

BIG

GAME-CHANGERS FOR CHILDREN

IDEAS



FIRST FOCUS

MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

# Commission on Children

By Elaine Zimmerman

“Whatever the issue may be, the Commission seeks out the authoritative information, identifies the knowledgeable leaders in the field and defines the best practices. In doing so, the Commission informs the legislative process and the general public on those policies that have proven effective in advancing the health and well being of children. If we didn’t have the Commission, we would have to invent it.”

– Peter Libassi, formerly of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare

## Overview

The Connecticut Commission on Children (COC) is an important arm of government for children and youth. The Commission provides policy direction, frameworks, and outcome data to the public and to elected leaders to ensure that the one large constituency that does not vote is both remembered and nurtured in public policy. A year lost during a child’s growth is not recoverable. Yet during hard times and national downturns, children are the first forgotten. Therefore, the Commission highlights opportunities, puts challenges in neon, and brings in unexpected stakeholders to shake up the status quo and move forward in pursuit of new opportunities.

## Mandate

Public Act 85-584 created the COC in 1985 with bipartisan support. An arm of the legislative branch, the Commission brings 25 government representatives from the legislative, executive, and judicial branches together with the private sector. The COC is mandated to advance public policies that are in the best interest of children. Described as the most successful state coordinating entity for children in the nation, the COC strives to be entrepreneurial and creative and to mix and match opportunities that allow children and youth to experience positive outcomes in health, safety, and learning.

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In its work, the COC (1) develops landmark policies for children; (2) brings dollars and donated skills to the state; (3) leads in providing public information for children and youth; (4) performs key research on children's needs; (5) brings the family to government and government to the family; (6) reviews and assesses programs and practices in all state agencies that affect children; (7) strives to build coherent systems for children, rather than single programs; (8) serves as a liaison between government and private groups concerned with children; (9) makes recommendations for children annually to the legislature and governor; and (10) releases a social health index that reports on quality of life for families.

### The Social Health Index

The COC sought to monitor quality of life for the family with the same rigor and public understanding as is employed in routine monitoring of economic performance. When people hear of the stock market going up or down, they know what this means. The COC sought to create a “stock portfolio” of social health indicators. Eleven indicators are collected and written up in a manner that is accessible to the public. Only indicators that have been collected over three decades are used, in order to disallow fads and to study substantive trend patterns impacting the young.

Three decades are graphed to highlight patterns of success or challenge within 11 social health areas. Each indicator is traced over 30, 10, and 5 years to show long-term as well as short-term gains or losses. A single figure reveals the average of these 11 indicators together. As the gross domestic product or the Dow Jones Industrial Average informs us on the state of the economy, this number informs us on the level of social health. The index is a civic tool intended to bring in the public as a partner in government and public policy decision making.

### Promoting Major Research-Based Public Policies for Children

The COC is a catalyst for research-based policy that promotes the best health, safety, and learning outcomes for Connecticut's children. Some examples of landmark legislation include the following:

- School Readiness legislation that developed preschool standards and a statewide infrastructure for quality early care and education (Public Act 97-25)
- The Early Reading Success law, which provided school options for reduced class size, full-day kindergarten, and school reading plans (Public Act 98-243)
- The Connecticut Fatherhood Initiative to reengage absent parents with their children (Public Act 99-193)
- The Reading Panel Report to define the skills and knowledge that teachers need in order to teach every child to read by third grade (Public Act 99-227)

- Adoption reform that promptly places young children in permanent caring homes (Public Act 00-137)
- The Safe Learning Act and Anti-Bully legislation to ensure safe learning in school and to reduce child aggression (Public Act 01-1)
- The Children and Homeland Security Act, the only state law in the nation addressing the particular needs of children against the new and growing backdrop of natural and unnatural disasters (Special Act 02-8)
- The Lead Action for Medicaid Primary Prevention Pilot, established to reduce lead hazards in the dwellings of Medicaid-eligible children at risk for lead poisoning (Public Act 00-216)
- The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training 50/50 match fund, which utilizes an uncapped federal funding stream for child poverty reduction implementation on the local level; 50 cents are reimbursed for every dollar spent on food stamp-eligible adults
- The Act Concerning Children in the Recession, which addresses family needs in the areas of food, housing, education, violence prevention, and family supports during economic downturns; the bill mandates that when the unemployment rate is 8 percent or more, state agencies must work as a team and treat this as an emergency for children (Public Act 10-133)

These policies were moved forward due to their preventive framework and return on investment. Prioritizing prevention and paying careful attention to research-based programs with cost savings for the public offers a formula for strategic action.

### **Bundling and Braiding What Works**

The Commission tries to bundle and braid best policies and partners with action plans and funding streams. A civic component is always included. A good example of this was moving Connecticut to shift from crisis funding and programs to proven prevention programs and outcomes. The COC facilitated research, discourse, and the ultimate passage of a bill that creates a state prevention council and budget for children, requires coordination of programs in prevention across agencies, requires contracts linked to outcome measures in prevention planning, and requires the governor to report in the state of the state message on shifts in spending from crisis to prevention for children. Departments must show what works to change the state's focus from the resolution of a problem to prevention of the problem (Public Act 01-121).

After this Prevention Initiative passed – creating a statewide prevention plan, budget, and benchmarks focused on what works early, rather than on what to do later in a crisis – the COC linked the initiative to child poverty reduction. The

legislature passed a bill requiring the reduction of child poverty by 50 percent within 10 years. The cost of child poverty was to be delineated, as along with an action plan. Child poverty reduction and systemic prevention planning were linked and placed under a legislatively created Poverty and Prevention Council.

