

## **Family Living Programs**

### **Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars**

#### **Situation**

Recent evidence suggests that policies and programs would be more effective if they took into account the effect on families. Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars attempt to connect research and policymaking, and help policymakers analyze the consequences of policies on family well-being. Family Impact Seminars are a series of seminars, briefing reports, newsletters and follow-up activities for state policymakers designed to provide objective, solution-oriented information on relevant issues. The seminars are unique in that they provide a neutral, nonpartisan setting for policymakers to receive information and discuss issues. Rather than lobbying for particular policies, the seminars offer a range of policy alternatives and provide opportunities for participants to identify common ground. Similar seminars are offered for county-level officials in several parts of the state.

#### **Response**

Family Impact Seminars feature a panel of premier researchers, policy analysts and program directors. Briefing reports are distributed at the seminar and are available on request and on the web site. Information is also disseminated through quarterly newsletters and audiotapes of the seminars. Seminar speakers often meet personally with the Governor, state secretaries, and Department of Administration officials.

Since 1993, 19 seminars have been held on topics such as juvenile crime, teenage pregnancy and welfare reform. To date, 1,324 participants have attended the seminars, including 91 different state legislators and 181 legislative staff. In January 2003, 33 legislators and 35 legislative aides from 59 offices attended the seminar and discussion session on rising health care costs, and an additional 17 offices ordered a briefing report or audio tape. All together, the seminars reached 74 offices, over half of Wisconsin's legislative offices.

#### **Outcomes**

The immediate outcome of the Family Impact Seminars is increased knowledge about the topic. As a longer-term outcome we expect participants to use the acquired knowledge in decision-making. In order to assess whether the desired outcomes have been achieved, seminar participants are surveyed at the end of the seminar and are contacted again several weeks later by phone. In addition, satisfaction and quality are measured by both surveys.

#### **Changes in Knowledge**

Evaluation of the seminars consistently shows an increase in knowledge. For example, the child care seminar participants (80% response rate) reported knowing significantly more after the seminar than before about child care programs. On a scale of 1 to 4 (low to very good understanding), knowledge of how child care programs differ across states increased from 2.2 to 3.1. Knowledge of how parents can be involved in child care programs increased from 2.8 to 3.0. In paired sample t-tests, each of these tests was significant at a  $p < .001$ .

## **Use of Seminar Information**

Phone surveys following the seminar assess how participants applied the information to decision-making. Legislators (67% response rate) reported using the information from the child care seminar in the following ways:

- 63% to evaluate pending legislation
- 63% to identify references for further information
- 63% to share information with colleagues

Legislators report using seminar information to decide how to vote on issues such as welfare reform and a cigarette tax. A juvenile justice seminar helped policymakers develop a statewide juvenile justice plan.

Following the seminars on prescription drugs, two legislators reported using seminar information to draft legislation. In addition, four legislators and one aide said seminar information helped them critique and modify proposals, and discuss the issue with advocacy groups. Several features of the prescription drug program discussed at the seminars were incorporated into Wisconsin's newly-enacted prescription drug law: prior authorization, generic substitutions, variable co-payments and a \$500 deductible, discounted rates for pharmacists, and rebates.

In addition, legislators reported that because of the Family Impact Seminar they are more likely to consider how new legislation being developed affects families (86%), to consider how pending legislation affects families (71%), and to see the practical value of research (71%).

## **Satisfaction and Quality**

Because one of the primary goals of the Family Impact Seminars is to provide useful, relevant and objective information, participants are asked after each seminar whether the information presented fit these criteria. On a scale of 1 to 4 (poor to excellent) participants rated the last 18 seminars as 4.4 on relevance, 4.2 on usefulness, and 4.3 on objectivity.

Legislators rate the seminars as their second-most valuable source of information, second only to direct communication from constituents. They rated the seminars ahead of information received from newspapers, newsletters or other print materials and lobbyists. Also rated highly useful are the round table luncheons, which provide legislators an opportunity to interact with the seminar speakers.

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