

## Part 7: Organizing Your Advocacy Efforts

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This section is intended to provide you with information about ways to organize your advocacy efforts. There has been much reference throughout the toolkit to working with others to help you achieve your goals. Two of the best ways to collaborate with others are through coalition building and grassroots organizing. This chapter is broken down into two sections, one dealing with each of these organizing methods.

### Coalition Building

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Working in coalition with other organizations potentially strengthens your advocacy efforts. While some network members may already be involved in local, regional or statewide coalitions, some of you may not be. Many of the advocacy strategies discussed in this guide can be used by your individual organization alone, but may be more effective when used by a larger, broad-based coalition.

The following sections provide an overview on what a coalition is, why being part of a coalition is important, and how to form a coalition.

#### What is a Coalition?

Webster's dictionary defines a coalition as "a temporary alliance of distinct parties, persons, or states for joint action." A coalition is simply a group of organizations and individuals working together for a common purpose. Coalitions may have a "one issue" focus or a "multi-issue" focus. Most likely, many of you are involved in coalitions with a multi-issue focus, with many issues relating to child and family well being. Therefore, your coalition may focus on broader issues, including child welfare, child and maternal health, child poverty, child safety, etc.

## **Why Coalitions Are Important**

There is power in numbers! By joining forces with others with similar priorities, you are likely to get more accomplished than you would alone. Coalitions have several advantages including:

- Coalitions can achieve more widespread reach within a community than any single organization could attain.
- Coalitions generally have greater credibility than individual organizations alone due to the broader interest and breadth of coalitions. This reduces the suspicion of self-interest.
- Coalitions can create a public perception of tangible, broad community support.
- Coalitions offer increased access to policy-makers and connections to influential decision-makers through a strong united voice.
- Coalitions create networking and partnership opportunities for your organization and programs.
- Coalitions provide economies of scale and cost efficiency, thereby conserving resources for each member organization.
- Coalitions have the potential to provide media attention and public profiles which member organizations may not otherwise achieve.
- Coalitions offer access to greater expertise by calling on a range of organizations and individuals.

**Some of the best and most effective coalitions have unlikely partners working in harmony for the same cause!**

## **Steps to Building a Coalition**

If you are not a member of a broad-based children's coalition or if there is not one in your state or region, maybe you should consider starting one. A broad-based coalition representing organizations and interests throughout your state will demonstrate the strength and breadth of support for early childhood services in your state. While the thought of creating a coalition may seem daunting, these guidelines should help you get started.

### **Step1: *Identify Potential Allies***

To demonstrate broad support for your issues, work to cultivate support from a variety of groups and individuals. Throw the net wide! Think outside of the box of "likely suspects" and look to those groups or professions that are affected by children's issues. You are encouraged to think beyond the child welfare organizations in your community and include representatives of health care agencies, school systems, the courts, law enforcement, religious and business leaders. It is important to start reaching out- or continue to expand your efforts - to those who will share their knowledge, experience, and resources in health and children's issues. Some of the best and most effective coalitions have unlikely partners working in harmony for the same cause! Seek representatives from all sectors so that the coalition reflects the community. Use the coalition as an opportunity to build bridges and form new alliances. To develop your list of potential allies, start by considering the following questions:

- Who is affected by issues surrounding children and families?
- Which groups and individuals have the most influence over key elected officials -local, state or federal?
- How do we gain the support of these key groups and individuals?
- Whom have we supported in the past who might now support our issues?
- Who are our opponents and how do we neutralize them?

After answering these questions and going through your entire list of potential contacts, start calling! For cold contacts (with those groups or organizations with which you have no previous relationship), consider starting your outreach efforts by mailing participants basic information on your organization and its purpose. Follow up with a phone call inviting them to a coalition planning meeting.

## **Step 2: Define your Goals**

Determine your long- and short-term goals for the coalition. Why are you forming this coalition and what do you hope to accomplish? You need to come to agreement on some general guiding principles for the coalition's work. Begin by creating a mission statement on which your coalition members agree. As the coalition is developing its goals, keep in mind that goals should be:

**Believable:** They should describe situations or conditions that the coalition believes can be achieved.

**Attainable:** It should be possible to achieve the goals in the designated time frame.

**Tangible:** The goals should be concrete and capable of being fully understood.

**On a Timetable:** A completion date should be included in the goal statement.

**Win-Win:** The goals should allow all members of the coalition to experience some level of success.

Address issues up front, so that all perspectives can be brought to the table. Remember that this is a collaborative effort (that's the whole point of a coalition!) and that means acknowledging and respecting differences, and being able to compromise. Always designate specific tasks to be done and set benchmarks for completion of coalition activities.

