

THE HATCHER GROUP

Connecting Non-Profit Organizations to Policymakers and the Media

**NON-PARTISAN ADVOCACY STRATEGIES
BY
ED HATCHER, PRESIDENT
THE HATCHER GROUP**

**2005 KIDS COUNT Brown Bag Series
Thursday, October 27, 2005**

THE HATCHER GROUP

Connecting Non-Profit Organizations to Policymakers and the Media

To get any legislation through Congress that is important to families, you have to have bipartisan support. That's it. That's the bottom line.

~ House Republican staffer

You know, there are really a lot more Republicans and Democrats working together than people realize. More in the Senate than the House.

But it (bipartisanship) is out there.

~ Senate Democratic staffer

I have been asked to talk today about “communicating policy solutions in a non-partisan way.” Perhaps reading too much between the lines, I take this question to really mean: “How do we convince moderate and conservative Republicans to support what is often perceived to be a progressive agenda of helping disadvantaged children and their families?” The urgency of both questions is fueled by the unprecedented partisanship that now polarizes the U.S. Congress and state capitals throughout the country. Redistricting by incumbent legislators has resulted in districts that are overwhelmingly Democratic or Republican. Due to this redistricting, legislators speak increasingly to their political base and feel little pressure to compromise with the other side. Meanwhile, of course, the public itself seems broadly and bitterly divided. We are a nation, so it goes, of red states and blue states.

And yet -- despite this genuinely bleak and polarized environment -- one finds equally genuine examples of Republicans and Democrats working together on an agenda important to the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its KIDS COUNT grantees. On both the federal and state level, policy solutions *are* being crafted to improve the well-being of children, their families and communities. Individual development accounts are but one example where both parties are collaborating at the federal and state levels. At the state level, the news is generally more encouraging. While reports from KIDS COUNT, the Corporation for Enterprise Development,

the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Center for the Study of Social Policy, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation¹ cite gaps in state policy support for children and families, they also provide multiple examples of legislatures approving bipartisan and progressive legislation on health care, child care, education and a broad set of issues that the Annie E. Casey Foundation refers to as family economic success.

This talk is about identifying proven strategies that lead to bipartisan breakthroughs. It is based on our extensive work promoting state and federal Earned Income Tax Credits, my years on Capitol Hill, and on a series of interviews I recently conducted with key Congressional staff members on non-partisan advocacy. These interviews were conducted with key staff members who are pushing for legislation on issues important to the Annie E. Casey Foundation and KIDS COUNT.

From all of this, I have identified three “non-partisan” and “bipartisan” strategies that seem to be particularly effective in attracting broad-based political support among federal and state legislators. These include:

- Approaching lawmakers with messages that speak to their core values;
- Convincing members that their own constituents have a stake in the issue;
- Engaging lawmakers in public outreach efforts (such as free tax assistance campaigns) so that they will feel invested and become policy allies (on issues like the Earned Income Tax Credit).

There are other strategies, of course, that are important to non-partisan advocacy, such as broadening your partnerships, using positive anecdotes in your messaging, and developing closer relations with Congressional staff in Washington, D.C. and the district. I did not focus on these strategies because they seem more straightforward, but I hope we can discuss these issues in your questions. Another caveat: I realize that I am speaking to a talented and sophisticated group of advocates and that many of you can cite examples where you have already done exactly what I propose. Based on my work with KIDS COUNT grantees and state child advocates, I would only suggest that these strategies be embraced on a more systematic and routine basis.

MESSAGING

As in diplomacy, effective advocacy starts with trying to understand your target audience in the same way that they understand themselves. What are the core values that organize and orient their thinking around public policy? For our purposes here, core values are not likely to change and they are not inherently “bad” or “misguided.” Attack or make value judgments about someone else’s core values and you will be perceived as elitist and an adversary.

Examples of core values often held by Republicans include:

- “opportunity for all” (we should all have the same chances to succeed without preferences for one group or another);
- “self-reliance” (government’s primary role should be to encourage economic independence);
- “liberty” (we should have the right to pursue our interests with minimum interference by government);
- “local autonomy” (policy is generally better handled at the state and local level).

For Democrats, core values might include:

- “fairness” (government should correct policies that result in inequities between groups);
- “compassion” (government should focus its efforts on the disadvantaged and those less able to help themselves) ;
- “active government” (government should be part of the solution).

These “core values” serve as frames by which Democrats and Republicans will often assess the different policy options they are confronted with; the fact that both parties sometimes end up backing policies that contradict their own values is irrelevant. Both sides, of course, perceive themselves to be pro-children, pro-family, pro-community.

