

UW-Extension seminars guide legislators on policy issues affecting Wisconsin families

Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars connect research and policymaking, and help policymakers analyze the consequences of policies on family well-being. The seminars, coordinated by UW-Extension family policy specialists, feature a panel of premier researchers, policy analysts and program directors. The seminars provide a neutral, nonpartisan setting for policymakers to receive information and discuss issues. From 1993 through spring 2004, 19 Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars have been held on topics such as juvenile crime, teenage pregnancy and welfare reform. These seminars reached 1,324 participants, including state legislators and staff members. Legislators rate the seminars as their second-most valuable source of information, second only to direct communication from constituents, and have used the information in drafting legislation.

Situation:

Members of the Wisconsin State Legislature work hard to create legislation they believe will enhance the quality of life for the state's residents. Recent evidence suggests, however, that state policies and programs would be more effective if they took into account the effect on families.

Response:

Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars offered by the UW-Extension attempt to connect research and policymaking, and help policymakers analyze the consequences of policies on family well-being. Family Impact Seminars include briefing reports, newsletters and follow-up activities for state policymakers designed to provide objective, solution-oriented information on relevant issues. Information is also disseminated through quarterly newsletters and audiotapes of the seminars. Seminar speakers often meet personally with the governor, state cabinet secretaries and Wisconsin Department of Administration officials. Similar seminars are offered for county-level officials in several parts of the state.

From 1993 through spring 2004, 19 Wisconsin Family Impact 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 state legislators and 181 legislative staff members. 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 audiotape. All together, the seminars reached 74 offices, more than half of Wisconsin's legislative offices.

The goal of the Family Impact Seminars is to immediately increase policymakers' knowledge about the topic and to have them, in the longer term, use the acquired knowledge in decision making. Seminar participants are surveyed at the end of the seminar and contacted again several weeks later by phone to determine whether the goals are met.

Impacts:

Evaluation of the seminars consistently shows an increase in participant knowledge. For example, the child-care seminar participants reported knowing significantly more about child-care programs after the seminar than before. 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. Legislators surveyed by phone after the seminar reported using the information from the child-care seminar to:

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

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%); consider how pending legislation affects families (71%); and, see the practical value of research (71%).

Participants are asked after each seminar whether the information presented is useful, relevant and objective. On a scale of 1 to 5 (poor to excellent) participants rated the last 18 seminars as 4.4 on relevance, 4.2 on usefulness and 4.3 on objectivity.

As a source of information, legislators rate the seminars as the second-most valuable, second only to direct communication from their 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.

Success stories:

Legislators reported 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.

Contact:

Karen Bogenschneider, Ph.D., Director, Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars and Family Policy Specialist; phone: (608) 262-4070; e-mail: kpbogens@wisc.edu

Bettina Friese, Ph.D., Associate Director, Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars; phone (608) 262-9161; e-mail: bfriese@ssc.wisc.edu

Submitted: May 2004