It's also important to determine how often, when and where your coalition will meet, and who will attend each meeting. Once these logistics are worked out, consider announcing your coalition to the public. By releasing a joint statement or holding a press conference, the coalition can make policy-makers and the general public aware of its existence.

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### **Step 3: Take Action and Keep the Momentum Alive**

The advocacy coalition should meet regularly to coordinate strategies. Different members will contribute different strengths and it is important to capitalize on those strengths. You need to keep all coalition members informed about the ongoing advocacy efforts, so that they feel a sense of involvement and investment in the coalition. You may consider a regular newsletter to all coalition members. Email is also an easy and inexpensive way to stay in frequent contact. Encourage feedback and suggestions from coalition members.

The key to successfully mobilizing your coalition around a common agenda is to develop an action plan that is specific, measurable, achievable and focused directly on your goals. Your action plan should include a clear road map for:

**What?** Decide what actions need to take place step by step. Consider your resources and time-frame for action to achieve measurable results.

**When?** Develop a timetable for achieving each task and illustrate the tasks on a planning calendar with deadlines, which you distribute to all members of the coalition.

**Who?** Assign someone to each task you need to accomplish and keep records of who does what. Also assess who has access to or relationships with key decision-makers.

**Where?** Decide where activities will take place strategically and where you will meet to monitor progress and plan next steps.

**How?** Decide how you will be most likely to reach your goals, recruit activists, communicate, and maximize resources in the most cost-effective manner possible.

All of the strategies discussed throughout this tool-kit (such as legislative advocacy, campaign-year advocacy, regulatory advocacy and using the media) are viable advocacy options for your coalition.

In fact, most of these strategies work best when used by a coalition! You can't do it alone. By cultivating relationships (there's that word we keep coming back to - relationships) and encouraging the involvement of other individuals and organizations, you will be able to make significant gains in improving the lives of children and families!

## Elements for a Successful Coalition

1. **Common Goals**  
The expressed need and the desired change should be understood by all involved in the coalition.
2. **Communication**  
Use common language that everyone can understand. Avoid professional jargon. Each member needs to know what is taking place and what is expected.
3. **Each Member is Important to the Coalition**  
Each participant should be able to perceive him-or herself as an important part of the whole, contributing to its success.
4. **Opportunity to Participate**  
Each member should have input into goals, methods and decisions.
5. **Ownership**  
By encouraging members to participate in the decision-making process, members feel a part of the coalition and feel responsible for action.
6. **Delegation**  
Consider delegating to each entity a part that they can control. This provides an opportunity for individual accomplishments and contributes to the overall success of the coalition.
7. **Efficient, Effective Meetings**  
Keep the meetings moving toward the agreed upon goals. Each meeting should update members on the progress towards these goals, so that members leave with some sense of accomplishment.
8. **Process and Pattern**  
Establish a format for conducting meetings and the decision-making process early in the development of the coalition.
9. **Shared Leadership**  
While one organization or individual may be responsible for initiating the coalition, it is important that several persons or groups share leadership responsibilities throughout the life of the coalition.
10. **Broad-Based Membership**  
Expand your membership to include organizations and individuals with diverse focuses and varying areas of expertise. This strengthens the coalition and allows you to reach a broader audience.

## **Grassroots Organizing**

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**Grassroots organizing refers to mobilizing your community for change.**

**What, then, is community mobilization?** Community mobilization involves organizing and convening a constituency of diverse stakeholders including parents, business leaders, social service organization members and the faith community to design an agenda for change within a community. While community mobilization does not, by definition, have to be geared towards a legislative or political goal, for purposes of this guide we will focus on how a grassroots movement can influence public policy.

Community mobilization is important for several reasons. Most importantly, community mobilization brings together all the key players -parents, professionals concerned about the well-being of children and families, business leaders, and service providers -to plan how their community can ensure that all children and families have the opportunity to thrive. Community mobilization and grassroots organizing strengthen the sense of community and encourage everyone to be involved and committed to the notion that we all benefit when communities support their children and families.

### **Purposes of Grassroots Organizing**

As with all types of public policy advocacy discussed in this toolkit, the purpose is to ensure that the proper programs, policies, and laws are in place at every level to protect the children in our communities and to provide support to parents raising those children. Grassroots advocacy specifically attempts to organize communities to provide a voice for the children and families within them. Thus, grassroots advocacy attempts to:

- Create awareness among collaborators and consumers of how different government systems work;
- Empower individuals to participate in systems change;
- Enhance the knowledge and personal responsibility of individuals and communities that is transferred to state, local and individual action;
- Create a community norm that the well-being of children is the mutual responsibility of all members of the community; and

- Advocate for public policy and legislation that ensures the protection and nurturing of children and the support of families.

