



# A Great Idea

January 2003

## *Electoral Advocacy*

### *Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy Uses A Forum to Engage Gubernatorial Candidates*

#### **Summary**

The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy (OICA), in the 2002 election, wanted to show gubernatorial candidates the diversity of needs in Oklahoma and gauge their commitment to children's issues. To achieve that, OICA assembled a diverse panel of Oklahomans who would question the gubernatorial candidates at a Forum held during OICA's two-day annual conference. OICA knew that the panelists' different life experiences would be reflected in their questions to candidates, and each candidate would come to better understand the full range of societal needs. Through all of this, OICA worked to secure candidate commitments on children's issues.

#### **History**

The staff members at the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy were reading NACA's Electoral Advocacy Tool Kit in early 2002 when they stumbled upon information that triggered an idea. The organization needed a way to engage candidates on children's issues during the heated gubernatorial race. In short, they needed to get commitments on the issues. Further, if OICA wanted to make progress in the upcoming year, the candidates needed to be educated about OICA's issues. Why not then, they concluded, invite a diverse group of people to interview candidates in a forum. And, if the forum were held at OICA's two-day annual conference, wouldn't that mean more people would

attend the conference? So, for the first time in Oklahoma's history, a panel of real people - including a single-parent family, a former welfare recipient, American Indians and an African-American couple (among others) - shared the stage with the gubernatorial hopefuls. These politicians had to look in the eyes of these panelists, feel their pain, answer their questions and make a commitment to make a difference for them.

#### **Key Elements**

- ◆ OICA came up with the idea of the forum in early spring of 2002 and decided it would take place in the fall during the annual conference.
- ◆ A letter of invitation was sent to the candidates prior to the primary election. (Though the forum would take place after the primary, it was felt that it would be better to have commitments from the candidates before. Those who didn't win the primary elections just wouldn't take part in the forum.)
- ◆ A commitment letter was sent a few weeks later to each candidate, reminding him of the invitation and asking if he planned to take part in the forum.
- ◆ By summer, basic information about the format and an agreement letter for the forum was sent to each of the candidates.
- ◆ The organization also joined forces with the League of Women Voters and the Junior

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League, as both organizations had done a sufficient number of similar events.

- ◆ In late summer, OICA worked with its network to select the people who would make up the panel for the forum. OICA made certain diverse faces, views and experiences would be represented.
- ◆ A moderator was chosen. OICA chose Jack Levine, President of Voices for Florida's Children, because he has experience in moderating similar forums and he was already going to attend the conference.
- ◆ The organization then worked with the panel to craft questions for the forum. The questions and rules of the forum were then sent to the candidates a week before the event along with background information on the issues.
- ◆ OICA used its network of advocates and concerned citizens to follow-up with politicians. A couple of candidates tried to back out of the forum at the last minute, but the network of advocates called them to make certain they were coming.
- ◆ Board members greeted candidates as they arrived for the forum. This allowed for relationship building.

### Staff Time

- ◆ OICA's executive director and two staff members worked on the forum, planning the event, inviting panelists and candidates, etc. The executive director and one staff member both spent 80 hours over the course of the year on the event. The third staff member spent about 30 hours during the same year assisting.

### Costs

- ◆ The organization spent a total of \$1,000 for letters and postage and printing expenses. Most of the expenses (i.e., building rent, moderator's travel, food and hotel expenses) were absorbed into the cost of the already-planned conference.

### Things to Consider

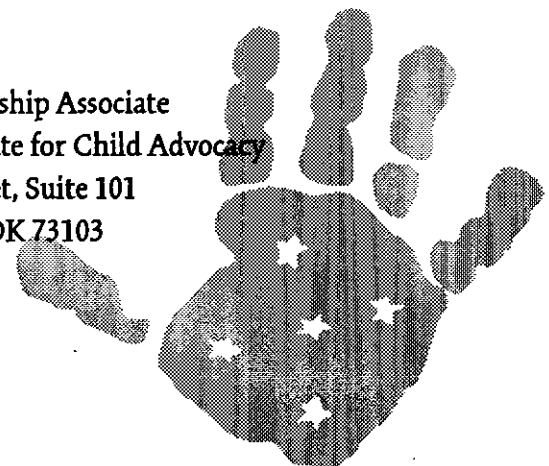
- ◆ To reach the most people, the forum needs to be televised. The staff at OICA decided against televised coverage because they felt it would limit the number of people who could participate in the live audience. Consider consulting with your local news media to find a venue that will suit everyone's purpose.
- ◆ To make certain that panelists ask questions that touch on your issues, it is advisable to have questions scripted.

### Outcomes<sup>1</sup>

- ◆ Every candidate vying for the Governor's Office in the general election was present at the forum.
- ◆ Those in attendance came away from the forum with a better idea about where the candidates stood on the issues.
- ◆ The forum actually attracted more people to OICA's conference and will most likely engage more people in the organization's issues.
- ◆ OICA's executive director, staff and board members were able to begin building relationships with the candidates resulting in a good relationship with the sitting governor.

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