

# State Children's Cabinets and Councils: Getting Results for Children and Youth

## A Forum — December 14, 2007

Many states have formed Children's Cabinets and Councils in an effort to meet the needs of their youngest constituents. Many believe that the increasing complexity of government systems has slowed the progress states can make on improving child and youth outcomes. As a result, governors are asking the heads of their relevant state agencies to agree to a common vision and set of desired outcomes for children and youth, work together to create a plan for achieving that vision, and hold themselves collectively accountable for the progress.

The Forum for Youth Investment has created a Network of Children's Cabinets and Councils from across the country and collects best practices and successes that can be shared across states. This forum convened state policymakers, elected and appointed officials, and stakeholders in youth development to examine these state-level coordinating bodies. The panel presenters represented the Kentucky Youth Development Coordinating Council, which was established in legislation in 2006 to align and improve the youth opportunities and outcomes in the state; the Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet Council, which is chaired by the First Lady and is working side by side to support 88 county Family and Children First Councils made up of public and community agencies and families; and the Maryland Governor's Children's Cabinet, which has created a culture of collaboration leading to improved service delivery systems and leveraged new resources.

**Elizabeth Gaines, Senior Program Manager, Forum for Youth Investment**, opened the session by providing an overview of children's cabinets and councils. In states across the country, established through legislative or executive orders, these cross agency coordinating bodies are systematically changing the fragmented and ineffective way states typically do business for children and youth. Children's cabinets and councils (which vary in structure from state to state) typically are made up of heads of government agencies with child and youth-serving programs, who meet on a regular basis with the collective goal of coordinating services, developing a common set of outcomes, and collaboratively deciding upon and implementing plans to foster the well-being of young people.

A handful of states, like New York and Maryland, have had permanent children's coordination bodies in place for decades. However, widespread calls for the creation of formal, permanent children's cabinets and councils have come more recently. There is growing recognition among governors, legislators, administrators and policy advocates that creating or strengthening state-level coordinating structures may be the cheaper, faster and better alternative for affecting cross-system, cross-outcome change.

The confluence of information, authority and influence held by the individuals, departments and governmental branches represented on state-level cabinets and councils gives these entities enormous potential to effect change. State level children's cabinets and councils, if structured and staffed correctly, have a unique capacity to increase a state's horsepower for changing the odds for its children and youth.

The classic approach to dealing with children's issues is to identify a problem, convene a task force around that issue, then create a programmatic response to deal with that specific issue. That leads to a proliferation of task forces and unrelated programs. It is far more effective to develop system-wide approaches to youth issues as this leads to improved communication, efficiency, and resource management for all agencies and programs that affect the lives of youth. It is essential to have a basic theory of change that links structure to strategies to purpose. These are the three core parts of the Forum's Ready by 21<sup>TM</sup> Change Model.

The Forum's work, over the past three years, has focused on articulating the principles, processes and practices that increase the capacity of change makers and coordinating structures to define and conduct what we call "Big Picture" work – work that brings a broad range of actors together to address a broad set of issues related to improving outcomes for youth.

The work is based on four premises:

Changing child and youth outcomes requires broad commitments to a comprehensive set of goals that cut across systems and settings;

Most of those who need to be engaged already are, but they are working in parallel and sometimes at cross-purposes;

Focusing on helping leaders think differently, act differently and act together to change the odds for children and youth is an effective, efficient, expedient way to improve overall community capacity and increase public and political will, and;

Leaders need program and policy examples, but they also need big ideas and practical tools and tips for reconfiguring structures, strategies and partnerships.

In conjunction with the convening of the lunch session, the Forum released the first two issues in a series that will serve to capture and organize the decisions and experiences of more than 20 children's cabinets and councils and present them against an emerging set of expectations about what the public and policy makers could and should expect from them. Elizabeth Gaines briefly discussed these resources and their creation. **State Children's Cabinets and Councils: Getting Results for Children and Youth** provides the rationale behind the Forum's assertion that children's cabinets and councils should be taken seriously, spells out how state children's cabinets and councils are operating in ways that are consistent with the Forum's assumptions about change, identifies challenge areas, and introduces the Ready by 21<sup>TM</sup> Change Model that is used to frame the issue briefs and directory. **The 2008 Directory of State Children's Cabinets and Councils** provides at-a-glance responses to basic but important questions: which states have these children's cabinets and councils? Who is involved in them? What do they do? The guide provides summaries of interviews done with children's cabinet and council directors in the latter half of 2007.