The question then is: *Are there credible and compelling ways to frame your policy request that will resonate with the core values of your target audience?* In most cases, I believe the answer is yes. An obvious example is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). In talking to Democrats, it is natural to stress that the EITC is the most successful anti-poverty government program ever enacted and that it has lifted millions of children out of poverty (fairness and compassion). In talking to Republicans, it makes sense to stress that the EITC helps *all* low-income *working* families to be more self-reliant (opportunity and self-reliance); that low-income families should be able to keep more of their hard earned dollars (personal opportunity); and that EITC refunds are critical engine for economic development (economic opportunity).

The EITC is hardly the only federal program where advocates can effectively tailor their messaging based on the core values of their audience. In arguing against recently proposed cuts in Medicaid, for example, Sen. Gordon Smith (R-OR) noted the hardship that would be caused to low-income Americans but he also stressed the issue of local autonomy and making sure that state governments can live within their means. “Governors are on the front lines of Medicaid,” Smith noted in a press release. “They understand how important the program is to their neediest citizens, and they know how Medicaid cuts would affect their state budgets.” In a strikingly bipartisan letter, 24 U.S. Senators wrote to the chairs of the Senate Agriculture Committee and urged their continued support for the Food Stamp Program. A key message in their letter was that the Food Stamp Program works and is an efficient and effective program. “Over the last several years, steady progress has been made to reduce errors and inefficiencies in the program. A recent report by the Government Accountability Office found that the combined error rate of the Food Stamp Program is at the lowest rate in program history.”

In terms of non or bipartisan messaging, it is particularly instructive to look at the America Savings for Personal Investment, Retirement, and Education Act (ASPIRE). The brainchild of the progressive think tank, the New American Foundation, the legislation provides a KIDS Account for every child born after December 31, 2005. Each account will be endowed with a one-time \$500 contribution, and children living in households earning below the national median income will be eligible for a supplemental contribution of up to \$500.

In identifying original co-sponsors for the bill, the New America Foundation managed to attract such unlikely bedfellows as liberal Democrats Charles Schumer (D-NY) and Jon Corzine (D-NJ) and conservative Republicans Rick Santorum (R-PA) and Jim DeMint (R-SC). Equally diverse co-sponsorship was identified for the House.

As the Washington Post has noted "...children's accounts are gaining proponents across the ideological spectrum. Conservative Republicans construe them as a form of the market oriented "ownership society" that President Bush touts. Liberal Democrats view them as an extension of the Great Society of the 1960s that created government programs to "lift people from poverty."

When introducing the KIDS Account bill at a joint press conference, the cosponsors praised the other side as well as the spirit of bipartisanship that had led to the bill's introduction. Members talked in near identical terms about savings rates, financial literacy and the importance of supporting families and children. At the same time, of course, their comments reflected their different core values. For Senator Santorum, the repeated refrain was "opportunity for all Americans." For Senator Shumer, an important thrust was ending the "dividend divide."

Both sides, in other words, highlighted their support for the legislation using language that their own parties and political bases would find acceptable. When asked bluntly how Senator Santorum could speak so glowingly about a bill that some might see as a big government, budget buster (some estimates for the ASPIRE Act go as high as \$60 billion), his senior legislative aid does not hesitate: "Making people less dependent on entitlements -- which this bill will eventually do -- costs money." The comment provides a conservative rationale for supporting progressive legislation. It is the kind of rationale advocates should seek to understand.

CONSTITUENT ANGLE

Effective advocacy, of course, is ultimately not about messaging but about power and influence. Most non-profits do not try -- or even desire -- to compete in the world of PACs, political fundraisers, or high-priced lobbyists. But the opportunity to wield power exists, and it comes from making what I call "the constituent connection." For all of the influence of money,

lawmakers still respond when an explicit and convincing case is made that an issue affects his or her constituents. That message becomes even more powerful when the Member realizes that an organization exists to assist him or her in reaching those constituents (through the media, mailings, public forums, etc.).

Good data is hugely important to making the constituent connection. Each year, the data gathered, analyzed, and disseminated by KIDS COUNT grantees is advancing policy agendas on the local, state, and federal levels. Both lawmakers and advocates use KIDS COUNT data books and reports to oppose and support legislation, identify spending priorities, and create legislative agendas. Editorial writers and reporters, local funders, and practitioners all recognize the value and quality of KIDS COUNT data. I want to suggest, however, that even when they have the data in hand, KIDS COUNT grantees often do not make lawmakers aware of how their own particular constituents are affected by an issue, even though they are sometimes well situated to do so. As one Democratic staffer told me, “Instead of just telling me that low-income residents from my state are hurt by a policy, they should tell me explicitly who and how many from the district are affected. That’s the way to get the attention from my boss.”

