

Integrating Legislative Advocacy and Development within a Social Services Agency

NAJEEB KAMIL

Integrating Legislative Advocacy and Development

The mission of the Human Services Department of Santa Cruz County (HSD) is to strengthen the community by protecting the vulnerable, promoting self-sufficiency, alleviating poverty, and improving the quality of life. This lofty mission is reflective of the social welfare policies in the New Deal era of the 1930's that mandated states to administer safety net programs. In California, counties were enlisted to fulfill this mandate and mission. Since the 1930's, federal, state, and local legislation and policies have continued to directly affect counties' abilities to fulfill this mandate due to the complexities of the legislative and policymaking process. In order to ensure that we meet this mandate while staying true to their mission, it is critical that HSD has a voice in these processes. How can HSD be actively engaged in legislative analysis, policy influence, and advocacy at all levels of government? What are the key components of a legislative advocacy and development office in HSD? This case study addresses these questions and recommend a framework for HSD that increases its macro-level capacity to accomplish its mission.

Background

DiNitto (2007) states that social welfare policy is "anything a government chooses to do, or not to do, that affects the quality of life of its people" (p. 2). These policies provide direction to government in the resolution of social problems (Brueggemann, 2006). Social policies inherently demonstrate the values and ways of thinking that drive decision-making. Both at the federal and state levels, legislation has been driving policy-making that mandates

how services are delivered and to whom. In addition to the legislative process, the budget process also expresses our values and priorities as a society, community, and agency. The budget provides a framework and dollars for funding the programs and systems that a social services agency administers.

Social policies are closely intertwined with social justice as they create programs, set eligibility requirements, and dictate funding levels that profoundly affect disadvantaged and disempowered communities served by social services agencies. Social services agencies are uniquely situated to learn from people who experience injustice, intolerance, economic disenfranchisement, or political oppression because they have a direct connection to the voices of the people impacted by these policies. This position leads to the responsibility of social services agencies to channel the voices of those they serve to policymakers at federal, state, and local levels, in order to influence the policymaking process. This type of advocacy is essential for addressing social justice issues.

Legislative Advocacy by Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA)

The Office of Policy, Evaluation, and Planning (OPEP) reports directly to the Social Services Agency Director, Lori Cox, and is tasked with providing fund development, legislative and budget analysis, and decision-making support resources for the agency. The mission of OPEP is to inform, inspire, and collaborate to support policies, programs, and decisions that strengthen the community (Alameda County SSA, 2018). The OPEP focuses on three main areas: fund development, data analytics, and policy and legislative advocacy.

Though the OPEP integrates these three areas of work, the focus of this paper is the policy and legislative advocacy component.

According to the Agency Monthly Report, the Alameda County Social Services Agency (SSA) assists approximately 11.3 percent of the county's residents, totaling over 401,000 people, in obtaining cash assistance, CalFresh, CalWORKs, Medi-Cal, and emergency shelter. In addition, approximately 27,000 elderly and disabled adults receive services from the Adult and Aging Department and 3,700 children receive services through Children and Family Services. SSA's mission is to promote the economic and social well-being of individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities (Alameda County SSA, 2018).

As part of the goals and role of the OPEP with respect to policy and legislative advocacy, the office ensures that the SSA Executive Team, staff, and the community are kept informed of legislative and policy developments and funding trends to better advocate, plan, and make decisions for how the agency serves residents of Alameda County. In addition, the OPEP assists policymakers in understanding the implications of proposed, pending, and adopted legislation. This includes developing policy and program recommendations to local, state, and federal policymakers that best meet the needs of Alameda County. The role of OPEP also includes advocacy and support for community-based organizations to promote the economic and social well-being of Alameda County's diverse communities.

There are a number of tools and partnerships that the OPEP utilizes in policy and legislative advocacy. One tool is the Legislative Council which engages staff across departments in SSA. The Legislative Council helps draft the SSA Legislative Platform, proposes legislation to sponsor, reviews and analyzes legislation throughout the year, and makes recommendations on SSA's positions to Executive leadership. The Legislative Council provides opportunities for a range of SSA staff to engage in the legislative process and obtains input from departments that are informed on current issues that direct services

staff and clients are facing. This leads to a richer and more relevant policy analysis that is grounded in the reality of what is occurring in the field. Participants of the Legislative Council need to be critical thinkers, work well as part of a team, and have diversity in experiences and backgrounds. The ideal structure of the Legislative Council should include 10 to 15 members and meet on a bi-monthly basis.

Another tool that the OPEP uses is legislation-tracking software, for both state and federal bills. Capitol Track is a web-based tool that tracks California bills as they move from idea to legislation. It provides the most current information on legislative proposals and can be customized to track specific types of legislation. In addition, it allows for the user to input analyses and feedback right into the platform. OPEP uses customizable reports to inform the staff and the public. Politico Pro is a web-based tool that tracks federal policy and legislation, and it combines reporting and analyses to the legislation or policy proposal being tracked. This tool is also customizable.

