

LEADERSHIP & ADVOCACY GUIDELINES

Background

As a coordinating body for services to children and families, the Council receives many requests for assistance in advocacy efforts. The Council's members have expressed a desire to take a more proactive role in advocacy. The purpose of this outline is to create a broad framework to allow the Council to be more proactive and effective in its advocacy efforts.

As a body of the Board of Commissioners and the MPCB-designee for Kent County, the Council works as an advocate *within* the system, working directly with department directors to coordinate and improve services (the Council's primary purpose). When necessary to improve and coordinate services, the Council can also engage in legislative advocacy, which is advocacy directed at elected officials designed to influence policy. Being an advocate *within* the system means that the Council operates under different constraints than do independent private agencies and individuals. However, being an internal advocate can also mean that the Council can be a more effective advocate. The outline attempts to take into consideration the following concerns:

- **Requirements of Multipurpose Collaborative Body status**

The Council acts in the capacity of the Multipurpose Collaborative Body (MPCB) in certain situations, as delegated by the Board of Commissioners, and receives Strong Families/Safe Children funds. In a letter to MPCBs dated July 20, 2000, the State human services directors emphasized the importance of the state-local partnership in improving services to families. They encouraged MPCBs to continue to work with the state in the spirit of partnership, and cautioned them that attempting to circumvent that partnership could be damaging to the relationship. They stated that lobbying; the re-direction of service dollars to pursue such activities, or the creation of bodies to lobby or promote political agendas or candidates can not be advanced under the name of the MPCB, or be supported by state-based funding.
- **The need to establish priorities**

Identifying priorities for advocacy will allow the Council to be proactive in its efforts and will ensure that the Council's voice is not diluted from overexposure. By being selective in its advocacy efforts, the Council will have greater influence. The establishment of priorities should not prevent the Council from taking action on emergent issues that may have a broad effect on the community. However, they should provide the Council with a strategic direction to focus its efforts and be an effective advocate.
- **Responsibility toward membership**

One of the Council's strengths is the diversity of its membership, which includes consumers, advocates, funding agencies, a business representative, and public and private agencies. The Council must be careful to conduct its advocacy efforts in a manner that is respectful of its members' different viewpoints and positions, and is responsible when speaking on their behalf. All advocacy efforts should be driven by data.

- **The need to address advocacy efforts with the appropriate tools**
There are a variety of available tools for advocacy and education. In order to be most effective, the Council should select the appropriate tools to accomplish its goals.
- **Ensure that the Council's ability to respond to emergency issues is not diminished**
The plan should not be so prescriptive that it does not allow the Council to respond to emergency issues that affect the community.
- **The overall goal is to be effective**
One of the Council's overall goals is to be an effective advocate and provide leadership for issues which affect children, youth, and families, including elders.

Responsibilities for Advocacy

- **Community Advocacy and Education**
Community advocacy and education efforts seek to change how our community (e.g., local agencies, the media, the general public, etc.) addresses the issues that affect children, youth, and families. Community advocacy and education should be considered important tools for the Council in its efforts to coordinate services for children, youth, and families in Kent County. Examples of community advocacy and education include raising public awareness of issues, increasing access to services; encourage media coverage of broad issues which affect children and families, and encouraging reallocation of resources to community priorities. These efforts can be directed by both standing committees and the Executive Committee, with feedback from the full Council. Goals for this type of advocacy include:
 - Increase public awareness and encourage media coverage of issues affecting families and children
 - Impact local processes or programs
 - Remove barriers to accessing services
- **Legislative & State Agency Advocacy and Education**
Legislative advocacy seeks to influence how elected officials and their administrative entities provide services, funding, or legislation affecting children, youth, and families. This type of advocacy is especially sensitive due to the Council's relationship with the MPCB and its Strong Families/Safe Children funding. At the same time, however, ensuring effective services sometimes requires seeking opportunities to educate elected officials or their administrative entities on issues that affect our children, youth, and families. Because this type of advocacy may involve the use of the Council's name, these efforts are best handled by the Executive Committee, with assistance from the Council and its committees. Goals for this type of advocacy include:
 - Influence legislation
 - Expand services or funding
 - Respond to emergency issues

Criteria for Advocacy

The Council and its committees should consider requests for formal Council community or legislative advocacy for issues that meet following criteria:

- Directly supports one of the four Council priority areas and strategies as identified in the KCFCCC 2004-2006 Action Plan
- Directly supports the current work of a Council committee
- Will benefit the community in one of the following ways:
 - Create or enhance opportunities for agencies (public and/or private) to work collaboratively;
 - Maintain existing revenue sources for services to families and children; or
 - Removes barriers to service improvement.
- Are specific and based on reliable data
- Are supported by all or a majority of Council members (depending on issue)

The Council will give priority to requests that maintain or enhance services funded through the Council (e.g., SF/SC, CP/CP, etc.) or initiated by a Council committee. The Council may also consider other issues, as outlined in the Council's Leadership and Advocacy Guidelines.

Process for Determining Strategic Direction

- **Community Advocacy and Education**
 1. Committees identify priorities for community advocacy and education efforts based on the Council's three year Action Plan, and include these efforts in their yearly action plans. In case of emergent issues, committees determine whether the issue is appropriate for Council action per the Criteria for Advocacy.
 2. The Committees include community advocacy and education efforts in their regular reporting schedule to the Council (i.e., Council approval of action plan, progress reports).
 3. Issues that requires legislative advocacy and education are referred to the Executive Committee for action per the process described below, with input from the full Council
- **Legislative & State Agency Advocacy and Education**
 1. The Council identifies priorities for governmental advocacy and education based on the Council's three year Action Plan as part of yearly strategic planning session
 2. The Executive Committee will seek Council input and determine the appropriate method for Council involvement. Potential tools include:
 - a. Individual contacts
 - b. Letter or other contact on behalf of the Council
 - c. Partner with another community or advocacy group (e.g., Michigan's Children, Kent County, associations, etc.)
 - d. Contact by key stakeholders
 3. In case of emergent issues, such as new legislation or concerns brought forth by committees or individual Council members, the Executive Committee determines whether the issue is appropriate for Council action per following process. Whenever possible, the Executive Committee seeks input from the full Council.

Process for Governmental Advocacy:

- 1) A Council committee or member identifies a service coordination/improvement issue that may require governmental advocacy
 - a) If the issue is identified by a Council member, he/she may present it to a committee for discussion if it is applicable to the current work of a committee, or directly to the Executive Committee or the full Council.
 - b) If the issue is identified by Council committee, the committee discusses the issue and determines whether to take a stance on it per its normal decision-making process. The committee chair or staff then presents the issue to the Executive Committee for consideration.
 - c) The Council committee or member provides a brief (one paragraph to one page) write up on the issue to the Executive Committee, including:
 - Summary of the issue, including which Council priority area it falls under
 - The expected benefit in terms of service coordination or improvement
 - Any potential consequences or other considerations
 - Requested action
- 2) Executive Committee gathers input from full Council when possible (via email or at a regularly scheduled Council meeting), considers request based on these guidelines and Advocacy Criteria, makes decision about whether the Council should advocate for the issue in question and the most appropriate and effective method for doing so (i.e., phone call, letter, through department or individual committee member, etc.). All Executive Committee decisions are final.
 - a) In cases where there is not sufficient time for the Executive Committee to consider a request, the Chair of the Council may act in the capacity of the Council. The Chair should make every effort to gather input from the full Council whenever possible.