



national foster care coalition



**LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE CHILD WELFARE FIELD**

PREPARED BY **childfocus**[®]

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Coalitions are among the most effective and daunting advocacy strategies that can be used to improve the lives of children, youth, and families in the child welfare system. The ability to bring together a diverse group of organizations and individuals to support a common advocacy or communications agenda can have a formidable impact on the field.

Yet a coalition's sustainability also depends on its ongoing capacity to provide strong and consistent leadership, raise money and choose a governance structure that meets both the needs of individual members and the group as a whole. In addition to maintaining these internal balances, coalitions must also reflect and respond to the shifting priorities of complex political and funding environments.

For almost two decades, the National Foster Care Coalition (NFCC) played a critical leadership role in foster care reform. Due to financial restraints, the NFCC Board decided to close its doors in the Spring of 2017 and directed its remaining funds to produce the following report. The purpose of this document is to explore the Coalition's key contributions and challenges, review lessons learned, and share recommendations on how future coalitions might address persistent gaps in the child welfare field.

To inform the content of this report, NFCC retained ChildFocus, a national child welfare policy consulting firm, to conduct confidential one-on-one interviews with current and former NFCC members, Hill staff, and other stakeholders in the field who had worked with the Coalition. ChildFocus also administered an extensive online survey to NFCC's member list and reviewed strategic plans, Coalition publications, and other historical documents. This report provides an overview of the feedback from this review process and shares interviewees' thoughts on next steps.

PURPOSE & HISTORY OF THE COALITION



NFCC has its roots in the National Foster Care Awareness Project (NFCAP), an effort that began in 1999 to create a public awareness campaign around foster care issues and youth aging out of the child welfare system. Led by a collaborative working group of Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), Casey Family Programs, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, its collective advocacy efforts helped secure the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, later named the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, a seminal legislative effort that fundamentally changed the policy landscape for older youth. Following the passage of this law, NFCAP was instrumental in its

implementation, mainly by creating easily accessible information about the scope of the legislation, advocating for and shaping regulatory guidance, and providing materials designed to help states and localities think through their implementation issues.

Based on the success of NFCAP, the participating organizations decided to create an ongoing coalition to work collaboratively on a broader set of foster care issues. While there were already other robust policy coalitions in the child welfare field, such as the Child Welfare and Mental Health Coalition, chaired by MaryLee Allen of the Children's Defense Fund, and the National Child Abuse Coalition, chaired by Tom Birch,

these coalitions focused mainly on federal legislative policy strategies. NFCAP stakeholders and other national child welfare organizations felt strongly that, in addition to the excellent policy advocacy of existing entities, the field would benefit from a platform that would allow a diverse group of stakeholders to coordinate communications efforts, allow for peer learning and exchange, and pursue advocacy strategies that cut across the entire foster care continuum.

NFCC's mission was to build momentum for change by harnessing a collective voice and enabling collaborative action to promote the well-being of children, youth and families impacted by the child welfare system.

In December 2001, the National Foster Care Coalition (NFCC) became a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, and Robin Nixon, a national expert on youth in foster care, became its first Executive Director. Following Robin's departure in 2006, Kathi Crowe became Executive Director of the NFCC from 2008 to 2010, followed by John Sciamanna, who managed the Coalition

part-time from 2010 to 2015. Upon John's departure to return to CWLA, the Board took over the NFCC's leadership, including the responsibilities for running Coalition meetings, engaging new membership, and identifying potential funders. When membership dues could no longer support the full-time Executive Director and other funding opportunities did not become available, the Board made the decision to end the Coalition in March 2017.

At its height, the NFCC was comprised of 52 dues-paying members, organizations, and individuals focused on children and families with child welfare involvement, including national advocacy organizations, private philanthropy, service providers, think tanks, and other stakeholders. NFCC's mission was to build momentum for change by harnessing a collective voice and enabling collaborative action to promote the well-being of children, youth and families impacted by the child welfare system. To fulfill its mission, NFCC engaged in a variety of collective activities, including sharing information, working on policy publications, collaborating on joint communications around National Foster Care Month, providing information on different topics to members of Congress, organizing annual meetings on Capitol Hill, and advising members of Congress.

The Coalition met quarterly for half-day in-person meetings in Washington, DC, with a conference line provided for out-of-town members. Between meetings, it also hosted additional opportunities to highlight particular child welfare issues, featuring Hill staff, researchers, and others. In addition, NFCC distributed weekly newsletters with updates on the latest policy developments, new research and other resources from the field, and regularly circulated member news, sign-on letters, and other alerts.

NFCC'S CONTRIBUTIONS & CHALLENGES

Key Components of a Strong Coalition

Experience dictates – and responses to the interviews and survey confirm – that in order to run a strong coalition, at least five key factors need to be in place: a clear vision, strong leadership, diverse and connected membership, ongoing nimbleness, and, perhaps most important to support all of these components, sufficient funding. These factors, common to all successful coalitions, provide a useful framework to understand the interview findings and complex organizational dynamics.

#1: Clear Vision for Mission, Goals and Strategy

Several interviewees noted that the NFCC was at its strongest when it had a clear vision for what it wanted to do, general consensus on how to accomplish those goals, and which strategies to focus on (e.g., communications, policy, grassroots organizing, etc.). One interviewee pointed out that because the Coalition was grounded in collective action



around older youth in and transitioning out of foster care, the NFCC was able to come out of the gate with strong success that could later be more easily parlayed into a broader range of issues. On the other hand, those interviewed also underscored that the NFCC often struggled to direct its limited resources efficiently when there was not a clear and consistent vision

for change. “I feel like we were at our best when we were working together on a project or a publication with a clear goal and outcomes,” said one long-time member. “When we didn’t have that, it was easy to get off course.”

