agenda and a research department upon which they relied to develop materials to support that agenda. ANF data or research would be referenced or distributed if it supported that agenda or was available nowhere else. Examples include the research on welfare leavers, child care arrangements, children's health insurance coverage, changes in family structure, immigrant demographics and program participation, and child support enforcement.

State Networks

Availability of state data fueled the effort to develop statewide networks. State policymakers generally wanted state-level data to make policy.

ANF established two levels of state networks. The first level included the 13 focal states. ANF could provide these states with both quantitative data from the NSAF and qualitative data

from the site visits. This data was of uneven value at the state level. In states like California and New York, stakeholders wanted city, county, or regional data and/or possessed local capabilities to generate the data. In Washington State, a local, influential, university-based child research organization criticized ANF research as inadequate and not focused on local issues.

In other states, ANF data and research had much more influence. This group included states with less developed data gathering and research capacity, such as Alabama and Mississippi. For instance, Alabama used health data based on NSAF as the official data for the state. But the group also included states with considerable capacity. Former Republican Massachusetts Governor Paul Celucci made NSAF one of the few outside sources of data on health insurance coverage to appear on the state's official web site. And, in January 2001, New Jersey relied heavily on the ANF brief "Who Are the Adult Uninsured?" (Holahan and Brennan 2000) to petition for a Section 1115 waiver to provide family coverage under SCHIP for parents and pregnant women with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

There is some evidence that these networking activities were successful. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation commissioned the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) to analyze the dissemination efforts within the devolution initiative. HFRP's survey of state policymakers found that the percentage responding that they "occasionally" or "frequently" used Urban Institute information increased from 35 percent in 1998 to 63 percent in 1999. Of the 20 organizations included in the survey, the Urban Institute was ranked third behind the National Conference of State Legislators and the Children's Defense Fund, but ahead of the National Governors Association, CLASP, and the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities. Urban Institute research was valued because it was seen as unbiased and nonpartisan.

The analysis includes two other interesting findings. First, 72 percent of Devolution Initiative grantees link to the Urban Institute web site. In addition, the Urban Institute ranked first in the extent to which Devolution grantees said that they have increased their collaboration with an organization. This provides some independent evidence that ANF succeeded in expanding the Urban Institute's relationships with national and state policy audiences.

Speaking Engagements and Briefings

ANF's dissemination strategy originally eschewed organizing its own conferences for speaking at key stakeholder organizations meetings. This decision was made for two reasons. First, ANF staff reasoned that attending stakeholder meetings provided the best opportunity to communicate directly with key stakeholders. Second, ANF staff felt that speaking at stakeholder meetings was less labor intensive for ANF staff than organizing conferences.

The strategy did not work well. First, arranging speaking engagements required a significant amount of time. Second, the sessions organized were generally workshops. Attendance at workshops often did not justify the up-front investment in organizing the meeting and the staff time for the researcher. Third, ANF researchers often accepted these speaking engagements reluctantly because they took time away from completing the research itself. Finally, many researchers, especially more junior researchers, prefer speaking to their academic peers rather than to policymakers, practitioners, and advocates.

ANF staff changed the approach to speaking engagements as a result of this experience. First, staff greatly reduced efforts to place ANF researchers as speakers. Second, staff was much more selective about accepting speaking engagements. Staff pushed to make sure that ANF speakers addressed plenary sessions or other large audiences.

Finally, ANF staff focused on arranging speaking engagements for the ANF director. To a lesser extent, ANF staff also brokered speaking opportunities for the center directors working on ANF. These senior researchers were more receptive to speaking to policy audiences.

The Urban Institute's First Tuesday series provided a good outlet for ANF research. On the first Tuesday of each month from October to June, the Urban Institute's public affairs department organizes a panel discussion highlighting the work of Urban Institute researchers. Accompanied by lunch, these sessions generally attract 100–150 people from the Washington, D.C., policy and media community.

ANF organized several of its own conferences to communicate a broad range of data in a policy context. The conferences took place in Washington, D.C., and had a national policy focus. The conferences sought to link several pieces of research together to tell a bigger story.