National experts were brought together across parties and interest areas to tell the Poverty and Prevention Council what was proven in reducing child poverty, what could be replicated, and what was most efficient. The council recommended specific action plans within the areas of family income and earning potential, education, income safety nets, and family structure and support. The COC then took the council's recommendations and asked for an economic model analysis. The Urban Institute found that the state could reduce child poverty by 35 percent if it (1) provided child-care subsidies to families with incomes of less than 50 percent of the state median; (2) provided education and training programs to result in associate's degrees for half the adults with high school diplomas; (3) helped high school dropouts get their GEDs; (4) increased employment by 6 percent among the unemployed; (5) increased participation in safety net programs (such as SNAP, subsidized housing, and the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) by 85 percent; and (6) ensured child support payments.

Next, the Commission drew on a federal funding stream to assist in building an ongoing statewide strategic plan using proven interventions that would reduce child poverty. The SNAP Employment and Training 50/50 match fund was accessed by 95 towns. They have now developed a collaborative and are working together to implement proven poverty-reduction practices using federal reimbursement resources.

### Family Engagement and Voice

Knowing that policy is only as good as the citizenry behind it, the COC built an initiative for families to help take the lead in advocating for children. Parents showed keen interest in helping their children and wanted to improve community programs and policies. However, they lacked the civic tool kit to do so. Searching for models across the states to teach parent leadership and family civics, the COC came up empty-handed. Therefore, the Commission built an organizing strategy and curriculum on how change happens for children and the civic tools necessary for effective, long-term leadership.

In 27 cities and towns in Connecticut, parents are training for 20 weeks in parent leadership. They learn about public policy, budgets, public speaking, outcome data, methods of evaluation, building coalitions, frameworks, and how to understand opposition. They challenge themselves and each other about attitudes regarding power, government, and leadership. Sixty-six percent of the parent graduates use their skills in the community.

Over 90 percent work with people who are different from them. One graduate is in the legislature. More than 2,000 graduates are on school boards, city councils,

and advisory committees. Over 1.5 million volunteer hours have been recorded for the state. This model is being replicated in seven other states.

## Public Information

Public access to information on children's services, family issues, and ways to participate is critical. Members of the Commission routinely speak on NBC and public television in Connecticut on children's issues. The Commission distributes more than a million booklets a year for the public on healthcare, literacy, school readiness, and other issues of importance to families. The Commission provides information to all new mothers in birthing hospitals and offers packets on immunization that are often given out by pediatric nurses or medical doctors to new parents.

The core issue, however, is how to reach the hardest to reach. Are there ways to talk about issues that will lead more parents and youth to take interest? How can we take a complex concept like prevention and reframe it? Here the COC learned that a messenger such as Hall of Fame basketball coach Jim Calhoun could have a large impact. We worked with Coach Calhoun and designed a Prevention Playbook that can be ordered by phone or on the Internet. He spoke on brain research and linked prevention to good health. The playbook tells all about prevention programs for children and offers suggestions on what parents can do. Calhoun became the messenger in the playbook itself, in print, on television, and on radio.

The Commission spends significant time learning how to frame issues based on discussions with parents, children, and youth, in order to ensure contact and exchange of information in communities. The Commission tests messages and relies on families to communicate the messaging that will help the COC meet its goals.

## Shine Light on Issues

The Commission assesses trends, gaps, and policy remedies. Sometimes a star or national expert can bring it all together due to his or her expertise, charisma, or artistry. The Commission has brought such artists and innovators to Connecticut:

- Dan Olweus is credited with creating the most effective bully prevention program in the world. Olweus came from Sweden to Connecticut and trained teachers and principals from across the state.
- Miss America met with youth to discuss bullying and ways to learn without fear. She traveled the state and visited schools, listened to youth share their concerns, and put on a Miss America talent show in Hartford with students.
- Filmmaker Morgan Sperlock came to Connecticut the week before the Academy Awards ceremony at which he was one of the nominees. He

spoke to several hundred people on his experience and research on food, nutrition, and obesity in filming *Super Size Me*. Sperlock also met with legislators.

- James Gaberino from Cornell University participated in a state forum on school safety and bullying. So many wanted to see him that the freeway came to a standstill and the highway patrol had to intervene. Students, parents, teachers, and state policymakers converged that day to find the best policies and practices.
- Neal Halfon from the Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities at UCLA joined the Commission and the Hartford Foundation to discuss state-by-state learnings on the need for a system to improve early care and education. He argued that preschool slots alone will not address school readiness.
- T. Berry Brazelton spoke at the first state summit on young children, following the national summit organized by Speaker Nancy Pelosi in Congress.
- Michael Petro, director of business and government relations at the Fortune 500 Committee for Economic Development, joined the COC to speak of the link between child growth and economic growth.

### National Replication

A National Council on Children that performs such functions or similar functions across the states could have profound impact. We need national child well-being indicators, such as those that have recently been released by Ken Land of Duke University. Policy discourse, analysis of trends, and a focus on prevention to address the trends might help the states shift from “ambulance behavior” for children to protective factors and primary prevention.

If members of Congress were appointed to the council, the discourse and policy direction could be bipartisan and transparent and might offer up cogent strategies to help children cope and succeed in a profoundly difficult economic time. This generation is being labeled the “sinking generation.” But these children need not find themselves in a leaking boat; leaders must come together and develop a shared vision with a structure and organization to help them move forward.

Senator Chris Dodd recently discussed the possibility of forming a National Council on Children at the landmark State of the American Child hearings. Founder of the Children’s Caucus, he suggested to the Subcommittee on Children and Families of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee that trend analysis, model policy, and a focus on strategic direction were warranted. We should begin work expeditiously in order to buffer this generation from the chaos and misfortune they are witnessing in this recession.