#2: Strong, Consistent and Independent Leadership

Interviewees and survey respondents identified strong leadership as a key ingredient in NFCC’s ongoing success, particularly the importance of an executive director who can both manage the direction of the coalition and ensure its alignment with member priorities. Interviewees also pointed out that strong and consistent leadership is important at the Board level. They agreed that the Coalition was in the best position to succeed when it could manage the Board and members’ needs in a way that still allowed decisions to be made and the work to get done: “Our directors were able to thread the needle in a way that solicited and respected feedback from members but was still directive enough.” One Board member observed, “directors have to be a convener, a connector *and* a fundraiser.”



#3: Diverse and Connected Members

The importance of diverse, engaged and connected members was also identified as a key element of the NFCC’s early success. Said one interviewee: “what was unique was that we had members from all over the map, including policy types, direct service folks, and the big funders in the field.” While that diversity could also be a source of tension in determining common goals and strategies, interviewees suggested it was essential, because it meant that the composition of the NFCC’s membership directly reflected and channeled the composition of the field. Given that its overarching mission focused on a “collective voice and collaborative action,” a cross-disciplinary membership representing national, state and local perspectives allowed the Coalition to craft messages and strategies that were more likely to resonate across the field and not just in one particular sector. “We already had a highly active national policy coalition working on child welfare issues,” noted one individual. “What was unique about the NFCC was that our members had broader perspectives on reform.”

#4: Nimble Response to Changing Conditions

Even with a clear mission and general agreement on how to accomplish it, several interviewees talked about how critical it is for a coalition to respond quickly and nimbly to changing political conditions, policy directions, and emerging trends in the field. All coalitions experience some difficulty in balancing commitment to their core mission with taking advantage of opportunities driven by another funder, organization, or outside force. Two examples interviewees pointed to were the field’s growing focus on well-being and the Pew Commission on Children in

Foster Care’s recommendations on child welfare reform, released in 2004. In both cases, outside leaders dominated the field’s discussions for a limited period of time, but because the focus of these discussions didn’t necessarily square with the Coalition’s mission and focus at the time, some members believed opportunities were lost. At the same time, at least one survey respondent pointed to the Coalition’s unique success in generating a quick response from its members to new directions in the field, such as fast-moving legislative proposals and new areas of interest.

#5: Sufficient and Balanced Funding

Not surprisingly, interviewees and survey respondents identified funding as the Achilles heel of the NFCC and other coalitions. Sufficient funding levels were essential to cover the cost of the NFCC staff, meetings and projects. Equally important, however, was a *balanced* source of funding. Interviewees specifically pointed to the ongoing challenges of collecting membership dues reasonable enough to reflect modest organizational budgets but high enough to cover operational costs. One successful way to fill that gap, members argued, was to ask the funders in the group to cover a larger share of the expenses. This approach, while practically appealing, also created problems because it sometimes had a chilling effect on Coalition members who depended on the same funders for support. “When one of the members is covering a third of the costs, it’s hard to disagree with the direction they want,” said one interviewee. “Ideally you raise the dues to reflect the true cost of running a coalition, but then you lose your smaller organizations.”



NFCC’s Key Contributions to the Child Welfare Field

Interviewees and surveys pointed to several contributions the NFCC made to the child welfare field. Building on the fundamental components described, there was almost uniform consensus around three primary functions:

- 1 High-level information sharing from the Executive Director about key policy directions, trends, and other developments;
- 2 Peer exchange and networking that allowed members to connect with each other and learn about new strategies or approaches; and
- 3 The ability to connect national, state and local voices in the field for a more cohesive approach to policy advocacy, communications and other strategies.

An Overview of NFCC's Key Accomplishments

Policy Advocacy

- Raising the public and policy profile of the challenges facing older youth in foster care and advocating successfully for the passage of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (which includes the John H. Chafee Independent Living and the Education and Training Voucher (ETV) Programs)
- Publishing and distributing detailed Q & A documents to assist states and localities in successfully implementing the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program
- Organizing Congressional and Senate briefing on various foster care topics including aging out, education and teen pregnancy
- Providing ongoing counsel and resources to Congressional staff

Communications and Messaging

- Founding and participating as an ongoing partner in National Foster Care Month, a continuing national campaign designed to improve the well-being of children and youth in care and support the individuals and systems that support them
- Encouraging funders, direct service providers, and national, state and local organizations to participate in and help shape a collective response to federal policy discussions over the past two decades
- Shaping and distributing effective messages and talking points for the field on a variety of child welfare-related issues

Information Sharing and Networking

- Organizing and distributing monthly newsletters, sponsoring expert speakers, and conducting issue-specific webinars on topics of interest

Elevating Youth and Other Stakeholder Voices

- Engaging youth in foster care and foster care alumni and supporting them in their advocacy
- Organizing Hill Days to conduct advocacy training and schedule meetings for foster youth and alumni, foster parents and advocates to visit with their members of Congress

Timely, high-level information sharing by NFCC's Executive Director was a critical resource for Coalition members.

Coalition members consistently noted that the NFCC was one of the best sources of information about current developments in the child welfare field. Most notably, the Coalition sent out weekly newsletters that included detailed, easily accessible information about recent policy developments, events, reports, and other news from the field, which supported members' work and decision-making in their own organizations and helped them stay up to date on recent trends in the field.

Special meetings organized by the NFCC between quarterly meetings often focused on an emerging issue of interest to the members. For example, the NFCC held an event in 2013 focused on credit checks for youth in foster care, which stakeholders found extremely useful and introduced them to the key players, such as staff at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), who were new to the federal scene.