- In 1998, ANF partnered with the journal *Health Affairs* to sponsor a conference. *Health Affairs* took care of the logistics for this meeting, and ANF put the agenda together. The conference coincided with the publication of eight articles by ANF authors in the journal.
- On the fifth anniversary of welfare reform, in 2002, ANF organized a one-day conference to summarize what the project had learned. The conference coincided with publication of the book *Welfare Reform: The Next Act*. ANF researchers provided a national overview of the accumulated research on each topic. Panelists discussed these findings in the context of changes at the state level. About 200 people attended the meeting. By synthesizing the research and reinterpreting it in the context of a current policy debate, ANF kept the data and research timely and relevant.
- In August 2006, ANF marked the ten-year anniversary of welfare reform. The forum of high-level federal and state policymakers and researchers addressed accomplishments,

controversies, and next steps regarding welfare reform. Drawing on a decade of ANF research and state experiences, discussion also covered why many former welfare recipients are not advancing in the workforce.

ANF considered organizing conferences in each of the 13 focal states. ANF considered this tactic for several reasons. First, state conferences could provide an opportunity to showcase ANF data and research. Second, state conference could let ANF researchers “give back” to the stakeholders they interviewed during the site visits. Third, the state conferences could let ANF researchers speak directly to key stakeholders. Fourth, state conferences could build the stakeholder network in each state. Fifth, the state conferences provided an opportunity to make ANF data and research more timely and relevant to the state.

ANF held conferences in Massachusetts and New Jersey. In each of these situations, ANF chose a local partner that reflected ANF’s values of objective, research-based policy. In Massachusetts, ANF staff worked with the Health Reform Network. In New Jersey, ANF staff worked with the Association for the Children of New Jersey.

ANF relied on the local organization to take care of the logistics. ANF and the local organization worked together to develop the program. The sessions connected ANF research and data to the policy questions defined by the local partner. The Massachusetts program focused on health policy data. The New Jersey session focused on children’s health insurance and child welfare.

These sessions were very well received. They each attracted about 100 people representing state legislators, executive agencies, advocates, professional associations, and the media. The conference organizers were enthusiastic about the sessions and were able to use them to follow up on their legislative agendas.

Unfortunately, ANF was not able to set up similar sessions in other states. First, ANF found it difficult to find appropriate organizations in the state with which to partner. Second, ANF researchers were concerned that preparing for these conferences and attending them would require too much time.

Networking with Congress and the Federal Government

Assessing the New Federalism provided data to key members of Congress, executive agencies, and the administration through *Hot Off the Press from ANF* and mailing of hard copies. But ANF did not undertake an active effort to educate federal policymakers directly.

ANF made the strategic choice to focus on pushing the data and research to the states since a central tenet of the project was that states were now responsible for developing safety-net policies. To do so, states needed the data and analysis that ANF could provide. Also, ANF did not have the resources to implement a state and national strategy.

Despite this choice, ANF's presence in the federal debates was significant.

- In September 2003, Senator Bingaman's floor statement accompanying the introduction of the Children's Dental Health Improvement Act of 2003 cited *Does SCHIP Spell Better Dental Care for Children?* (Almeida, Hill, and Kenney 2001).
- Based on work in "Navigating the Child Care Subsidy System" (Adams et al. 2002), senators Christopher Dodd and Olympia Snowe inserted language to simplify the child care subsidy system in the mark up of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee child care bill in July 2002.
- The General Accounting Office's testimony to the Senate Finance Committee on TANF work supports in April 2002 cited several ANF research papers.

- Alan Weil, Sheila Zedlewski, and Elaine Sorenson each testified several times before Congress.

Media Relations

ANF initially implemented a media strategy designed to build awareness of the project. This included awareness of the broad range of issues that ANF covered, the objectivity of the research, the uniqueness of the data sources, and the ability of ANF researchers to understand the policy issues.

To achieve recognition of what the project covered, ANF staff initially issued a press release for each publication produced. The releases served as fact sheets for the publication. Writing releases for each piece also forced ANF staff to highlight the key findings and consider how to relate these findings to policy issues.

