

AGENDA FOR CHILDREN: 2006 YEAR IN REVIEW

The mission of Agenda for Children is to make Louisiana a state in which all children can thrive. This means that the basic needs of children and families must be met – including an adequate family income, safe housing, nutritious food, and accessible health care. It also means that children must be nurtured, well taught, and protected from harm, beginning in the early years and continuing through adolescence. Our mission also means that we must act consistently and intentionally in ways that combat racism and other forms of oppression.

Founded in 1984 and incorporated in 1986, Agenda for Children works statewide, as well as locally, in the 16 parishes of southeast Louisiana, through programs, policy advocacy, and strong strategic partnerships.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, all of the staff at the Agenda for Children New Orleans office evacuated. Some did not come back to the City. It took an entire year for the rest of us to get back, given the housing challenges. We had 19 staff members in the office in August 2005 and now we have 13, plus four open positions. With the added challenges to the well-being of children and families in the post-Katrina and Rita landscape, our workload has nearly doubled.

We have, however, been supported by generous gifts from many wonderful friends. A short list includes the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Packard Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, Voices for America's Children, the IMH Foundation, the Ms. Foundation, the 21st Century Foundation, and many more.

PROGRAMS

Kids Count

Kids Count is a national initiative of the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, which annually produces a fifty-state compilation of the indicators of child well-being throughout the nation. Casey also funds one grantee in each of the states to produce county level reports on the well being of children in the states. Agenda for Children is the *Kids Count* grantee in Louisiana.

In June of this year we distributed the national *Kids Count* report, which once again ranked Louisiana 49th in the nation on overall child well-being and among the bottom ten states on selected “key indicators.” Though Louisiana made some improvements in the rates of child death, teen births, dropouts and the percentage of “idle teens”, we lost ground on six other indicators – low birthweight babies, infant mortality, children living in families where no parent has fulltime, year-round employment, single parent families, and child poverty.

The theme of the national 2006 *Casey Kids Count* report highlighted the importance of the nation's informal systems of child care, described as "family, friend, and neighbor care". In December 2006, Agenda for Children will release the *Louisiana Kids Count Special Report on Child Care*, now in the final stages of production. This report will document the known supply of child care – including licensed child care centers, Head Start sites, public preschool slots and family child care homes – in each parish of the state. Other indicators will include population estimates, percent of children in poverty, and self-sufficient income. Child care costs, as well as administrative data on the state's Child Care Assistance subsidy program will also be documented.

In collaboration with the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC), we produced monthly maps of open and closed child care centers in the post-Katrina New Orleans landscape. Since we began tracking this data in January, the number of open child care centers in New Orleans has doubled. The map is available on the Agenda for Children website, as well as the websites of GNOCDC and Louisiana Rebuilds.

Covering Kids and Families

Covering Kids and Families is a Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Foundation initiative to connect uninsured children to free health care coverage through Medicaid and the federal state children's health insurance program. Known in Louisiana as the Louisiana Children's Health Insurance Program (LaCHIP), the aim is to ensure that all eligible children are enrolled in the program. Working through a statewide coalition of over 900 individuals and organizations over a four year period, with Agenda for Children as lead agency working in close partnership with the state's Medicaid office, we made tremendous progress in reducing the number of Louisiana children who lack access to health care.

In 2006, CKF continued outreach to families through schools, faith-based institutions, child care centers and providers, social service offices, employers, non-profit agencies, community events, and many other venues. In addition, we held several gatherings – an interfaith breakfast in April for "Cover the Uninsured Week," a statewide coalition meeting in June in Baton Rouge, and the annual "Back to School" kick-off enrollment event and campaign. In August, we purchased and ran television ads for LaCHIP throughout the state in every major media market and supplied each region with promotional items and informational materials.

The four-year RWJ grant to Agenda for Children ended in September of this year, but thanks to the efforts of the coalition steering committee, funds were included in the state budget to enable the Medicaid office to continue the program and assume the role of lead agency, working with four regional coalitions. Agenda for Children is now leading the southeast regional coalition, including the six parishes in the Greater New Orleans area, working in partnership with Family Road of Greater Baton Rouge.

The post-Katrina environment and the culmination of the four-year RWJ grant have made this a year a bumpy ride for CKF and for LaCHIP. Last year at our 2005 “Back to School” enrollment press conference in early August, Governor Blanco shared her commitment to enrolling all eligible children in LaCHIP. At that time, the LaCHIP program had been in existence for six years and seen consistent increases in enrollment every month since its inception. A week later Hurricane Katrina hit, soon followed by Rita. Then in July of this year, the Congressional Deficit Reduction Act went into effect, requiring stringent new procedures for enrollment in LaCHIP. Families must now provide original documentation of their children’s identity and citizenship status – a cumbersome process at best, and especially so in the post-Katrina and Rita environment.