NFCC members emphasized that the Coalition's information-sharing function was valuable because it wasn't just "recycling of information we could find otherwise," but rather synthesized and curated to help push its members' thinking and understanding of key issues in the field. Said one member: "this is especially important for new groups coming up the ranks that could use this forum and feel like they are part of a larger movement, learning what they need to learn and connecting to the people they need to be connected to." As with any coalition, the NFCC inevitably took on issues that had varying levels of interest among its members, but there was general agreement that discussions helped its members clarify what they should be working on, how

it squared with their missions, and what they needed to pay attention to on a more global level. Several interviewees praised the NFCC's committee structure during the first several years of the Coalition, which played a key role in recruiting new members and moving the work forward productively.

NFCC also gave its members the opportunity to connect with people and organizations to which they would not otherwise have exposure, such as practitioners in the field, national organizations, researchers, and Hill staff.

The opportunity for regular peer exchange and networking helped drive both NFCC and members' own organizational priorities.

NFCC also gave its members the opportunity to connect with people and organizations to which they would not

otherwise have had exposure, such as practitioners, national organizations, researchers, and Hill staff. Regular meetings, as well as webinars and other issue-specific meetings, provided a unique opportunity for members to share their work. Interviewees and survey respondents consistently noted that the combination of information-sharing, peer exchange, and networking had the benefit of helping members find other organizations they could partner with on individual projects and build allies. As one interviewee put it, “the Coalition never actually did the matchmaking, but it set the table and, when staffed well, created more intentional opportunities for these connections.”

Interviewees also indicated it was helpful to hear different viewpoints on key developments to get a better sense of how their perspectives would be received by different stakeholders. This networking was especially valuable to members who handled a wide portfolio of issues in addition to child welfare.

NFCC was one of the few collective efforts in the child welfare field to effectively bring together national, state and local voices around a common agenda.

Prior to NFCC, there were (and continue to be) effective policy-focused coalitions in child welfare, but none that brought together national, state and local voices around a common agenda. This was a particularly important development for the field because up until that point, diverse stakeholders only had the opportunity to interact during conferences or meetings sponsored by a specific organization with a pre-determined agenda. Interviewees explained that the NFCC’s independent

approach to agenda-setting was made stronger by the combination of national, state and local perspectives.

In addition to its official members, NFCC maintained a large email distribution list of 300 organizations, which it used to disseminate sign-on letters and other time-sensitive information to hundreds of stakeholders in the field. The Coalition’s extensive reach was noted by a former Hill staffer who commented on its unique ability to “get the word out on the national and state level” by generating dozens of signatories and target multiple Congressional districts in a short period of time. Interviewees and survey respondents also noted, however, that this engagement of local and state voices seemed to weaken over time as the NFCC became increasingly dominated by larger national organizations and had fewer funds to forge new member relationships.

NFCC’s Most Significant Challenges

Interviewees and survey respondents were also asked to identify areas in which the NFCC could have been stronger. In offering perspectives on these challenges, members made two things clear. First, there was consensus that the challenges the NFCC faced were *universally* shared by almost every coalition in which they were involved. One interviewee put it this way: “I think all coalitions have a shelf life. Without steady funding, it’s really hard for a group to withstand natural changes in leadership, constant turnover of members, and significant shifts in the landscape.” Another noted that there were very few examples of coalitions that existed for long periods of time without substantially changing their strategy or reinventing themselves altogether. In particular, one

interviewee commented that all coalitions struggle to “fire up their base” when there is not a compelling project or clear threat to its member: “It’s easier to get people together when legislation is moving or there is a big budget cut,” she explained, “but otherwise people have a limited attention spans.” Several interviewees pointed out that all coalitions struggle to stay relevant. “To really work, members need to perceive the collective power of the coalition as being more effective than what they can do alone,” said one interviewee. “If it’s no longer directly relevant to their work and their ability to succeed in their organizations, member interest fades.”

Second, many interviewees, especially those who had been involved with the NFCC since the beginning, were careful to emphasize that the Coalition’s perceived weaknesses were not consistent over its entire lifespan. Instead, they described a series of dynamics that came together over time and ultimately contributed to the Coalition’s closure. For example, limited funding in the Coalition’s second decade made it difficult to support the full-time staff needed to retain and recruit new members, supervise the creation of new products for distribution in the field, and drive a common agenda.

At times, NFCC seemed to lack a clear purpose and mission that would successfully unite and excite members around a common, actionable agenda.

Although the NFCC’s publications and website articulated a clear mission, its members and others interviewed remarked that its vision was not consistently used to guide its work. Over time, subtle mission drift and confusion made it difficult to maintain energy, enthusiasm

and follow-through around critical goals. This may be in part due to NFCC’s challenge to find a balance between meeting and supporting its own existence with the needs and priorities of member organizations, which resulted in a more staff-driven rather than member-driven agenda and priorities. Ultimately, the lack of clarity around its mission led the Coalition to focus incrementally on discrete tasks such as information sharing instead of more impactful collective action. According to one survey respondent: “[NFCC’s] purpose just wasn’t clear as times changed. It seemed like people just talked about what they were doing rather than the Coalition taking the lead on where the membership should be focusing their energies.”

Others pointed out that even though it was called the National Foster Care Coalition, its stated mission conveyed a much broader focus on all children and families in the child welfare system. As a result, some members pushed to move beyond a focus on foster care, which increased the potential for conflict and competition with other existing coalitions. By contrast, others perceived that the NFCC became too focused on issues related to older youth in the foster care system at the expense of other issues on which the coalition could have led. Mission confusion further blurred a clear and collective understanding of the NFCC’s central purpose. As a result, members did not always understand why the NFCC focused on some issues over others.