ANF developed a press list that included the major national publications and broadcast news outlets. ANF targeted the health reporter, social services reporter, and family reporter in these 25–30 news outlets. Where possible, staff also identified members of the editorial board covering social policy issues. Because broadcast media generally do not have reporters focused on specific beats, ANF identified assignment editors and others with an overall responsibility for determining what stories are covered.

In addition to these outlets, the national press list included the editors of the major publications of the organizations that ANF had targeted for networking purposes.

To keep the number of state-level reporters to a reasonable level, ANF focused on media outlets in the 13 focal states. ANF assumed that state-level reporters would have much less interest in the research if it did not have a local focus. In addition, ANF did not have the staff capacity to reach out to reporters in all 50 states.

In each state, ANF targeted the daily newspapers and Associated Press office. Contacts were also made in each city with a population above 200,000. The state capital was included regardless of whether its population exceeded 200,000. Except in the larger states, this generally limited the number of press contacts to 10 or 12. Staff reasoned that newspapers covering smaller markets would use the Associated Press story to cover state issues and that only the larger papers would have their own reporters to cover stories involving social policy issues.

To assist with media relations in the focal states, ANF issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a communications agency. The RFP called for the agency to develop contacts with the targeted reporters in the 13 states, release ANF research to them, identify stories on which local reporters were working where ANF data and research was relevant, and introduce editorial writers to ANF.

ANF senior staff and the Urban Institute public affairs office reviewed proposals and made a final decision. The relationship did not work out. First, the agency wanted to assist the project to gain access to national reporters and pundits rather than state-level journalists. Second, the agency did not have sufficient capacity to develop a state-level network of journalists and maintain these relationships on behalf of ANF. Within a year, ANF determined that the agency was not providing sufficient value and ended the engagement.

We learned that retaining an agency with sufficient capacity and an established network probably required a greater financial commitment than ANF could make. ANF also determined that an increased use of electronic communications could provide a viable, cost-effective substitute for a public relation agency's support.

ANF did not focus on local television. Television requires visuals. Unless ANF could provide television reporters with someone on camera locally or make referrals to local families, staff did not believe that local television stations would be interested in the story.

A strategy to accomplish the most with available resources did succeed. ANF staff followed up with reporters. These contacts covered several pieces of research that the reporter would have received. Staff used these contacts to identify the issues on which the reporter worked as well as future stories on which the reporter planned to work. These data were entered into the contact database the project operated and used in future contacts with the reporters. As a result, reporter recognition of ANF grew. Reporters understood what ANF covered. They felt comfortable using ANF materials. They began to call ANF when they wanted data or research. They also contacted ANF to speak with researchers regarding the links between research and policy.

To avoid alienating reporters with information overload, ANF prioritized its reports. All reports received mention in *Hot Off the Press from ANF*. Reporters were added to the list of subscribers to HOTP. ANF worked with organizations in the Kids Count network to identify reporters beyond the list of priority reporters who should be added to the listserv. Press releases were developed for reports judged more newsworthy.

Commentator Strategy

In addition to focusing media outreach on selected research reports, ANF developed what was termed a “commentator strategy.” The idea was simple. Reporters want controversy. They want to understand the implications of the research for local policy. Working with commentators enabled ANF to offer a reporter a contact that could discuss the policy implications of the

research and what the data meant in terms of real people. This made it easier for ANF to maintain its objectivity and for researchers to focus on the research findings.

The strategy had other benefits. It involved stakeholders in dissemination and gave them a vested interest in the research. It created an incentive for stakeholders to become familiar with the research. Since ANF did the legwork of contacting reporters, it was easy for “commentators” to participate. If commentators knew that they might receive a call from a reporter on ANF research, they were more likely to take the time to read the report. Once they read the report, they were more likely to use it in other ways.

To recruit commentators, ANF used the contact management software to identify stakeholders at national and state organizations that might be interested in the topic of the upcoming report. ANF staff would contact them via e-mail about a month before the report’s release. The initial e-mail described the topic of the report and hinted at the direction of the findings, but it did not include any specific data. Recipients of the e-mail were required to respond if they wanted to be part of the release effort. The e-mail also stipulated that responding meant that they agreed to make themselves available to speak with reporters about the implications of the research for their state. In practice, ANF did not exclude people who did not want to make themselves available to reporters. This was frequently the case with people working in national and state executive agencies. ANF organized a conference call where the authors of the report could speak directly to the commentator network. In the conference call, the researcher provided an overview of the paper, responded to questions, and helped commentators understand how the data related to their local policy environments.