Some data, of course, cannot be easily broken down along legislative boundary lines. Sometimes it simply doesn’t exist or making the translation (from county lines to Congressional lines, for example) can be too difficult. Sometimes even when the district data exists, there are not enough resources to send targeted briefs or reports to individual lawmakers. To the extent that data that corresponds with legislative districts can be provided, however, the payoff can be tremendous. As Steve Dow, of the Tulsa Community Action Report noted, “When we approached rural state legislators about creating a state EITC in Oklahoma, we simply showed them the numbers about what it meant to their constituents. They got it.”

When it comes to the EITC, federal lawmakers have also “gotten it.” Despite huge pressures to reduce the deficit, most members of Congress have refused to make cuts to the Earned Income Tax Credit this year as a source of new revenue. In part, this has been because advocates effectively “messed” the EITC, but it’s also because advocates have driven home the credit’s value to lawmakers’ constituents.

That task was made considerably easier when Alan Berube of the Brookings Institute began providing EITC and Refund Anticipation Loan (RAL) data by Congressional district. Berube's reports show the number of EITC returns filed in each district and the total number of EITC dollars flowing to that district as a result.²

Federal EITC Example: Missouri

Tax Year 2002 EITC data by Congressional District ~ 109 th Congress						
State	District	Representative	Returns	EITC Claimants	% of Returns Claiming EITC	EITC Amount
MISSOURI	01	<i>Wm. Lacy Clay</i>	279,357	64,332	23.0%	\$119,131,726
	02	W. Todd Akin	331,115	21,346	6.4%	\$32,423,465
	03	<i>Russ Carnahan</i>	278,408	39,295	14.1%	\$66,352,090
	04	<i>Ike Skelton</i>	264,318	46,225	17.5%	\$78,459,654
	05	<i>Emanuel Cleaver</i>	280,542	49,465	17.6%	\$85,493,007
	06	Sam Graves	275,340	36,714	13.3%	\$59,235,293
	07	Roy Blunt	275,506	52,768	19.2%	\$89,960,246
	08	Jo Ann Emerson	249,799	60,227	24.1%	\$107,970,689
	09	Kenny C. Hulshof	262,598	41,175	15.7%	\$68,185,684

D: Italics, R: Bold

~ Compiled by The Brookings Institution

Many advocates used a multiplier effect calculation to show the full economic benefits of the EITC to a Member's district while others showed the economic loss to a district that occurred when eligible filers did not file. Some advocates used the data to document the EITC's importance to a Member's rural constituents; others used the data as the basis for developing statewide policy reports. In all cases, the evidence was compelling: a vote against the EITC would be a vote against the best interest of a Member's constituents.

Other issues – not just the EITC – lend themselves to this kind of legislative breakdown. State financial regulators, for example, are providing some advocates with county data on payday loan operators. That data, in turn, is being used by advocates to show state legislators the negative impact that payday loan operators are having on their district and constituents.

Not unlike Berube’s EITC reports, the Oregon Food Bank has just released county data providing food stamp participation rates, as well as the value of food stamps to that county. Again, advocates are using the data to demonstrate to individual legislators that food stamps help feed large numbers of hungry constituents as well as provide a boost to local economies. Rural state legislators are less put off by a Great Society Program like the Food Stamp Program when they recognize its importance to his or her own constituents.³



2004 Participation Data

Value of Increasing Participation

Oregon County	Annual Value of Food Stamps	Monthly Benefit per Person	Average Monthly Participants	Food Stamp Participation Rate	People Not Participating	Min. Annual Increase	Max. Annual Increase
Baker	\$1,941,081	\$74	2,190	57%	1,639	\$721,459	\$1,452,838
Benton	\$7,003,349	\$91	6,428	45%	7,761	\$3,415,862	\$8,455,774
Clackamas	\$22,595,029	\$82	22,854	73%	8,596	\$3,783,652	\$8,498,707
Clatsop	\$3,581,401	\$80	3,721	57%	2,769	\$1,218,620	\$2,664,417
Columbia	\$5,025,281	\$84	4,983	90%	567	\$249,424	\$571,437
State Total	\$427,574,027	\$84	421,689	76%	134,059	\$59,007,519	\$135,930,241

~ Oregon Food Bank 2004 County by County Report

ENGAGING MEMBERS IN PUBLIC OUTREACH CAMPAIGNS

In advancing a policy agenda, advocates often make contact with a Member of Congress’s relevant legislative assistant in Washington, D.C. Sometimes a pitch is made around pending legislation or the findings of a recent policy report. But advocates also should remember to engage legislators in “non-partisan” public outreach activities.