Interviews with members also underscored a lack of consensus regarding the basic role the Coalition should be playing. While some members saw the need for a united voice to influence federal legislative efforts and respond to requests from the Hill, others believed the Coalition should

be more outward-facing by providing the field with consistent messaging and communications support. Several interviewees and survey respondents also noted there was not a strong process for determining which issue areas to focus on, leaving it up to the Executive Director or a Board member to pick and choose the areas based on their own issues of interest. Others noted that this was not always the case. In the early days, the Coalition would hold an annual full-day meeting during which policy priorities and other issue areas were selected by members. This was an effective and staff-intensive process that diminished over time as funding decreased. One board member remarked, “we became more staff-driven as a means of supporting our survival and lost sight of our role as a convener and facilitator in the process.”



Members felt NFCC spent too much focusing on information sharing and not enough on building and advancing a shared advocacy agenda.

Interviewees and survey participants agreed almost universally that the NFCC should have spent more time working with members to craft and drive a common advocacy agenda, rather than letting information sharing be its primary function. This was especially true in later years, some asserted, when information became so much easier to access through multiple on-line sources and social media. In the words of one DC-based policy expert: “I can’t imagine a coalition in DC that doesn’t have some plan for collective action. Even if information sharing is a primary benefit, you need to provide more value to members to keep people engaged.”

Some interviewees made it clear that, in the later years of the Coalition, the lack of financial support for full-time leadership made it practically impossible to drive an advocacy agenda – a job they acknowledged requires daily contact with key members, policy makers, communications experts and others. “A coalition can’t function as an organization without full-time staff. It’s unfair to the members and to the director. We definitely did the best we could with the funding we have.”

With the exception of its early participation in the passage of federal legislation on older youth, stakeholders interviewed generally struggled to identify any legislation or major advocacy effort in which the NFCC played a primary role, including significant legislative victories such as the Fostering Connections and Increasing Adoptions Act in 2008 and, more recently, in the Family First Prevention Services Act debate. “I am

just thinking of what we would have been able to do if we have been at our peak during Family First,” said one member. “I feel like we could really have made a difference on that if we had continued to grow and bring in members from the states like we did at the beginning.”

The universal tension between the fundraising interests of the coalition, itself an organization, and the financial interests of individual members is precisely what makes a sustainable funding model so tricky.

The lack of a sustainable funding model was the most significant factor in NFCC’s decline.

The unfortunate reality is that there are only a limited number of business models to sustain a Coalition like the NFCC, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. According to coalition-building experts, an ideal approach is when each member provides equal financial support at levels that are sufficient to fully staff the coalition and all activities.

This model tends to work best for well-resourced corporations, trade associations, and other private sector entities, but success is more difficult with non-profit organizations, all of which have limited budgets, unpredictable funding sources, and changing priorities. Bringing together organizations of different sizes often exacerbates the problem by necessitating a tiered funding structure, and therefore, disproportionate investments and influence based on contribution levels. Even with the best intentions, these inequalities often throw off the balance of power and cause resentment and sometimes disengagement among members. One Board member pointed out that it was a mistake not to collect membership dues from the Coalition’s inception. “We provided benefits for free for too long. By the time we started charging a flat rate, it was hard to link the benefits to dues since they had already been getting them without a charge.”

In addition to the complex dynamics of membership dues, outside sources of funding to support coalition building are equally problematic. Government funding is not reliable and cannot support advocacy activities. In the business sector, there is little or no corporate interest in child welfare. This leaves private philanthropy as one of the only other viable sources of support for growing coalitions. When it began, NFCC relied heavily on foundation funding to sustain the high levels of activity and staffing it needed to deliver on its initial agenda. The willingness to accept outside funding, however, was not without controversy, as some members, while grateful for the support, felt that a larger contribution by funders who were also members gave them subtle influence over the Coalition’s agenda. NFCC actively sought other

sources of philanthropic support, but it was difficult to convince outside funders to invest in a coalition that did not closely align with their own institutional agendas.

As is true for all coalitions, the lack of a sustainable funding structure created a domino effect that impacted all aspects of the NFCC's operations, most notably the capacity to support a full-time director, fund publications and events that attracted outward attention and support, recruit and excite new members, and communicate effectively with child welfare stakeholders who were not Coalition members. Despite these limitations, several interviewees noted the extraordinary job that the NFCC's directors, and later the Board, did in sustaining the coalition's basic operations while being supported at only a small fraction of adequate funding levels.

A few stakeholders suggested the NFCC and its members could have worked

smarter and harder to engage potential funders by making a stronger case for why such an entity is essential to advance the work of the field. They also added that more structured interface with potential funders might have also been helpful for individual NFCC members whose individual agendas might align with funders' interests. Another interviewee pointed out that the universal tension between the fundraising interests of the coalition, itself an organization, and the financial interests of individual members is precisely what makes a sustainable funding model so tricky. "You don't want a coalition to compete with its members for money, but that is bound to happen in a small field without a lot of funders," said one interviewee. Despite differing perspectives, those interviewed, along with Coalition leadership, agreed that it was the lack of funding that ultimately ended the Coalition's efforts.



CRITICAL GAPS IN THE CHILD WELFARE FIELD

The accomplishments described above underscore NFCC's unique role in child welfare reform. In considering its impact on future efforts, however, it is also important to understand the remaining gaps in the field. Interviewees were asked about their perspectives on outstanding gaps and deficiencies in the field that impede progress on the systemic and programmatic levels and for individual children and families. A critical question is how future leadership efforts can build on the best of NFCC's work while employing new and more effective strategies to drive change in child welfare.



Advocacy

There is no longer a diverse, unified, and disciplined advocacy voice with the capacity to drive a common agenda.

One Hill staffer said: "I keep waiting for the groups to get together, come up with a plan and bring it to us. I feel like we go to them and then nobody agrees on what to do." While an issue-focused community can agree completely on a path forward, to achieve real change there must be some effort to speak with a united voice to policy makers about the priorities for the field. Across the country, there are effective, committed organizations actively working on almost every aspect of child welfare reform, and yet the field still lacks a shared vision that can be understood and supported beyond the usual players.