The opt-in strategy had several benefits. It allowed stakeholders to determine when a particular report was timely and relevant for their local policy agenda. It enabled ANF to

understand the local policy implications of the research. This knowledge improved the ability of ANF staff to pitch stories to local reporters. Finally, the “commentator strategy” allowed ANF to create effective ad-hoc networks around specific pieces of research. This reduced the labor required to maintain a network.

The “commentator strategy” did require a culture shift among the stakeholders participating. Most commentators expected ANF researchers to interpret the data for them. Commentators were used to receiving national research from organizations with a policy agenda. In those cases, the national organization would tell the state organization how the data could be used to advocate on behalf of a specific policy option. ANF did not seek to guide the interpretation of the research in this way. ANF worked with state commentators to understand the data for their state and to think about it in the context of the policy situation in their state.

An analysis of press clippings indicates that the “commentator strategy” was successful. Of 693 articles mentioning ANF between January 1, 2001, and August 31, 2003, 260 quoted a total of 416 commentators. Advocates, service providers, and association representatives were quoted in 213 articles. Government representatives were quoted in 121 articles. The most popular topics for articles quoting commentators were child care, welfare and work, child welfare, and immigration.

Conclusion

The Urban Institute’s *Assessing the New Federalism* project was designed not just to document changes in the social safety net during a period of great change, but also to help national and state policymakers decide how to structure the safety net based on the best available data and research. Accomplishing this goal required ANF to implement a multifaceted dissemination program.

Just as the social safety net was undergoing great change, the rise of e-mail and the Internet was changing the way people communicated. This report describes how ANF responded to these changes. It shows that objective data has power and that policymakers from various political perspectives can share the same data to make policy. Finally, a few broad themes emerge that should prove helpful to others undertaking similar dissemination efforts.

Evaluation and Evolution

ANF viewed the communications strategy as an evolving program. This meant establishing new objectives, evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and tactics, analyzing changes in the environment, and identifying new opportunities.

ANF consistently evaluated its activities and, as needed, made changes and priority trade-offs to better reach the goals of the project. The project decided to deemphasize outreach to researchers, figuring that ANF researchers already communicated with this audience. The project also decided to give ANF researchers access to NSAF data before releasing it to the public. Finally, ANF decided that giving stakeholders access to research before its official release was a useful trade-off. Prerelease allowed ANF to maintain its objectivity by creating opportunities for all stakeholders to learn about the research before its release, understand it, interpret it independently, and comment on it to reporters.

This approach encouraged ANF to experiment with new tactics and technologies. With experimentation, ANF was willing to fail as well as to succeed. Tactics like the print newsletter and contracting with a public relations agency failed. Experiments such as the commentator strategy and e-newsletter proved successful.

During the course of the project, the issues surrounding welfare reform changed. As the number of people leaving the welfare rolls increased, the issues of concern to stakeholders

focused on the challenges faced by low-wage workers. Debate ensued over expanding the number of hours people on cash assistance should spend in work or work activities. ANF faced new challenges: how to adopt the framing of the research to the new priorities and how to use electronic communications in the dissemination efforts. Maintaining ANF's relevance in the context of new policy debates required the project to devote greater effort to syntheses of its research.

Effectiveness—Cost and Time

Time is money and, through evaluation, ANF continually sought ways to get the most out of both. Early on, ANF saw that electronic communications could be an effective way to reduce the cost of printing and mailing publications and put materials in the hands of stakeholders faster. ANF also implemented contact management software to make it easier for staff to maintain a network of diverse stakeholders interested in a variety of issues over a broad geographic area.

ANF learned that researcher time was a scarce resource. The first priority for researchers was analyzing the data and publishing it. This left little time for labor-intensive dissemination efforts such as speaking at conferences. ANF dissemination efforts focused on working with researchers to disseminate their reports.