Such strategies might include:

- Site visits where you invite the media and hold a luncheon with local stake holders;

- Trying to place stories about your issue or organization in the Member’s district newsletter or services that you provide on the Member’s website;
- Engaging the Member’s district office as a coalition partner.

When lawmakers participate in even a mundane public relations activity, they begin to feel invested in that issue. Moreover, such activities help to build relationships with that office and offer opportunities for the lawmaker to become a future ally. In the case of Congress, it should not only be a Member’s legislative assistant who is on the Rolodex of advocates, but their district office director and press secretary as well.

Again, I would like to use the issue I know best – The Earned Income Tax Credit – to bring the point home. Across the country, free tax assistance campaigns have been engaged in a concerted campaign to engage lawmakers (mayors, state legislators, statewide officials, and Members of Congress) in their efforts. Lawmakers have responded and are:

- Posting free tax assistance information (hours and locations) on their websites;
- Participating in media launches of free tax assistance campaigns;
- Allowing their district offices to be an active partner in local free tax assistance campaigns;
- Writing articles in their newsletters and op-eds in local newspapers.

Office of the Governor
STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

NORTH CAROLINA
PROCLAMATION, GOVERNOR MICHAEL EASLEY

ANNOUNCING
"TAX HELP FOR WORKING FAMILIES" MONTH

WHEREAS, each year, many working families in North Carolina fail to claim the Earned Income Tax Credit; and

WHEREAS, this money could be of vital help to these families and to the construction and businesses where they live; and

WHEREAS, across North Carolina, community organizations have hundreds of trained volunteers who provide free federal and state income tax preparation, and help families apply for all the tax credits for which they are eligible; and

WHEREAS, EITC Coalition is a program to raise awareness of tax credits and make free tax assistance available to low-income families;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, MICHAEL F. EASLEY, Governor of the State of North Carolina, do hereby proclaim January 15 – February 15, 2005, as "TAX HELP FOR WORKING FAMILIES MONTH" in North Carolina, and commend this observance to all our citizens.

MICHAEL F. EASLEY

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand and affixed the Great Seal of the State of North Carolina at the Capital in Raleigh this eleventh day of January in the year of our Lord two thousand and five, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twenty-eighth.

Kit Bond

BOND VISITS TAX PREPARATION SITE, URGES TAXPAYERS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF TAX CREDITS AND FREE ADVICE

Press Release
February 7, 2004

ST. LOUIS, MO—Senator Kit Bond today visited the tax preparation site at the Grace Hill Eckstein House in north St. Louis, where he thanked the Gateway Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) Coalition for their dedication to educating Missouri families and legal low-income taxpayers to take advantage of the federal tax credit.

"These sites are part of a growing movement spreading across cities nationwide to help working families attain the financial stability and upward mobility they need to raise strong families and build for their futures," said Bond.

Bond pointed out that the EITC can play a vital role in the lives of working families. Since it began in 1975, the EITC program has grown into the largest federal anti-poverty program. In 2001, the average EITC was \$1,680, and almost 85% of the EITC was received as a refund. For many families, these dollars could be used for a new furnace, diaper, food or healthcare.

In 2002, thousands of Missourians received EITC, unfortunately, thousands of eligible individuals and families did not file for the tax credits. Bond stressed that this missed opportunity may be a result of language barriers, literacy problems, fear of making errors on tax returns, or the inability to understand tax returns, which is why tax preparation sites like the one at Grace Hill are so important.

"Thanks to the United Way and other members of the EITC Gateway Coalition, taxpayers will have a resource available to them to learn about this credit. By educating taxpayers and providing this essential outreach, EITC refunds will be brought back into the hands of the many Missourians who need it most," said Bond.

Organized by the Gateway EITC Coalition, volunteers at the Grace Hill Youth Center in North St. Louis will provide Missouri families with free taxpayer assistance and financial advice.

Kit Bond is Missouri's senior Senator and will be in St. Louis from after having served the state previously during two terms as Governor.

SHERROD BROWN

Fact Sheet

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
The Federal Tax Credit for Working Families

Dear Neighbor:

Ohio families are missing out on a valuable tax benefit for working Americans. I am committed to changing that.