A key partnership that the OPEP has for legislative advocacy is the County Administrative Office (CAO). The OPEP provides SSA's legislative priorities as part of the overall Alameda County Legislative Platform on an annual basis. In addition, the OPEP works in coordination with the CAO and Board of Supervisors (BoS) to take positions on federal and state legislative proposals in order to guide policy and provide transparency to the community. The BoS and CAO are constantly receiving proposals from SSA, other county departments, the private sector, community-based organizations, and the community on social service issues. The OPEP both submits recommendations and is consulted when this occurs, and is able to provide feedback on the proposals to help the BoS and CAO make informed decisions on the legislative and policy proposals they receive. In 2017, with the agency director's approval, OPEP submitted over 30 legislative position requests to the CAO and BOS.

Another key partnership the OPEP has is with the County Welfare Directors Association of

California (CWDA). CWDA is a nonprofit association representing the human service directors from each of California's 58 counties. The Association's mission is to promote a human services system that encourages self-sufficiency of families and communities, and protects vulnerable children and adults from abuse and neglect (CWDA, 2018). To accomplish this mission, CWDA advocates for policies that will further the mission of the organization and educates state and federal policy-makers and the public regarding the significance of human services policies to individuals, communities, and county human services operations. In addition, CWDA collaborates with county human service agencies, state and federal governmental entities, and community-based organizations to ensure efficient and effective service delivery and the exchange of best and promising practices (CWDA, 2018).

Lastly, the OPEP has started partnering more with the community and organizing stakeholder forums where the OPEP can share what is happening legislatively at the federal and state levels. Last year, OPEP coordinated its first Legislative Breakfast, bringing over 80 community leaders from around the county to brainstorm ideas for SSA's 2018 legislative platform. In addition, the OPEP updates the community on how the pending or adopted legislation is affecting the services SSA provides by participating as standing agenda items to update local commissions and councils, such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the Commission on Aging. Community members are encouraged to provide input on issues that are most important to them.

Implications for Santa Cruz County Human Services Department (HSD)

Currently, HSD engages in legislative advocacy when letters of support are requested from CWDA, the HSD Director comes across a piece of legislation of interest, or a division director is interested in bringing forward a proposal related to their division's work. There is a Senior Analyst who works on this as part of their responsibilities. In augmenting

current practice, Alameda County's model for OPEP provides several clear implications for HSD.

HSD assists approximately 127,000 people in obtaining cash assistance, CalFresh, CalWORKs, Medi-Cal, and emergency shelter. In addition, approximately 3,400 elderly and disabled adults receive services from the Adult and Aging Division and 340 children receive services through Children and Family Services. Santa Cruz County is considered a medium-to-small county and consists of mountainous, rural, and urban areas with people from a wide variety of socioeconomic levels. In many ways, Santa Cruz County is very different from a large county, such as Alameda County, with predominantly urban and suburban areas. In addition, the demographic makeup of Santa Cruz County is mostly Caucasian and Latino while Alameda County has many diverse communities, including African-American, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islanders, and Middle Eastern. However, the core issues affecting both counties are similar and are reflected in the mission statements of both agencies.

One opportunity for HSD to be more effective in policy and legislative advocacy is to establish a unit or program that is dedicated to this task. Unlike the OPEP where data analytics are integrated with legislative advocacy, this program would focus only on policy and legislative advocacy, and work closely in collaboration with the Performance and Evaluation Division (P&E) to provide the data analytics needed to inform HSD's positions on legislative proposals. In researching this topic, Sonoma, Monterey, and San Benito Counties were contacted due to their similar size, demographics, and geographic characteristics to Santa Cruz County. In all three counties, policy and legislation analysis and advocacy occurred informally or was completely driven by the CAO. All counties stated that they would like to have formal systems or processes in place to be more effective in analyzing legislation at the state and federal levels. This could potentially be an area of cross-county collaboration.

The second implication is the importance of HSD being an active policy and legislative advocacy

agency versus a passive one. The county perspective on pending and adopted legislation is a critical one since HSD is best able to determine their effect on residents of Santa Cruz County. While CWDA is an effective and active partner in policy and legislative advocacy, it is essential that HSD have formal and proactive processes to gather this information to provide the best input and analyses on pending legislation to CWDA's Legislative Committee.

This leads to the third implication for HSD, which is increasing engagement and partnership with the CAO, community-based organizations, and the community. HSD has a solid working relationship with the CAO and develops the HSD portion of the annual Legislative Platform. Partnering on legislative advocacy would strengthen this partnership and allow HSD and the CAO to be more active in advocacy work at all levels of government and the community, which aligns with the county's new strategic planning initiative. Perhaps, instituting a similar Legislative Breakfast to incorporate community voice would make sense in Santa Cruz County, similar to what happens in Alameda County.

