

SCRA Public Policy Initiative: Small Grants Program

Children First/Communities in Schools of Buncombe County: Evaluating the Effectiveness of a Local Advocacy Group's Efforts

This project is a collaborative effort between Children First/Communities in Schools of Buncombe County (Children First/CIS) and Dr. Jon Miles from Searchlight Consulting, LLC. The grant supports the collaborators' efforts to design and implement a rigorous evaluation of the effectiveness of Children First/CIS's advocacy actions, particularly those that apply to state budget policies that positively impact low-income children and families in Western North Carolina.

Children First/CIS is a well-established not-for-profit organization that is on the forefront of grass-roots and "grass-tops" advocacy in the region and in the state. They have a strong model in place to guide their wide range of advocacy tactics, but have not had the resources to properly evaluate how their efforts are perceived and what impact they may be having.

Children First/CIS uses a variety of tactics such as email campaigns, rallies, letter/petition drives, direct lobbying, and identifying key advocates that may have extra influence or leverage with elected officials. While Children First/CIS is often lauded for their advocacy efforts, and often provide advocacy leadership and training to other local organizations, they would like to develop a stronger understanding of the relative effectiveness of their different tactics, and how they might enhance the cumulative impact of their advocacy on the legislative process.

The evaluation will focus on these questions:

- How effective did various recipients (supporters, allies, clients, as well as media) perceive the *messages* from Children First/CIS to be in engaging them to act,
- How did recipients of those messages use the information they received and did they take recommended *actions*, and
- What do elected leaders report about the *effects* of the different messages they receive from Children First/CIS and from constituents spurred to advocate by Children First/CIS.

Based in part on a series of focus groups Children First/CIS conducted with families in poverty, they have identified the upcoming state and federal budget processes as the most pressing policy issue facing local families in the coming year. Both budget processes present grave threats to many of the safety net, educational, and health programs upon which low-income families rely. Specific programs include Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly Food Stamps), Head Start, Child Care Block Grant, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Smart Start (NC), public school funding for NC, NC drop-out prevention funding, and funding for the NC juvenile justice system.

This grant is supporting the efforts of Children First/CIS advocacy staff and Dr. Miles to design and implement an effective evaluation. Children First/CIS has been collaborating with Dr. Miles on some of their child poverty reduction efforts over the past year, and have enlisted his support to develop a plan to effectively and efficiently evaluate this work.