Almost half of Ohio's individual tax return filers are eligible for the EITC, a federal tax credit that recognizes the economic contributions of working families. But 29% of eligible Ohioans did not claim the EITC in 2000. According to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), \$141,520,400 that could have been refunded to Ohio families in 2000 stayed in Washington instead. These dollars need to reach the families who deserve them.

If your family earned less than \$7,000 in 2005, you may be eligible. The EITC amount depends on things like earned income, total income, and family size, but the maximum credit for 2005 is \$4,400. Even if you did not claim the EITC in the past, you can amend earlier returns and claim the credit.

Visit my Website (www.house.gov/sherradbrown) for an instant, online estimate of what the EITC might be worth to you. Then download IRS' Earned Income Credit publication (Publication 596), which provides more details. The back of this letter lists IRS contacts who can answer your questions or help you request or download Publication 596.

Feel free to share this information with other Ohio families, and please do not hesitate to call with questions about the EITC. Thank you for your interest in this important tax benefit for working families.

Your Congressman,
Sherrod Brown
SHERROD BROWN

This mailing was prepared, published and mailed at taxpayer expense.

For local free tax assistance campaign directors, the engagement of lawmakers in their district can be profound. Campaign directors talk regularly about how lawmakers have helped to boost both credibility and visibility of their campaigns.

Engagement of lawmakers in free tax assistance campaigns, moreover, has had another decided benefit: it has significantly boosted policy support for the Earned Income Tax Credit. As lawmakers engage in these campaigns, they learn more about the EITC and its importance to residents and the local economy. They don't just become believers; they become advocates themselves. Take a look at Delaware where on August 22, the Governor signed into law a 20 percent state Earned Income Tax Credit. The key force behind the legislation was Delaware state Senator Margaret Rose Henry who has been trying for years to enact a state EITC. The big difference this year, Henry and advocates noted at the signing ceremony, was the statewide free tax assistance campaign engineered by state Treasurer Jack Markell. "The growth of the statewide free tax assistance campaign really generated a new level of awareness (among state legislators)," said Mary DuPont, executive director of the Nehemiah Gateway Community Development Corporation. "When I say EITC, people now know what it is."

Lawmakers, of course, can be engaged in a host of different campaigns. Advocates, for example, should consider engaging lawmakers in awareness campaigns around Food Stamp and Medicaid eligibility. Even when not part of a campaign, however, advocates should seek to obtain some kind of participation from lawmakers in their outreach efforts. Instead of just educating Members of Congress about a policy report, ask him or her to circulate it as a "Dear Colleague." If a Member cannot attend an event in person, ask the press secretary for a letter or Congressional Record statement that can be read on their behalf. If the lawmaker does a regular radio or cable television show, propose a topic, provide some compelling background, and propose yourself or one of your coalition's members as a guest. And so on.

Non-partisan lobbying, of course, has its limits. Given the federal budget deficit, it is unlikely that The ASPIRE Act will be approved or even voted on by Congress this year. In a zero sum game, kindly efforts to engage lawmakers from both sides can often fail to get the job done.

Effective messaging and advocacy might persuade some Conservatives that Medicaid is a reputable program that is serving their constituents well, but – if forced to choose – they’re more likely to support tax cuts. When trying to prevent cuts or a bad bill from moving forward, there will be times when confrontational public letter writing and petition campaigns, harsh op-eds, and calling the Member out at a public forum may represent a more effective strategy. On the other hand, in trying to advance a positive agenda around children and families, it seems that non-partisan and bipartisanship strategies are well worth the effort. Positive outcomes are being achieved despite all of the severe partisan rankling. I hope my suggestions today will at least kindle more discussion among advocates about what works and what doesn’t.

References

1. *The Assets and Opportunity Scorecard*. 2005. Corporation for the Enterprise Development.; *Policy Matters: Tracking State Supports to Children and Families*. Forthcoming Winter 2005. Joint Project: Center for the Study of Social Policy and National Conference of State Legislatures.; *Promoting Family Economic Success*. Forthcoming Winter 2005. Annie E. Casey Foundation.
2. Full EITC data, as well as EITC outreach materials can be found in “*Connecting Elected Officials & Free Tax Campaigns: A Resource Guide*.” 2005. The Hatcher Group.
http://www.thehatchergroup.com/doc/briefing_book05.pdf
3. Oregon’s Food Bank *2004 County by County Report* can be found at:
http://www.oregonfoodbank.org/research_and_action/legislative_update/documents/CountyFoodStampReport04.pdf