Publishing books and organizing conferences to release them was costly in both time and money, yet critical for the development of the project. The books provided a focus for ANF researchers to synthesize the projects' body of work and analyze it in terms of the current policy debates. The conferences gave ANF a venue to control the story. Since the books and conferences had the support of the project's senior staff, they became priorities for the researchers. Such major events also drew the ANF staff together, with everyone playing a role.

Electronic Communications

The explosion in the capacity of ANF stakeholders to use technology greatly changed the project's dissemination activities. With increased e-mail, the e-newsletter became possible. Improvement in web site technologies made the establishment and use of interactive databases such as the Welfare Rules Database and NSAF public use files possible.

With the pace of change unabated, any dissemination effort must rapidly embrace new technology or get left behind. This includes upgrading the search capabilities of web sites and using techniques such as RSS feeds and podcasts.

ANF demonstrated that providing data online was a valuable resource for key stakeholders. Even for educated stakeholders, however, training was needed to use data resources. While ANF developed press releases for many papers, these releases were not posted on the web site. ANF missed an opportunity to use the releases as a concise summary of the research, as often the abstracts are too brief and the full reports can overload.

Timeliness and Relevance

Research often runs on a slower timetable than policymakers want. ANF responded to this problem in several ways. ANF methods for making data and research timely included timing releases to specific events, synthesizing a body of research to tell a bigger story, and providing opportunities for stakeholders to opt in to research release activities.

Separately, ANF identified the specific interests of stakeholders and reporters to make materials available to them directly. The dissemination efforts sought to focus the discussion on areas in which ANF had a unique perspective or data. These included child welfare, the well-being of children of immigrants, and the relative roles of public and employer-sponsored health insurance coverage.

The ANF project operated during a period of profound changes in the social safety net. The story of the social changes that took place in the late 1990s, and their continuing ramifications, is still being told. ANF became a major chronicler of how low-income families fared through those changes.

Changes in the ways people communicate, especially electronic communications, paralleled the policy changes. ANF's dissemination program leveraged the communications changes to help policymakers respond more quickly to policy changes—and we learned lessons in both communications and policy.

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Appendix A

Survey of ANF Stakeholders

ANF surveyed the 19,150 subscribers to our listserv four times between June 16 and July 16, 2003. About 3,310 were bad e-mail addresses. Three invitations to participate in the survey were sent to those who had not responded to the survey. We received 538 responses, a disappointing 3.4 percent response rate.

Several factors may have contributed to the low response rate. Some subscribers may have been on summer vacation. Most state legislatures were out of session. Since we subscribe people to the list before they have an opportunity to “opt in,” they may be less willing to answer a survey.

Nonetheless, when we analyzed the respondents, we found that they represented a cross-section of ANF stakeholders. To test this finding, we compared the proportion of people with various extensions on the listserv (e.g., .gov, .org, .edu) with the proportion of survey respondents from different end-user groups.

Respondents were asked to choose a category that best described their current position. The categories were government (elected, appointed, or civil service—101 responses, 20.2 percent), advocate (59 responses, 11.8 percent), service provider (28 responses, 5.6 percent), trade or professional association (20 responses, 4 percent), researcher (107 responses, 21.4 percent), reporter or media representative (10 responses, 2 percent), university faculty or student (104 responses, 20.8 percent), and other (71 responses, 14.2 percent). Those responding “other” were asked to specify their position.

The government (20 percent .gov extensions on the listserv and 21 percent of survey respondents) and university audiences (20 percent .edu extensions on the listserv and 23 percent

of respondents) lined up almost exactly. While 32 percent of survey respondents represented advocacy, service, or trade organizations, only 25 percent of the listserv had .org extensions. Researchers accounted for 22 percent of those responding to the survey, but there was no extension that matched this group. On the other hand, 34 percent of the e-mail addresses had .com or .net extensions (5 percent were AOL subscribers). These did not line up with specific end users. Researchers, advocates, service providers, and trade associations were likely to work for companies or use Internet services that had these extensions.

While respondents probably overrepresented heavy users of ANF material, they reflected the ANF subscriber base. The authors concluded that the sample was sufficiently large and representative to draw useful inferences on the ANF dissemination program.

