

Family Living Programs

Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars Give State Policymakers Access to Vital Research

Situation

Policymakers do not have the staff or time to gather all the relevant data on the many complex issues that confront them. The information that policymakers receive is often parochial, fragmented, biased, and less focused on family issues. In response, Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars attempt to increase the use of research in policy decisions, and to promote a family perspective in policymaking.

Response

Family Impact Seminars are a series of seminars, briefing reports, newsletters, and discussion sessions for state policymakers including legislators, legislative aides, Governor's office staff, legislative service agency staff, and state agency representatives. Similar Seminars are offered for county-level officials in several parts of the state.

The Seminars provide objective, solution-oriented research on timely policy issues such as corrections, health care, juvenile crime, long-term care, Medicaid, school funding, and welfare reform. The Family Impact Seminars feature a panel of premier researchers, policy analysts, and program directors. Each Seminar is accompanied by a briefing report that summarizes state-of-the-art research on the topic and provides a range of policy options. These reports, newsletters, and audio of the Seminar speakers are available on the web at www.familyimpactseminars.org.

Rather than lobbying for particular policies, the Seminars deliver objective, solution-oriented information on a range of policy options. The Seminars also provide a neutral, nonpartisan setting outside the political environment for policymakers to discuss issues and seek common ground.

Outcomes

Policymakers report that the Seminars increase their knowledge of research on family issues in ways that have shaped the design and enactment of public policies in Wisconsin.

Track Record in Attracting State Policymakers

Since 1993, the 24 Seminars held for state policymakers have attracted 1,827 participants. Of the 132 legislators currently in office, 77 have attended at least one of the Seminars and another 23 offices have sent an aide. The Seminars attract an average of 76 people, with attendance ranging from 62 to 110 participants. Seminar speakers often meet one-on-one with the Governor or state agency secretaries.

The 18th Seminar was attended by 110 participants, including 28 legislators and 35 legislative aides. An additional five legislators attended the luncheon, bringing the total to 33. During the day's activities, 59 legislative offices were represented. Another 15 ordered copies of the briefing report or an

audiotape, which means this Seminar reached 74 legislators and their staff—over half of Wisconsin's 133 legislative offices.

In evaluations, Seminar participants rate the Seminars as highly objective, relevant, and useful. For example, on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent), the average objectivity rating for the last 24 Seminars was 4.3. Attendees also gave high marks to the Seminars' relevance to their needs and interests (4.4) and usefulness in their current role (4.1). In policymaker's own words:

"...the ability to present and prepare unbiased research based on objective analysis and without political taint is truly refreshing."

State legislator

"Because of the Family impact Seminars, we are able to engage in discussions on a policy as opposed to an ideological level, and I think that we have been able to discuss the issues in a more responsible way and actually come to more responsible conclusions as a result."

State legislator

"...this is the only time such a broad group gets together to really discuss family-related issues in an atmosphere that encourages good public policymaking over politics."

State agency representative

Changes in Knowledge

In evaluations, Seminar participants consistently report an increase in their knowledge of the Seminar topic. For example, 60 participants (80% response rate) at a Seminar on early childhood care and education reported knowing significantly more *after* the Seminar than *before* about research on the issue and how the issue impacts families. Participants reported increased knowledge of how the quality of child care affects children's development, why the private marketplace does not work as well for child care as for other industries, how child care programs differ across states, and how parents can be involved in child care programs (each t-test significant at $p < .001$).

Use of Seminar Information

Legislators report using Seminar information to develop positions on legislation, such as welfare reform and a cigarette tax. Following two Seminars on prescription drugs, legislators reported using Seminar information to draft new legislation, critique and modify proposals, and discuss the issue with advocacy groups. Later, several features of other state's prescription drug programs discussed at the Seminar were incorporated into Wisconsin's Senior Care law.

Following the Seminars on prescription drugs, 11 legislators (55% response rate) reported applying what they learned at the Seminars in the following ways:

- 100% to evaluate legislation
- 81% to incorporate into speeches or presentations
- 74% to share with colleagues
- 73% to identify references for further information

- 27% to contact researchers with questions, and
- 18% to draft new legislation.

Contact

Karen Bogenschneider, Family Policy Specialist, University of Wisconsin-Extension
Rothermel Bascom Professor of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Director, Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars and Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars
(608) 262-4070
kpbogens@wisc.edu