

PARENT LEADERSHIP IN STATE GOVERNMENT

An Issue Paper

ISSUE:

Programs and services that are designed with the input of families better meet family needs, make services more effective, increase fiscal responsiveness, and lead to better outcomes.

Michigan no longer funds leadership development programs for families, which has caused the parent leadership community to erode. Presently there is no clear, collective, parent voice representing families who use public services.

BACKGROUND:

Our decision-making bodies are not effectively partnered with parents who have unique expertise about the goals, outcomes, and real impact of services for themselves and their children. With Governor Granholm's commitment to the value of "Inclusion", now, more than ever, parents need to be represented and involved as equal partners in program planning and policy development that affect their lives. Such involvement will support more effective use of the state's resources and support families in their roles as providers and caregivers. As government revenues shrink, education, health and human services also contract. Consequently, customer input as a part of quality improvement has become an afterthought. Currently, there is no mechanism that prepares and supports parents for these roles.

In the early 1990's Michigan organized and supported a few parent leadership development opportunities. They included the Parent Leadership Program through *Early On* and Partners In Policymaking, through the Developmental Disabilities Council. These programs trained and supported groups of parents and/or consumers to develop the skills needed to be effective partners at various state and community policy tables. The participants became the foundation of the parent voice in a variety of state initiatives such as Strong Families Safe Children, Multi Purpose Collaborative Bodies, and Local Interagency Coordinating Councils. Many of the current parent leaders involved in *Early On*, the ECIC and other interagency initiatives are graduates of these former leadership programs. Between 2001 and 2003 funding for these leadership development programs ended. It has become increasingly difficult to identify and support parent participation at various policy and service delivery tables.

Michigan does fund some parent training opportunities that broadly help parents to support their children's development. While this is excellent training, it does not fulfill the need for leadership training that is intentionally focused on leadership development with an eye toward impacting local, state, and federal program planning and policy development.

DISCUSSION:

The best models and decisions for state program and policy are born out of effective partnerships between the state, providers and parents of children who receive public services.

There is a body of research and literature documenting the need and importance of parent participation as equal partners in planning, program and policy development. At the Federal level, the parent involvement movement began in the late 80's under the leadership of Surgeon General C. Everett Koop. Over time it has become recognized and duplicated across human service, health, and education communities.

The problem with the previous strategies to provide parent leadership training was that they had limited support and yet such support and training of parents as leaders is needed across all of Michigan's human service agencies and programs. In the true spirit of collaboration, the responsibility for parent leadership training and support should be SHARED. No one system, agency or program should be bearing the total cost.

NEED:

Parents who have children aged 0-18 who have been or are eligible for public services are the most impacted by government decisions and need to have a voice in designing and shaping federal, state, and local policies and programs. Michigan needs to develop an integrated systematic approach to identify, recruit, train, mobilize, deploy and support leadership from the parent community to serve on numerous commissions or advisory bodies

We are in an era of structural deficit that require tough decisions to be made each and every year regarding services to children and families. As Michigan redesigns its investments in education, health and human services towards results and efficiency, it is essential that parents be at the table. Parent input in state government is not sustainable with volunteers and private donations alone. Parent involvement requires an investment of state resources in leadership development and support for active participation of parents in advisory committees, commissions, task forces, and service delivery tables.

RESULTS:

Parent leadership training will enable families to:

- Impact both executive and legislative decision-making
- Engage in state and local advocacy
- Engage in state and local policy and procedure development; and
- Increase their civic engagement.

LONG TERM BENEFITS:

- Growth in family capacity – parent knowledge, competence, confidence and enjoyment in positively impacting their children's growth and development.
- Clear picture of the breadth of opportunity for families to be involved in program planning and policy development.
- A list of parents interested in participating on committees and boards, so that parent appointments are not left unfilled for long periods of time.
- Active parent participation in bodies such as Foster Care Review Boards, local Great Start Collaboratives, local Community Collaboratives, Mental Health Boards, Governor-appointed oversight boards such as the State Interagency Coordinating Council for Early On, etc.
- Increased parent participation in the legislative process.

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

1. A clear statement through the commitment of funding is required from leadership of public agencies serving families with children about the importance of parent involvement and the importance of "inclusion". Each human service agency should share in the funding of a total allocation of \$150,000-\$200,000 to re-establish a parent leadership training program. This funding will support the re-implementation of training and the on-going financial support for the parents to participate at the various levels.

2. A cross agency steering/advisory committee made up of at least 50% parents should be established to oversee the program.
3. The Children's Cabinet should determine where best to place the responsibility for a parent leadership training program.

BACKGROUND MATERIALS:

1. State of Michigan Vision and Values (http://www.michigan.gov/ose/0,1607,7-143-6097_35711_35538-110647--,00.html)
2. Leadership Training Manual for The Parent Leadership Program.
3. Communiqué—No.5 May 2005--- to Community Collaboratives on “Family Centered Practice”
4. Dunst, Carl J. Evidence-Based Approaches to Improving Results for Infants, Toddlers, and Families. Presentation at the *Early On* Michigan Redesign Meeting, October 20, 2005.