The tremendous momentum achieved over the past seven years halted. The advances made in Louisiana – reducing the number of uninsured children from 20% to 7.6% - are now turning back. As a direct result of the displacement and confusion created by the storms, coupled with the new rigorous demands of the enrollment process, we are now seeing the monthly number of LaCHIP applications drop for the first time in the program’s history.

Family Resources for Early Education (FREE)

The FREE program – and it is FREE – is funded through a contract with the Louisiana Department of Social Services (DSS) to provide parenting education and support for low and moderate income families in the Greater New Orleans and the Houma/Thibodaux areas.

FREE reaches parents in a variety of settings, in small groups of ten to twenty parents. In most cases, the sessions are ongoing, giving parents regular opportunities to problem-solve, try new skills and approaches, and reflect on their experiences. Participants include mothers and fathers, grandparents raising grandchildren, parents in homeless shelters, parents recovering from addictions, parents on probation and parole, and parents who just want to learn new ways of supporting their children’s healthy growth and development.

In 2005, we conducted 186 sessions for about 10 participants each and in the first twelve months of 2006, 138 sessions for about 20 participants per session.

Venues include:

Odyssey House

Probation and Parole offices

Shelters for homeless parents and for battered women

Early Start and Head Start

Housing Developments

Teen parents in the schools

Covenant House

St. Tammany Parenting Center and other social service agencies that engage parents.

FREE focuses on reaching parents where they are. After Katrina, FREE went to hotels housing flood victims, temporary shelters, and the Charity Hospital makeshift trauma centers to talk to parents about stress management and how to recognize and address the effects of trauma for themselves and their children.

The curriculum is built and rebuilt based on the individual needs of the participants. Some of our most popular topics are child development, guidance and discipline, stress management, and modeling good behavior.

Positive Steps: training for child care personnel

The Positive Steps training program covers all aspects of child care and early education, from brain development to messy play. The program served 99% of the number of participants proposed in the contract with DSS, and stayed open and flexible to the needs of child care programs and early childhood professionals as they returned to the area. More stress management and trauma response topics were added to the schedule to address mental health issues for children and caregivers. Given that the state's Bureau of Licensing suspended all licenses and registrations after the storms, a health and safety mini-conference was held to help centers and providers through the process of regaining their official status.

Noting that an extraordinary number of child care programs were, by necessity, hiring staff new to the field, Positive Steps developed a session to orient newcomers. "Working in Child Care 101" was well received because "there's a lot to know when children become your "business!"

As the state's new Quality Rating System for child care centers prepares to "roll out" in January 2007, Positive Steps has collaborated with the Child Care Resource and Referral agencies in the state and our on-site Technical Assistant team to address the issues and uncertainties that child care personnel are experiencing. The program has developed special training sessions to help centers get ready for meeting the challenges of a "star rating system."

In response to the increasing diversity in the area's population, Positive Steps is working with Family Services of Greater New Orleans to offer our Family Child Care orientation class in Spanish, to allow the Latino population to establish registered Family Child Care Homes.

In partnership with the UNO Small Business Development Program and Goodwork Network, we are offering training in business plans and handbooks for family child care providers, who receive stipends for successfully completing the training.

In 2005, Positive Steps provided 240 three-hour workshops for 4,847 child care personnel. In 2006, there have been 286 training sessions (typically three hours each) for 4,939 participants. These numbers include seven four-to-six hour "family child

care orientations” over a ten-month period for 73 individuals planning to use their own homes to offer child care for up to six children each.

“Map to Inclusive Child Care” is a separate training series, offered throughout the state, for centers and providers who include, or would like to include, children with special needs in their programs. The Inclusion program conducted 123 six-hour sessions for 123 participants in 2006.

Child Care Technical Assistance Program (CCTAP)

CCTAP, funded by a contract with DSS, visits child care centers and family child care homes to help them advance the quality of care in their programs. Using the nationally respected “Early Childhood Rating Scales”, our TA visitors walk through the elements of quality child care and engage the director or provider in a plan to identify problem areas and make improvements. Repeat visits are made to follow up and advance the plans. While child care centers and directors were initially reluctant to invite us in, they are now enthusiastic and appreciative about the assistance. During the visits, the TA visitors share information about grants and other resources and often bring donated materials such as toys, books, cots, outdoor and indoor equipment, furniture, and other items.

In addition to the on-site visits, technical assistance is often offered, by request, over the phone.

In 2005, CCTAP visited 512 family child care providers and in the first ten months of 2006, the team visited 401 family child care providers and 124 Class A child care centers. The total number of visits to centers and providers in 2006 was 591.

