

Advocates find their voices at the Wisconsin Child and Family Institute

The annual Wisconsin Child and Family Advocacy Institute helps grass-roots community representatives improve the quality of life for Wisconsin children and families. Participants say the institute helps them apply current university research, access the state's public policy planning process, and network effectively with local, state and federal policymakers to influence legislation and regulations affecting Wisconsin's children and families. Several participants have been elected to public office or taken positions with organizations that advocate for children.

Situation:

Parents, children, the elderly and families have many health care, social, psychological, economic and environmental needs that could be or are supported by local, state or federal public policy programs. However, because these persons often lack the resources or ability to speak for themselves, human services and religious organizations, child and family agencies, and parents themselves must advocate on their behalf. University of Wisconsin faculty and staff cannot advocate for implementation of particular policies, but they do have a role in educating others how to advocate for issues and positions they feel are important.

Response:

UW-Milwaukee's School of Continuing Education and UW-Madison's School of Human Ecology collaborate for a one-week residential Child and Family Advocacy Institute designed to give participants knowledge and confidence to successfully advocate for child- and family-friendly public policies. Since 1994, the institute has had 150 graduates from social service and government agencies from all Wisconsin racial and ethnic backgrounds, as well as from other states and countries. The content of the program focuses on current child and family research findings and their public policy implications. Instructors for the institute are drawn from the host institutions as well as experienced lobbyists, public officials from county and state government, and representatives from many statewide organizations who provided public policy updates and forecasts. A full day spent meeting with legislative leaders and having lunch with the state agency officials responsible for child and family policy is the highlight of the week, according to participants. The Meta Beckner Fund, the Otto Bremer Foundation, Helen Bader Foundation, Kohl Charities, the UW Institute on Race and Ethnicity, and the Evjue Foundation support enrollment costs for nontraditional students.

Impacts:

A post-7-year intensive evaluation of the Advocacy Institute was completed in 2002 by a former institute participant as a doctoral project. The researcher sent surveys to 125 past participants; 43 persons, 34 %, responded. In addition, the researcher interviewed seven of the respondents by phone or in person.

About 68% of the respondents said the institute increased their confidence and skills related to their advocacy roles. They learned how the advocacy process works, got to know the players in the policymaking process, became comfortable dealing with legislators, increased their

participation in advocacy and the political process, encouraged others to attend the institute, and made efforts to influence others to become advocates for themselves and others.

The research also found:

- Forty-seven percent of the respondents had contacted elected officials in the last year
- Fourteen had attended a public hearing.
- Nineteen respondents participated in advocacy work such as membership in and attendance at meetings of groups involved in advocacy.
- Thirteen advocated by making phone calls and writing letters to legislators regarding child and family issues.
- Twelve were involved in educating others about the advocacy process.
- Twenty-three persons are new employees, chairpersons or directors of an organization whose primary goal is advocacy for children and families.
- Five participants are now in positions where they have a direct impact on child and family policy.

Success stories:

Interviews of 2001 participants found the institute helpful in preparing African Americans to address issues on behalf of families in their communities:

Brian Bedford, Madison, attended the institute in 2001 as a youth worker, and has since become an environmental activist. A single father of four, he was recently elected to the Madison City Council. Bedford also advocates for disadvantaged youth as a director of a Boys and Girls Club.

One participant credits the institute with teaching her to be more comfortable about and when voicing her opinion. She has contacted her mayor and county executive as well as state and federal officials about issues of concern, primarily about funding for early childhood programs. She testified at two hearings; at other times she has gone to listen and then written letters.

Another participant chose to seek a leadership role since the institute, and is now the executive director of a statewide child care organization. She said, "I have to tell you that I think that this kind of program [the Institute] is continuously needed because very frankly, there are not enough African American people working on these issues. We need other representatives from our community – from other communities of color as well. One of the issues and concerns that I've really tried to take up is diversity in leadership..."

A retired librarian and grandmother in the Milwaukee area expanded her advocacy activities since participating in the 2001 institute by becoming a spokesperson to prevent youth asthma and advocating for affordable housing.

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