### **Goals of a Grassroots Movement**

A key component of a successful grassroots movement is engaging both individuals and organizations to become part of the movement. Creating a community-based coalition is the basis of advocacy efforts at the grassroots level. With that in mind, the following list describes some of the goals you might hope to accomplish through your grassroots efforts:

- Provide information to your grassroots membership network. Up-to-date, accurate information is vital to any advocacy campaign.
- Provide the legislature with information about what matters to constituents.
- Educate the public about issues affecting children and families in their community.
- Build a movement in conjunction with allies around a particular issue - for example, home visiting.
- Strengthen important links to the legislative and executive branches of government and work in conjunction with these branches whenever possible.

### **Steps to Building a Grassroots Community Movement.**

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#### **Step 1: *Attract Supporters***

Build support through public education activities, public relations events and other community-based initiatives. Work closely with other organizations to ensure continuity, singleness of purpose on behalf of children and families, and lack of duplication. Keep in mind that some of your most important supporters are the parents in the community. Families' experiences and dreams should drive the community's vision for change.

### **Step 2: *Business Involvement***

Encourage local businesses to adopt child and family friendly positions by asking them to support local children's initiatives. Having businesses involved in community mobilization efforts benefits the community by adding new perspectives on issues, bringing new contacts and connections to the effort, and by providing greater availability of and accessibility to business leaders' expertise, experience and resources.

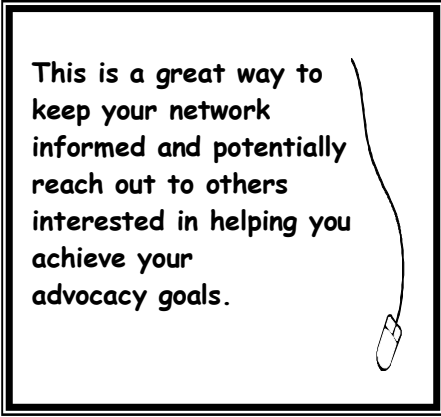
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### **Step 3: *Participation of Faith Communities***

Religious communities are the backbone to many communities and are often already involved in projects that impact children and families. Mobilize faith communities by educating them about the well-being of children in local communities. Host a series of breakfast meetings with religious leaders of various faiths to strategize the role that the faith community can play in influencing policymakers on issues that affect the lives of children and families in your community.

### **Step 4: *Focus Your Effort***

By sharing information throughout your grassroots network you can identify the immediate needs of the children in your community. Discuss programs that provide quality services to children, including home visiting programs, and create your focused advocacy agenda. This agenda should be created from the people in your community - the grassroots!



### Using the Internet

Building a successful coalition or grassroots movement depends largely on your ability to communicate efficiently and effectively with your members. Consider using the internet to help meet this need. Your coalition or grassroots movement might want to create a web site containing up-to-date details on current children's issues, upcoming events, status of relevant legislation, and other important information. This is a great way to keep your network informed and potentially reach out to others interested in helping you achieve your advocacy goals.

You may also consider creating a listserv to communicate with your coalition or grassroots network. This will allow you to send out information via email to a large group of people with the touch of a button. Most organizations and individuals have access to the internet – you are encouraged to take advantage of it!

## **Other Beneficial Relationships**

### **Community, religious, and business leaders**

- ◆ Develop local key contact list.
- ◆ Keep key contacts informed of upcoming events and recent accomplishments.
- ◆ Host forums, coffee hours, focus groups.
- ◆ Place information in local business/chamber publications.
- ◆ **Partner in events.**

### **Media**

- ◆ Identify the reporters/contacts covering early childhood issues.
- ◆ Organize media tours of your organization.
- ◆ Keep a flow of information to media, but do not become a burden.
- ◆ Only send newsworthy information. Avoid “fluff.”

### **Other Child and Family Advocates**

- ◆ Keep contacts informed about upcoming events and recent accomplishments.
- ◆ Ask to be included in newsletters.
- ◆ Send periodic mailing when appropriate.

### **General Public**

- ◆ Develop local speaker’s bureau to promote your topics.
- ◆ Participate in community fairs or special events.
- ◆ Share success stories through the media
- ◆ Host Open Houses.
- ◆ Ask others to share your information on their website or offer a link to your website.

### **Faith Communities**

- ◆ Organize a Children’s Sabbath. Please visit [www.childrensdefense.org](http://www.childrensdefense.org) for more information.
- ◆ Organize forums on child and family issues facing your community.
- ◆ Sponsor training sessions for congregations that address their social outreach ministry needs.
- ◆ Provide an effective vehicle to educate and involve congregations in public policy issues.
- ◆ Create a church-sponsored family support center providing child care, family social activities, and resources.