In 2006, the program has been working in close collaboration with the Tulane University Institute for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health in an effort to prepare for the roll-out of the state’s Quality Rating System. Child care centers that choose to engage in the program receive an assessment visit from Tulane, followed up by a TA visit from CCTAP focused on addressing the problem areas identified.

Child Care Resource and Referral (R&R)

Founded in 1989, the child care resource and referral office provides information for parents looking for child care that meets the needs of themselves and their children. When a parent calls looking for child care, a trained parent counselor uses an “intake form” to collect the information from the parent about their particular needs and preferences and then searches the database of roughly of over 2,400 child care facilities and related programs – including afterschool care, Pre-K, and summer camps. The counselor then gives the parent a list of at least three options, if available, that meet their needs.

In the last twelve-month period, R&R received over 6,000 calls, about 500 per month. About 2,250 of the calls resulted in referrals. The remainder of the calls were for consultation about licensing, consumer education materials, questions about the DSS subsidy program, and concerns from parents about their child's care.

PARTNERS

In the post-Katrina landscape, Agenda for Children has focused much of our effort on rebuilding the child care infrastructure in southeast Louisiana. With 80% of the New Orleans child care capacity and 50% of the Greater New Orleans area child care capacity decimated by the storm, the needs were – and are – substantial. However, we are climbing back! Almost 30% of the centers in Orleans Parish and 82% in Jefferson have re-opened. St. Bernard Parish had 26 centers before the storm and they now have only two. In Plaquemines Parish 77% of the centers are up and running. The other surrounding parishes in the region are running at or near pre-storm child care capacity.

The recovery of family child care homes, a very important part of the child care system, is much more problematic. In August 2005, there were 447 “known” family child care providers in Orleans Parish and now there are 26. Jefferson Parish dropped from 212 to 55. The other parishes in the region had very few family child care homes before the storm.

The gradual recovery of center-based child care is due to the tremendous efforts of many strong partners and generous donors. The list below represents only a portion of the effort that has been made and which continues, thankfully, as there is a long way to go.

United Way of Greater New Orleans has provided in-kind and financial assistance to child care centers in the area, and is engaging support from United Way of America to add to the rebuilding effort.

Kaplan Early Learning Company made a generous contribution, supplemented by discounts on some materials and equipment.

The state's Department of Social Services expanded the level of “repair and improvement grants” to allow two applications per licensed center in FY 2005 in the storm-impacted areas.

The early childhood professional community in Wisconsin sent a huge truck full of supplies and equipment for centers and providers. We held a toy give-away at a downtown location with a loading dock and 56 child care facilities in four GNO parishes went away happy!

The regional chairperson of the National Association of Family Child Care Providers came from San Antonio with a truck full also. We held a picnic in the park for 20

family child care providers and the children in their care and they left with over \$1,500 worth of new materials and supplies.

Thanks to a connection through Save the Children, one center received a center full of fine furnishings from Community Playthings.

The Institute of Mental Hygiene created a special grant-making category to support the rebuilding effort.

Kaboom built playgrounds!

The Imagine Early Learning Corporation in New York City paid for the fire alarm system that one new center needed to acquire their license.

Agenda for Children convened the “Child Care Rebuild Collaborative” in August 2006, to join forces with other child care advocates toward rebuilding and advancing the quality of child care in this region. The collaborative partners include the following agencies:

Agenda for Children

Children’s Defense Fund-LA

Department of Social Services, State of Louisiana

Greater New Orleans Afterschool Partnership

Institute of Mental Hygiene

Louisiana Association for the Education of Young Children

Louisiana Recovery Corps

LSUag Center

Save the Children

Tulane University Institute of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

United Way for the Greater New Orleans Area – Success by Six

United Way’s Women’s Leadership Initiative

The purpose of the Rebuild Collaborative is to secure funds, engage contractors and architects, and carry out a plan to bring child care capacity in this area up to the level needed.

POLICIES

In the next Congress the State Children’s Health Insurance Program will be up for reauthorization. A raise in the federal minimum wage, which has been at \$5.15 per hour for the last eleven years, will be introduced in this Congress.

The Louisiana Quality Rating System will go into effect, creating new opportunities and challenges. The Louisiana Bureau of Licensing will be revising the child care licensing standards. One point to watch will be the child/staff ratios. Our state’s ratios are inadequate to support high quality to care. The ratio of one caregiver to 11 two-year-olds is the one most in need of change.

The Department of Social Services will be submitting a new State Plan to the federal DHHS. Look for an increase in the maximum amount paid to centers and providers with no increase in the co-pay for parents. DSS will be also working toward allocating new funds for rebuilding child care facilities