The fourth implication for HSD is to foster cross-division collaboration and staff engagement with the development of a Legislative Council. This would help 'de-silo' the divisions within HSD that work on different issue areas and foster understanding amongst staff on how policies and legislation not only affect their specific division's programs, but other programs that clients may be potentially navigating. The Legislative Council can also be used as a vehicle for staff development where they can learn and engage in macro-level work and analysis in a team environment.

Proposed Model

The following values for HSD provide the scaffolding for its mission: Excellent Services, Compassion, Integrity, Partnerships, and Effective Practice. Utilizing these values as guiding principles, a proposed model for engaging in policy and legislative advocacy contains the following four key components:

Institutionalization, Collaboration, Organizational Learning, and Advocacy.

Institutionalization of policy and legislation advocacy is critical in providing timely and clear analyses to CWDA, state legislators, CAO, the BoS, and the community. That means establishing an official unit or program that conducts this activity and is situated under the HSD Director. This would also include software tools for policy and legislation-tracking at state and federal levels. As part of institutionalization, it will be important to include the policy unit in executive team meetings and discussions, as this would be a place for policy proposals and understanding the key issues affecting HSD and its clients.

Collaboration between HSD divisions, and with CAO, BoS, other county departments, and the community will both enhance the general, current collaborative efforts and develop new partnerships in providing effective legislative analysis and advocacy. Close cross-division collaboration will be required with Organization Development, Centralized Contracting Unit, and P&E to provide the data and evidence for powerful and effective analysis and advocacy. Also, a Legislative Council will bring staff from all levels and divisions together to propose legislation, review and analyze legislation throughout the year, and make recommendations on HSD's positions. In addition to the annual Legislative Platform, collaboration with the CAO and the BoS will include work on proposals that come externally from the community to inform decision-making. Empowerment is a key part of collaboration and involves new and improved forms of representation and participation in decision-making (Hickman, 2010). Collaboration with the community can lead to community members' sense of power in legislative advocacy in partnership with HSD, and the power they have within themselves to effect change.

Organizational learning is an important process to foster change collectively (Hickman, 2010). A policy unit or program can be part of HSD's process that adapts the organization and its members

to change by encouraging innovation, continually renewing structures and practices, and using performance data to assess and further develop the organization (Hickman, 2010). This means that HSD will move toward becoming a “learning system” that is capable of bringing about its own continuous transformation at both the organizational and staff levels. For the Policy Office, this includes policy and legislative analysis that is grounded in evidence, and that facilitates organizational change as it learns from experience.

Hickman (2010) posits that advocacy is essential “to highlight critical issues, influence public attitudes, and promote the enactment and implementation of laws and public policies” (p. 226). Therefore, advocacy would not be limited to state and federal legislation, but also will include policies of other county agencies, city governments, community-based organizations, community members, and associations. This proposed model will establish an engaged, active, and effective policy unit and can potentially be transferrable to other aspects of HSD and its efforts to improve the way it operates and serves the community.

Recommendations

Learning from Alameda County's OPEP and utilizing the proposed model, the following next steps are recommended:

- **Create a Legislative Council:** The Legislative Council would initiate the legislative analysis and cross-division collaboration required to conduct an effective legislative advocacy program. This would include having representatives from administrative support divisions such as Organization Development, Centralized Contracting Unit, and P&E in addition to members from program divisions. This can later be expanded to include key community partners and leaders.
- **Establish a formal policy unit or program:** Due to the current fiscal climate, this can begin with assigning a dedicated Senior Human Service Analyst (Policy Analyst) to this program under the HSD Director. As the work is developed and

expanded, this can be transitioned to an Administrative Services Manager (Policy Director) with a unit of Associate Human Services Analysts and an Administrative Aide. Due to Santa Cruz County's medium size, discussions and ideas should be generated to see how this function can be centralized for the county where all departments can provide input on policy issues.

Conclusion

The services HSD provides and the everyday life of the community members it serves are “impacted by the intended and unintended consequences of a whole series of public policies” (Theodoulou, 2013, p. 1). Therefore, establishing a policy program or unit within HSD to influence the process by which public policies are developed and implemented would be a critical approach to addressing the mission of protecting the vulnerable, promoting self-sufficiency, alleviating poverty, and improving the quality of life of those living in Santa Cruz County. HSD currently provides a wide array of direct and indirect services and supports to the Santa Cruz County community. In addition, HSD continues to advance services and systems to improve outcomes for clients. A formal policy program would be another method in enhancing the lives of Santa Cruz County residents.

The proposed model for the Policy Office has four core components: institutionalization, collaboration, organizational learning, and advocacy. These components are based on the values of HSD and provide a framework that not only can create an impactful policy program, but can be used to for future endeavors by HSD. The mission of HSD is a noble and essential one, but difficult to achieve. However, an integrated and well-established policy unit or program has the potential of moving HSD and the people it serves closer to its mission of a strong and vibrant Santa Cruz County community.

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