We need to diversify our advocacy voices for broader reach and impact.

Effective policy advocacy requires a broad and diverse set of messengers who are committed to advancing a common set of policy reforms. Currently, the child welfare field is scattered, with too many factions working in silos, and sometimes, at cross-purposes. Some coalitions that already exist are effective, but tend to bring together like-minded individuals focused on one narrow issue (e.g., older youth) or one particular advocacy strategy (e.g., policy). Many interviewed remarked on the need

for a strong umbrella entity that can forge robust connections between the national, state and local levels, attract interest across disciplines, and integrate the voices of those with lived experience to ensure that high-level strategies can actually succeed in improving outcomes for children and families. Several interviewees commented that the child welfare community must learn how to better engage non-traditional partners in advocacy. Social impact and health communities are good potential partners, for example, as are early childhood and law enforcement personnel, groups not usually invited to the decision-making table in child welfare discussions despite their roles in the system's success. Said one member: "we need the doctors, public health, business leaders, the faith community, and more as an integral part of our advocacy community, and they have to be there from the beginning. It's not good enough to bring them in at the end of the game. They need to help write the playbook."

The child welfare field has traditionally lacked more sophisticated and coordinated advocacy tactics, particularly in comparison to other issue areas such as early childhood and health care.

The field should explore more innovative advocacy strategies.

Several interviewees pointed out that the child welfare field has traditionally lacked sophisticated and coordinated advocacy tactics, particularly in comparison to other issue areas such as early childhood and health care. Even with the most diverse and unified coalition, they asserted, a message is only as effective as the way in which it is delivered. Interviewees and survey respondents also noted a common tendency within the child welfare community to "let the perfect be the enemy of the good" when it comes to advocacy strategies. As one interviewee put it, "the advocates want to wait until everything lines up perfectly. Sometimes we need pragmatism instead of ideology and to remember that a bunch of small reforms over time still make a difference."

Interviewees noted that innovative policy advocacy, accompanied by a successful public communications campaign, was at its height during the Pew Commission on Children on Foster Care, which was centered on the priorities of one foundation. While the Pew effort led to one of the more comprehensive pieces of legislation in recent years, the advocacy tactics that were used to garner support, such as compelling data, grassroots organizing in select member districts, empowering constituent voices, and campaign-like messaging, have not been sustained or replicated in other issues of importance to the field. Some interviewees also believe the child welfare field should borrow from strategies that are working in other fields such as home visiting, which has successfully championed its programs at the federal and state levels. One interviewee noted that child welfare advocates could do a better job of using data to inform their advocacy. For example, children aged 0-3

represent the largest segment of children coming into care. “We should be using data like this to inform our advocacy efforts, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone making these connections.”

Stronger connections should be made between federal and state policy makers and the field.

Several interviewees observed that the child welfare community is still struggling to build solid and consistent relationships between key policymakers and coalitions. “There are still just a couple of organizations that are involved enough to make calls on policy,” said one advocate, “but the field’s advocacy capacity could really benefit from all sorts of people like researchers and service providers.” There were also some comments that the field in general is not as savvy as it could be about proactively building and maintaining relationships with policymakers over time. While acknowledging that forging strong relationships requires time, patience and money, some interviewees felt that, too often, advocates waited until there was a proposal in play or a “fire to be put out” before they reached out to federal and state legislators. As a result, they didn’t have sufficient influence when they most needed it. Strong relationships and connections are essential to the policy advocacy process, and one of the core functions of a strong coalition is the ability to connect the field to policymakers who can become champions for the cause.

Child welfare advocates should consider more proactive advocacy approaches.

Interviewees and survey respondents also shared their perspectives that child welfare advocates too often follow Congress’s lead rather than working together to develop a common agenda and convincing policy



makers to support it. “We’re handed legislation to comment on instead of writing it. We should be doing a better job of telling policymakers what we want,” said one advocate. Without a collective commitment to creating and pushing for legislative proposals, advocacy calls are more likely to be made by those organizations and groups with more resources, better relationships and stronger influence. As a result, the policy landscape is made up of a patchwork of legislative proposals promoted by special interests in the child welfare field instead of a more cohesive and broad-based approach to reform. One interviewee noted that the only organizations currently taking a more proactive approach to child welfare reform are foundations or individual grantees with substantial financial support. “More and more, foundations are driving the policy agenda in child welfare. This has enormous implications for the field because it has the potential to mute some of the voices that don’t have the right resources or connections.”

Developing Effective Communications Strategies

The child welfare field must develop and communicate knowledge and messages more effectively.

With so many organizations working on child welfare issues – all with different philosophies, approaches and methods of communication – some interviewees pointed out that it has been more difficult than ever for the field to deliver one centralized and accessible source of the latest information. While some members get their information from the federal government’s Child Welfare Information Gateway, the resources provided by the Capacity Building Collaborative, and other private sources such as the Chronicle for Social Change, many argue that the field lacks an unbiased and regular source of information that cuts across all aspects of the foster care system – one that courts, child welfare agencies, frontline workers, volunteers, policymakers, researchers and others can rely on for regular updates on developments in the field. A more unified approach to knowledge development might include regular updates on research, emerging policy proposals, recent legal decisions impacting foster care issues, evidence-based programs, and emerging policy proposals. It is also difficult to find a balanced view of major controversies in the field and opportunities to debate issues as they emerge. This information source should be a place to go for *analysis* on key issues impacting child welfare.

This type of “go to” resource on a broad range of issues impacting children and families in the child welfare system could also serve as a resource for reporters covering child welfare and foster care

issues, particularly when significant events occur in communities, such as child fatalities. Creating stronger relationships with reporters who cover these issues is also a strategy that can help to unify and shape public perceptions of foster care is and how it can be improved. Several interviewees, for example, remarked that John Sciamanna’s weekly digests were among the most comprehensive, accurate and valuable sources of information in the child welfare field. “Those were enormously helpful,” noted one survey participant. “It’s a pretty big hole that we need to fill.”

