

Making a Difference

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The *Child Advocates Making a Difference* series profiles the extraordinary accomplishments of Voices' member organizations across the country. If you would like to receive this publication electronically, email camad@voices.org.

ACCOUNTABILITY: Advocates work for child welfare reform

Maryland's Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY), a member of Voices for America's Children, won a huge victory for children when its multi-year advocacy effort resulted in the Maryland Child Welfare Accountability Act of 2006. The Act mandates oversight of child welfare services, and the development of methodology to reduce staff-to-caseload ratios to levels set by the Child Welfare League of America. It will improve the lives of children in foster care, those who have been abused, children in group homes, and other children and families served by Maryland's Department of Human Services.

If at First You Don't Succeed

In 2003 ACY proposed a child welfare reform bill. The state legislature did not pass it, but did pass a mandate for a Task Force on Child Welfare Accountability, for which ACY provided staff and resources, and chaired a data and outcomes work group.



Jann Jackson, Executive Director of Advocates for Children and Youth on the steps of the Maryland State House, handing flyer to Delegate Nathaniel Exum, that says "Don't leave Annapolis tonight without passing HB 1197, Child Welfare Accountability Act of 2005."

The task force issued a report in December 2004 with recommendations for improving the Maryland child welfare system's performance and accountability. The report noted that the system touches the lives of 90,000 children and their families each year. Approximately

11,000 children are in out-of-home placements because of abuse or neglect or because their parents are unable to take care of them.

Feeling the time was right, and building on the report's recommendations, ACY worked to introduce another child welfare reform bill the

following year: The Child Welfare Accountability Act of 2005. ACY drafted language, secured a legislative sponsor, and guided its partners in the Coalition to Protect Maryland Children—24 organizational members statewide—towards consensus on the elements of the bill.

The bill passed the House late in the legislative session. Up against partisanship and resistance from the administration, ACY helped the House Appropriations Committee prepare for floor debate, outlining supporting arguments and finding relevant data to meet counter-arguments. Armed with these facts, House committee chairs and members spoke out on behalf of the bill and won the floor fight—but it would be too late.

The Senate Finance Committee did not hold a hearing on the bill until the last evening of the 2005 General Assembly Session. The committee gave the bill a favorable report, but without enough time to move the bill through the full Senate chamber, it was dead for the year.

Try and Try Again

But ACY had laid the groundwork for progress. Legislators continued tinkering with the bill during the summer of 2005. The House

Appropriations Committee formed a work group to look at the issue. ACY provided testimony, and encourage legislative staff to contact child welfare experts from the University of Maryland's School of Social Work, who also provided testimony.

In December 2005, as Maryland's 2006 legislative session approached, ACY held a major press conference on child welfare and foster care. Every television station in the metropolitan area covered the event.

While other states such as California include some child welfare measurements as regulations, Maryland codified these requirements into law, an affirmation of a strong commitment to improving child welfare services.

The Speaker of the House requested that a report on the issues raised at the event be completed by the beginning of the 2006 legislative session.

By the time the Child Welfare Accountability Act of 2006 had its hearings in the House and Senate, ACY had so saturated the General Assembly with support for the bill that legislators on both sides of the aisle signed on as co-sponsors of the bill.

After years of hard work, ACY saw the fruits of its labor—the first comprehensive child welfare reform legislation to pass in the state of Maryland. The bill contained the provisions for comprehensive quality assessment for which ACY had originally advocated, including local assessment; establishing caseload ratios; developing a methodology to determine actual costs for services; and tracking

expenditures by child. While other states such as California include some child welfare measurements as regulations, Maryland codified these requirements into law, an affirmation of a strong commitment to improving child welfare services.

Keeping an Eye Out

When the bill takes effect in January 2007, ACY will begin working on ensuring effective implementation. The Act included statutorily mandated outcome and performance measurements, which ACY Deputy Director Linda Heisner notes, "provide real accountability."

According to Heisner, the 2006 Act was a success because of "a combination of government relations, press and communications, mobilization with Coalition partners, and policy work with [legislators].." ACY's steadfast commitment to improving Maryland's child welfare system demonstrates yet again how child advocates can work together to achieve big wins for children.

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