**TJ Delahanty, staff person for the Kentucky Youth Development Coordinating Council and a Youth Development Extension Specialist with the University of Kentucky Cooperative**

**Extension Service 4-H Youth Development Program Office**, discussed the process the state of Kentucky undertook to decide whether and how to form a state-level coordinating council. The main impetus for the creation of the coordinating body was to improve accountability and maximize the effectiveness of the over \$1.4 Billion budget for 101 statewide youth programs in 2004. The funding from these programs came from a range of sources with separate visions, outcome measures, and plans. The statewide council was formed to provide a common framework and create a common strategic plan for improved youth outcomes.

As a result of Senate Joint Resolution 184, unanimously passed in the 2006 General Assembly, the Kentucky Youth Development Coordinating Council was created. By passing the resolution, Kentucky has taken major steps to ensure that young people are fully engaged and fully prepared for adulthood. Under the leadership of the Cabinet for Health & Family Services, the Council is made up of the heads of fourteen state agencies, a representative from the University of Kentucky, Cooperative Extension Service, 4-H/Youth Development, a Senator, a Representative, and three young people.

The Council provides an infrastructure for coordinating youth services and aligning programs to more efficiently and effectively utilize existing resources; it provides a framework for a shared vision centered around the Five Promises; and it promotes youth involvement.

**Angela Sausser Short**, appointed by the Ohio Governor in July 2005 to serve as the **Director of Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet Council**, spoke about the Ohio structure developed to coordinate child and youth services. The Ohio Family and Children First Councils began at the local and county level in the late 1980s and were codified into law in 1993 as a state level council and 88 county councils. There are many states that have established parallel local structures, coordinating bodies at every level of government within a state that share the same basic mission and vision as the state body. These types of structures are essential for the integrated program delivery of services at the local level throughout a state.

The Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet Council is convened by the Governor, chaired by the First Lady, and includes the Directors of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services, Budget and Management, Health, Job and Family Services, Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, Youth Services, and the Superintendent of Public Instruction. It is important for the effectiveness of a statewide collaborating council to have a wide representation of leaders from the departments and agencies who touch the lives of young people. The state level body works closely with local FCF Councils in planning and program delivery. This relationship is enconced in the mission of the Council, and the tracking, planning and reporting of the impact on child well-being are shared at the state and local levels.

In order to improve accountability, the state of Ohio is not resting on its successes. There is a web-based platform being developed to collect and analyze child, youth and family service coordination data at the local level. In order to garner the ideas and input of families and community members, the Council is working to establish a Cabinet level advisory board as well as regional family advisory networks. Lastly, there is work underway to create an annual administrative grant application to capture progress and goals for the core function areas of the Council.

**Karen Finn, Chief of Policy and Programs** for the **Maryland Governor's Office For Children**, described the results of the work of the Maryland Children's Cabinet and the Governor's Office for Children. Maryland Planning Framework is based on results accountability. The key questions that they ask in their planning are:

- What are we trying to achieve?
- What does the data tell us?
- What is the story behind the data?
- What partners do we need?
- What strategies work?
- What is our action plan?

On the question of what the Cabinet is trying to achieve, there were 8 major child well-being results identified- babies born healthy, healthy children, children enter school ready to learn, children successful in school, children completing school, children safe in their families and communities, stable and economically independent families, and communities that support family life. The Cabinet then broke these results into specific indicators, collected data to determine current rates, and established goals to achieve in 1 and 5 year increments. In the span of 2000-2005 Maryland has achieved improvements on the majority of its indicators.

The best success story thus far in Maryland has been on the indicator tracking the percentage of children entering kindergarten fully ready. In 2001-2002, the percent was only 49%. The series of questions listed above were applied and the systemic factors of the issues were examined. The Children's Cabinet established 6 specific goals with 25 strategies to improve the rate, and created an immediate action plan to build public support, establish a school readiness committee to the Children's Cabinet, focus on parental involvement, expand early care and education services, and address credentialing and compensation of child care staff. As a result of these and other efforts throughout the state, the percentage of children ready for kindergarten increased to 67% in 2006-2007!

## **Highlights from the Question and Answer Session**

A question was asked regarding how many children's cabinets and councils engage businesses in their efforts. Gaines stated that based on the Forum's research, five bodies engage the business community either as members or in key advisory roles. Finn added that businesses play a major role in the local level commissions and that Maryland's state level business council has been very helpful in their efforts.

A follow up question along the same lines questioned how best to engage community members in the decision making process. Delahanty stated that the purpose of Kentucky's Council was not "to reinvent the wheel." The purpose instead was to work with preexisting agencies, networks, partnerships and services and improve their coordination of services. Gaines stated that patterns had emerged in the formation of these coordinating bodies. Some entities have created all-

encompassing groups with members from all types of organizations. This set up creates challenges. Other groups have focused on keeping the actual membership very streamlined while creating community and business advisory groups. Finn added that this is an ongoing struggle.