Finally, unpacking research is a critical function that currently has no “home” in the child welfare space. As policymakers demand more focus on evidence-based practice, it is important that child welfare stakeholders become more adept at learning how to effectively use the existing evidence-based clearinghouses, connect them to their policy agendas, and build consensus about the approaches that are gaining ground in the evidence continuum. As suggested by one interviewee, “Child welfare advocates protect everything they have way too fiercely. We’re going to have to let some programs die so we can make room for the ones that really work.”

New technologies and social media strategies are needed to communicate critical information and data to a broader audience.

Finding innovative ways to use technology to share knowledge is another key challenge for the field. The NFCC relied on in-person meetings and webinars as their primary methods for conveying information, but much more innovative technological resources could be employed to take over old coalition functions, including podcasts, apps that

Any future entity designed to promote a collective approach to foster care reform will need to understand and use social media more effectively to sustain momentum toward its goals.

are updated in real time, TedTalks, and more. Much of the knowledge needed to move forward already exists in some form, but the field lacks the resources and structure to package it in an accessible way. While some individual organizations have embraced social media to advance their missions, this has yet to translate into an overarching social media push for the field. Any future entity designed to promote a collective approach to foster care reform will need to understand and use social media more effectively to sustain momentum toward its goals.

Better communications and messaging strategies are needed for multiple audiences.

One of the most consistent observations was the lack of a clear and consistent set of guiding messages about what role the child welfare system should play, how it should help children and families, and the steps that can be taken to improve it. Several interviewees lamented that the field

lacks a basic narrative designed to combat common media portrayals of foster care as a hopelessly broken system. To make progress in system reforms, they assert, the field must be much more proactive in explaining the challenges, describing the solutions and making the case that change is possible. In addition to an overarching narrative, members noted that future efforts to advance reform will require greater investments in communications strategies that arm the field with effective messages to engage the public, policymakers and the media. Consistent and unified messaging is a fundamental step toward a more productive dialogue on the need for child welfare reform. It is also key to ensuring that all stakeholders at the local, state and national levels are speaking with one voice to impact these changes.

Grassroots and Constituent Engagement 2.0

The field must do more to actively engage stakeholders who have lived experience in the child welfare system.

The child welfare field has made great headway in engaging grassroots voices to influence policy, and the benefits of engaging constituent voices in the policy making process are widely valued. Because an increasing number of organizations, foundations and coalitions including NFCC have pioneered these efforts, policy makers have come to both appreciate and expect feedback and guidance from these constituencies. Yet the field still struggles to integrate the voices of lived experience in a more effective and coordinated way that is respectful of these grassroots stakeholders, engages them in a way that helps them grow as advocates and become leaders in

the field, and coalesces multiple interest groups around a unified set of messages and priorities. This is especially true for growing efforts to engage young people. Interviewees noted that the NFCC was one of the first coalitions to reach out to alumni of foster care to participate in coalition activities, but acknowledged that future efforts to honor and integrate the voices of parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents could have an even more powerful impact with greater constituent-driven leadership.

Developing Sufficient and Sustainable Sources of Funding

More innovative strategies are needed to attract additional sources of child welfare funding.

Several interviewees lamented that the child welfare funding landscape has become more austere in recent years. Several foundations that previously invested in the field have ended their child welfare commitments, such as the David and Lucille Packard



Foundation, the WK Kellogg Foundation and Atlantic Philanthropies. One Coalition member suggested that the loss of funders is grounded in a growing misperception that the child welfare system is irretrievably broken and cannot be fixed without larger scale investments. Federal, state and local government spending has also decreased over time through spending reductions on individual programs, declining eligibility for federal IV-E foster care funds, state and county budget cuts and other budgetary reductions. Continuing declines in public and private funding is a constant source of frustration for child welfare leaders, advocates, researchers, and innovators looking for direct support for both existing programs and new innovations. It is even more frustrating for coalitions and other collective efforts that do not produce measurable outcomes, such as publications or conferences.

Given many foundations' reluctance to fund legislative advocacy, the funding search can be even more frustrating for coalitions focused on policy reform. One interviewee pointed out that even when foundations are willing to fund advocacy activities, they have already developed their own advocacy agendas and support organizations whose goals align with their overall approach. For a coalition whose agenda is collectively determined by multiple organizations and whose approach must often change based on member needs, funding is especially scarce. Given multiple funding challenges, some interviewees argued that organizations need to come together to make a stronger case for why and how better child welfare outcomes are possible. This requires the better use of evidence and evaluation to prove what works, clearer ways to explain current problems and how to solve them, and more data on the long-term cost savings generated by their investments.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR THE CHILD WELFARE FIELD

NFCC played an important and transformative role in uniting diverse voices across policy, practice, research, and lived experience and providing a centralized platform for a more coordinated agenda around policy, communications, and other joint activities. Both NFCC members and outside stakeholders also agreed that the Coalition’s closure leaves a substantial “hole in the field” and expressed hope that many of the NFCC’s core functions, most notably allowing the field to speak with one voice, would be taken up by the “next generation” of collective action. To help guide future approaches to collective thinking and action, interviewees focused on two main categories of recommendations for the field: advice on how to organize and structure more traditional coalitions; and thoughts on other potential strategies that might help address persistent gaps in the field.