Five stakeholder groups were created from this sample.

- Government stakeholders identified themselves as government.
- Advocates, service providers, and trade association representatives (ASA) were grouped together into one stakeholder group. The main work of these constituencies differed, but they all operated outside of government, had a self-interest in the outcome of the policy debate, and participated in policymaking.
- Researchers.
- University faculty and students.
- Media representatives.

Press Clipping Database

ANF created a press clipping database. The database tracked when and where each article appeared, who wrote it, the type of article, the issues covered by the article, the presence of a commentator in the article, the prominence of ANF, and how the Urban Institute was described.

The press clipping database ran from January 1, 2001, to August 31, 2003. It included 693 articles and 1,542 clippings. Articles referred to stories written by individual reporters. Press clippings referred to the number of times an article appeared. For example, we collected 27 press clippings from a single Associated Press article by Laura Meckler on children's health insurance. About 10 percent of all press clippings collected appeared on the first page (160).

We identified six types of stories.

- News stories reported on the events of the day. Articles focusing on ANF research were considered news stories. ANF generated 343 news stories.
- Feature stories put a human face on an issue. They frequently begin with a focus on a particular individual and then describe how that individual's situation is typical of what others face. ANF data and researcher comments were generally used to provide context to understand the broader issues. Ninety-five of the articles collected were feature stories.
- Factoids focused on a single fact or chart to tell a story. These articles rarely exceeded 50 words. Seventy-eight ANF articles were categorized as factoids or graphics.
- Editorials and syndicated columns represent the opinion of the newspaper in which they appear (editorial) or the opinion of a columnist (such as Marie Cocco). Editorials most commonly use a specific fact from an ANF report, although several focus on ANF research. ANF research generated 77 editorials or syndicated columns.

- Op-ed pieces are opinion pieces written by responsible parties (experts, government representatives, and advocates) not affiliated with the newspaper. These pieces generally appear only in one newspaper. ANF researchers wrote many, but not all, of the 61 op-ed pieces identified.
- Journal articles are scholarly pieces by ANF researchers that appear in peer-reviewed journals. ANF researchers placed 52 journal articles.

Press clippings were coded into eight categories by issue—welfare reform and cash assistance, health care (including Medicaid, SCHIP, and the safety net), child care, child welfare (child protective services and child well-being generally), immigrants, fiscal and budget issues, race and ethnicity, and devolution. An individual article could cover more than one issue. For instance, an article could discuss welfare reform and immigrants.

Ease of Reading Analyses

The research uses the Flesch Reading Ease score and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level score to test the readability of ANF publications. The Flesch Reading Ease score computes readability based on the average number of syllables per word and average number of words per sentence. It uses a 0–100 scale where higher scores indicate a document is easier to read. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level reports the score in the form of a grade level. Microsoft Word includes both of these tests.

WebTrends

The Urban Institute used WebTrends software to track use of our web site. WebTrends measured user sessions for the ANF web site monthly. WebTrends also included valuable information on access to individual publications and pages on the ANF web site.

Appendix B

National Networking Partners

- State government—These multi-issue organizations worked on all the issues ANF research covered.
 - National Governors Association
 - National Conference of State Legislatures
 - Center for Policy Alternatives
- Advocacy groups
 - Kids Count
 - Children’s Defense Fund
 - National Association of Child Advocates
 - Connect for Kids
 - National Immigration Law Center
 - Families USA
 - NAACP
 - National Urban League
 - National Council of La Raza
 - National Congress of American Indians
- Associations
 - Child Welfare League of America
 - National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
 - National Association of Community Action Agencies
 - National Association of Social Workers
 - American Public Welfare Association/American Public Human Services Association
 - American Public Health Association
 - American Health Care Association
 - American Hospital Association
 - National Association of Public Hospitals
 - Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs
 - Family Services Organizations Association

About the Author

Harold Leibovitz is director of strategic communications for the Foundation for Child Development in New York City. As director of communications for *Assessing the New Federalism*, he developed a strategy for communicating how people were affected by changes in the social safety net. This strategy included combining broad themes about these changes with state-specific information on the impact of state policy on the well-being of families.