Recommendations on Building the “Next Generation” of Child Welfare Coalitions

When asked what is needed to move the field forward, interviewees and survey respondents pointed to a common vision: a broad, nonpartisan, collective voice on child welfare that unites the field

and pushes a collective agenda. There was also clear consensus in the field that coalition-based work is valuable and should continue despite the challenges and limitations of coalition-building. One interviewee perfectly captured a sentiment shared by many others who offered feedback: “Coalitions are messy, but absolutely necessary.” Interviews emphasized the following recommendations to guide similar efforts in the future:

▶ MAKE STRONG AND EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP THE COALITION’S TOP PRIORITY

The NFCC was at its most powerful, members agreed, when it had experienced directors to drive the Coalition’s overall mission and the more detailed aspects of its daily operations. Many of those interviewed, including former Board members, agreed that the Coalition’s leaders succeeded when they were able to balance a strong knowledge of and respect for individual member needs and interests with the ability to keep the group on track while sometimes making executive decisions. “Good executive directors can’t get out ahead of the group,” observed one former Board member, “but they also can’t wait for consensus all the time either. You have to have both.” To ensure strong leadership, interviewees specifically noted the need for:

- At least one full-time, experienced executive director and another full-time staffer to support member recruitment and care (especially if the coalition is dependent on membership dues);
- An active and decisive board that can help the leader prioritize strategies and navigate conflict between member organizations, help manage group dynamics, and help streamline the coalition’s decision making processes as needed; and
- A committed and disciplined membership that supports the director and board, values collective results over individual organizational priorities, helps keep meetings and projects on track, and completes tasks in a timely manner.

Second only to a strong leadership is the need for sufficient and sustainable funding to support the mission, goals and daily work of the coalition.

► CHOOSE A “COALITION BUSINESS MODEL” THAT SUPPORTS SUSTAINABLE AND BALANCED FUNDING

Second only to a strong leadership is the need for sufficient and sustainable funding to support the mission, goals and daily work of the coalition. As we have

highlighted throughout this document, funding drives the ability to maintain all the other components of a strong coalition, from proper staffing to publications, events and other deliverables to regular communications and advocacy efforts. Additionally, the balance of funding is as important as the amount of funding. In order to create a sustainable and balanced funding base, coalitions should:

- Consider a tiered dues structure that bases financial participation on budget size but makes clear that all voices will have an equal voice at the table;
- Strive to recruit enough members to ensure that dues cover the total cost of coalition operations in order to avoid the need for outside funding;
- When it’s necessary to seek outside funding, try to diversify funding sources as much as possible and ensure private funding is closely aligned with coalition goals; and
- Be as transparent as possible with membership about foundation targets and fundraising goals to minimize funding competition between the coalition and its members.

► COMMIT TO BUILDING AND MAINTAINING A BROAD AND INCLUSIVE MEMBERSHIP BASE

Interviewees generally agreed that much of the NFCC’s strength, reach and impact came from the diversity of its membership. Members agreed that, unlike other existing coalitions that intentionally focused on policy at the federal level, the NFCC succeeded both in bringing new voices to child welfare reform discussions and new combinations of experts and giving them the opportunity to interact and share information on a regular basis.

Stakeholders also emphasized that a coalition must include a more intentional focus on member value. That is, making sure there is careful research on the front end about what members want out of the coalition and that this is reflected in all aspects of the coalition, including communications, the structure and frequency of meetings, etc. To create and maintain this unique platform, members specifically recommended:

- Engagement of multiple voices at all levels of the field, including ground-level practitioners, state-based advocates, foster parents, and others that have not been engaged in past coalition efforts;
- Facilitating effective communication between national organizations and frontline entities to ensure that each informs the work and agenda of the other as well as the collective action plan for the group;
- Opportunities for members to share information, network and collaborate on a regular basis and develop new partnerships to advance the work of their institutions as well as the coalition's collective agenda; and
- A comprehensive approach to address member needs, including instituting regular group and one-on-one communications, creating a feedback loop to improve member engagement and robust member recruitment.

► DEFINE AND IMPLEMENT A CLEAR MISSION THAT CAN ALSO RESPOND TO CHANGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Interviewees emphasized that a strong coalition needs a clear purpose and mission that is realistic, actionable and also has relevance to the institutional

interests of its members. One Board member described how the strategic planning process to create a common mission, goals, and objectives can quickly eclipse the actual work a coalition wants to accomplish together: “Keep it clear and simple, but don’t make it an activity in an of itself. It’s really the process of getting stuff done that keeps people interested.” At the same time, several interviewees emphasized that a mission should be flexible enough to respond to unexpected changes and challenges in the field and take advantage of legislative and policy opportunities that might secure basic child welfare reforms. A coalition’s clear and flexible mission must be supported by:

- Clearly articulated short- and long-term goals for the coalition and a corresponding strategy for how to achieve those goals;
- Continued efforts to build and maintain buy-in from all the members around general principles for reform and collective activities;
- Creating a “culture of deliverables” where the Executive Director and membership follow through on specific tasks in an effective and timely way; and
- A commitment to regularly revisiting the mission to ensure it is aligned with priorities for coalition action and adjusting if needed to reflect new needs and opportunities.

► MAKE EFFECTIVE POLICY ADVOCACY AND COMMUNICATIONS THE CORNERSTONE OF THE COALITION’S WORK

At its heart, many members commented, strong coalitions must be good communicators and effective advocates for change. Whatever other levers of change a coalition uses to accomplish its

goals, it must craft strong messages that engage and inspire multiple audiences to convince them that change is needed. As one interviewee explained, “even if all the members are working hard on the same goal, you still need to share the bigger picture to get people on board.” To build effective advocacy and communications capacity, coalitions should:

- Engage coalition members with communications and campaign experience to help shape and promote effective messages for different audiences;
- Consider outside communications support to assist the executive director in publicly promoting the coalition’s agenda and creating an effective coalition description, website and other collateral materials;
- Ensure that members support the coalition’s advocacy objectives and understand both the boundaries and allowable activities for non-profit organizations; and
- Create a broad continuum of opportunities that allows members to participate in advocacy activities at their own comfort levels.

Other Potential Strategies to Address Persistent Gaps in the Child Welfare Field

The NFCC Board also asked ChildFocus to reflect on other possible structures, in addition to coalitions, that could help move the dial for child welfare reform. Below is a reflection on three possible approaches that do not necessarily replace a strong coalition, but could complement and further advance its goals:

Campaign-Style Approach

Social causes are often advanced by broad-based campaigns that work in an organized and active way toward a particular goal. The child welfare field can and should continue to make use of campaign-like strategies – advocacy, communications, grassroots mobilization, and data – to advance specific goals that are ripe for attention. Campaigns are not mutually exclusive from coalition building, and coalitions can and should be built around specific goal-oriented campaigns. But they must be, by necessity, time-limited and fluid to respond to the ever-changing tactics that are necessary to run an effective campaign. And because campaigns can be expensive, there’s rarely the expectation that they will last forever, especially when the primary goals of the campaign have been met.

Stakeholders frequently point to home visiting as an example of a highly successful public policy campaign that relied on coalition building, but has since evolved to include a coalition that has a very specific goal: continued engagement of national, state and local stakeholders to ensure that federal home visiting resources are sustained. As one interviewee noted, “I thought then, and I think now, that a coalition should be time-limited, everyone working together to accomplish a defined goal.” Some believe that it is much easier to build time-limited coalitions around a campaign than it is to expect a permanent coalition to be nimble enough to change course when new opportunities and challenges arise.

Finally, some suggested that child welfare campaigns can be built around policy goals, but don’t always have to be limited to state or federal legislative wins. Because the field has excelled at engaging the

voices of youth, for instance, a campaign could be built around engaging other constituent voices, such as birth parents and caregivers, for policy, practice and systems change. Other ideas include a campaign to promote prevention-focused work in child welfare or to address the needs of families affected by opioid use that can have local, state and national impact.

A Strong Network for Communications

Child welfare stakeholders agree that communications is under-resourced, and the field suffers from a deficit-based perspective about what child welfare is and the role it plays in supporting at-risk children and families. Efforts have been made in recent years to better understand public attitudes towards child welfare issues and to develop messages that resonate with the public and policymakers. There is agreement, however, that additional attention is needed on how to use communications more effectively and strategically as a field.

A stronger network for communications requires an organized and intentional process to engage multiple stakeholders that set the tone for child welfare, including the media, child advocates, state policymakers, think tanks and research institutions. One interviewee suggested creating a coalition or network specifically designed to move the dial on a common set of messages and more productive communications strategies. Stronger communications networks could also be significantly strengthened by a “go to” resource for the latest child welfare developments that are described on page 19, as well as more sophisticated use of social media across the board.

A Robust Network of Funders

Given the number of funders who have left the field in recent years, child welfare leaders yearn for a more intentional effort to recruit more funders to support coalition building, campaigns around targeted goals, and communications networks. Recruitment of new funders will, however, depend on the capacity to be clearer about what’s needed for success, and for leaders to help build consensus about the things that will help the field move forward. As one interviewee said: “We should be communicating to funders what child welfare really needs to make headway, and focus on that. It can’t be everything but the kitchen sink.”

Prospective funders will also need to know that their investments will pay off and that success is possible. Changing the narrative to one that clearly outlines that success is possible is a critical step to engaging more philanthropic investments, especially by the new wave of philanthropists that are insistent on a results-based orientation. Engaging a network of new funders will also require leaders to clearly explain the *cause* of child welfare, not just the child welfare system. “Child welfare is a hybrid between a system and a cause,” observed one prominent leader in the field, “and we need to get better at emphasizing the cause.”

Finding new funders for child welfare will also be dependent on the ability to make the connection between child welfare and other social causes, such as early childhood, education reform, health, mental health, and public health approaches. Understanding child welfare involvement through the lens of other critical outcomes – the ability to learn, experience healthy child development, and successfully transition to adulthood – are all impacted by child welfare involvement.

For almost two decades, the National Foster Care Coalition played a critical role in bringing together a diverse group of advocates, policy experts, direct service providers, researchers and youth and families involved in the foster care system to speak with a “common voice” about the need for child welfare reform.

As a result of its advocacy work, the Coalition helped to inform and pass key legislation, act as a resource for Congressional staff, support youth as they shared their stories and influenced policy changes on the Hill, and share important information about policy developments with its members and the broader child welfare field. Through its communications efforts, NFCC helped to successfully launch and support National Foster Care Month, develop publications and monthly newsletters that brought diverse interests together to take policy action and share effective messaging with the field, and provide a regular opportunity for coalition members to network, share information and forge new partnerships to advance the field.

As with all coalitions, NFCC also faced ongoing challenges, including turnover in leadership and membership, and later on, a lack of clarity around mission and purpose and limited funding. Both the Coalition members and outside stakeholders interviewed for this report, however, made it clear that the Coalition’s end in no way diminishes the strength of its contributions to the field or the continuing work of its individual members.

“By sharing our lessons learned and recommendations for how to address the persistent gaps in the field, NFCC’s Board of Directors is hopeful that its successes and challenges will help inform and inspire the creation of a new entity to fill the gap created by NFCC’s closure. Across the country child welfare is a critical and complex system impacting diverse families in chaotic times. The challenges of operating an effective and supportive system requires an equally diverse set of advocates, service providers and jurisdictions who can come together in an open forum to collaborate, craft and advance a common national and state agenda in the best interest of our children and families. While saddened by the decision to close NFCC, speaking on behalf of TNCF, we are ready to step forward to support what comes next and excited to be a part of the future.”

– *Jeannette Pai-Espinosa, NFCC Chair and President of The National Crittenton Foundation (TNCF)*