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How to Impact Public Policy for Families

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Societal changes impact families (*). Changes in families affect the dynamics of society. These changes result in development of public policies that may or may not adequately respond to family concerns. Private sector (business) policies may also compound such effects. Like government, these private sector policies may or may not respond to family concerns. This publication will focus primarily on public sector policymaking and how citizens can influence these processes for families.

***Definition of "Families"**

The American Home Economics Association defines the family unit as "two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitment to one another over time. The family is that climate that one 'comes home to' and it is this network of sharing and commitments that most accurately describes the family unit, regardless of blood, legal ties, adoption, or marriage."

(American Home Economics Association, 1975)

In the past, families provided financing, protection, welfare, and insurance for family members. Since government has increasingly provided those functions, there are some who believe that government causes some societal problems.

The policies that government makes at local, state and federal levels affect individuals and families living within their jurisdictions. Legislation on social services, education, child care, housing, nutrition, consumer rights, product safety, and the environment affects economic well-being as well as the physical and mental health of individuals and families. Government--whether local, state, or federal--makes and administers rules and regulations by which citizens all must live. Government also may provide families with direct services which they could not afford or obtain on their own.

Public policy affects family life through government regulation and by governmental services, which often interact:

1. **Governmental regulation** may include laws to protect the health and safety of children in child care and in the schools; safety regulations for nursing homes; standards for education and training

for health care providers; and safety standards for food and medicines.

2. **Governmental service** advance the public welfare, such as health programs, aid to the needy, disaster relief, fire/police/military protection, streets, and education. (Fitzsimmons, 1973).

In recent years, both public and private sectors have become more aware of the effects on family life by governmental policies and programs. In practice, public policies can both help and hinder families by expanding or restricting family resources.

Policies represent U.S. social values in action!

(Effie Hacklander, 1992)

Numerous groups, including Congressional committees, agree that public policy should not add to family problems, but should help support and strengthen families. (Ooms, 1988) The underlying question becomes, "What can be done to ensure that policies, in fact, support family life and, how do we know?"

Government decisions may dramatically affect the lives of families. Increasing or decreasing public services such as closing schools, hospitals, day-care centers. and residential homes for the elderly; transportation; and street cleaning create impacts on families. As an unemployed parent re-enters the workforce after locating subsidized day-care for his or her child, the reality of positive impact from government services become apparent. As adult children experience parents with declining health conditions being refused medical treatment because of cuts in health services, the negative family impact from government decisions becomes more clear. When rural families become isolated from markets because of the curtailing of a bus service or railroad line due to spending cuts, the impact on families because of government decisions becomes evident.
(Brookfield, 1989)

Examples of Policies Impacting on Families

Family Economics

- income maintenance
- fair credit reporting/billing
- truth in lending parental leave

Food and Nutrition

- feeding programs
- dietary guidelines
- nutrition labeling
- food inspection regulations

Family Life

- child care

- domestic violence
- child support
- family planning
- family leave

Others

- tax laws
- farm subsidies
- savings and loan bailout
- international conditions
- natural resource surplus/scarcity

Health and Human Services

- care of elderly
- health care
- retirement support
- handicapped services
- public health

Environmental Protection

- water, air quality
- waste management
- pesticides

Textiles and Housing

- flammability standards
- labeling codes
- construction standards
- trade/tariffs

Safety

- seat belts
- air bags
- product labeling
- drug testing

Decision-Making Knowledge and Skills Are Essential

Basic decision-making models have been used for years to teach problem solving. (Stevens, 1991) A similar decision-making process can be used to teach public policy education. Both models emphasize examining alternatives and their consequences.

Decision-Making Steps For The Public Policy Education

Process

1. Express concern
2. Become involved
3. Clarify issue
4. Consider alternatives
5. Consider consequences
6. Make a policy choice
7. Implement choice
8. Evaluate choice

Steps 1 and 2:

As a public policy issue evolves, citizens must first identify what faces them. Citizens begin by expressing concern and becoming involved. An example would be citizens realizing that their community has no means of transportation for elderly persons. Citizens may become involved in this issue as individuals or as members of a group working together to address the transportation problem.

Step 3:

Citizens then clarify the issue by defining the scope of the problem. Returning to the transportation example, citizens can talk with community leaders and the elderly to further define and clarify the transportation issue.

Steps 4 and 5:

Identifying alternatives and their consequences are the two most critical steps in public policy education. Examining all alternatives and consequences demands identifying existing alternatives, brainstorming new ones, and recognizing that doing nothing is an alternative.

In the example on transportation for the elderly, citizens can consider alternatives such as applying for government grants, inviting private businesses to bid on developing a transportation system, or organizing volunteers to donate transportation. As each alternative is noted, consequences are explored. For example, a government grant may help with a feasibility study or purchase of a van, but then additional funding sources must be sought before federal funds are exhausted.

Another consequence may be that volunteers are willing to help in the beginning of a project, but tire as the project matures.

Step 6:

When all alternatives and their consequences have been considered, a choice must be made. While the citizen may influence the choice, she or he does not typically make the choice directly at this step. Instead, the citizen chooses indirectly by influencing policymakers who make those decisions. However, on some levels of public policymaking, citizens acting as elected or appointed representatives to a board or commission may be making choices. For example, an elected board may decide to apply for the transportation grant providing the van, therefore accepting the stipulations involved with the grant and the need to seek other funding sources later.

Step 7:

The citizen's role in implementing the choice is to learn how to provide input to the policymaker as implementation procedures are developed. To follow through, citizens must learn about the policymaking process, including how the elderly transportation services decision will be made (for example, formal or informal, which decision arena, and the process to be used) and the means for citizen participation in the process.

Step 8:

Citizens usually evaluate decisions informally as they experience and react to each new solution. For example, if citizens are satisfied with the resolution to the elderly transportation issue, they may move on to other activities.

The decision-making process is cyclical. For example, citizens unhappy with the selected choice or the implementation procedures may begin the process again as they identify a new approach to the same problem or issue. Or, citizens may begin a campaign to elect new policymakers as a result of the experiences gained from the decision-making steps of the public policy education process.

Role of the Public Policy Educator

Educators can help citizens in various ways. They may help by simply listening and then asking questions to clarify the decision-making process. They may also help citizens approach the problem more realistically. Decision-makers may need more help in estimating a realistic time frame for specific stages in the decision-making process such as searching for information or implementing a choice as a citizen preference.

Educators can help identify objective sources of information and remain objective themselves. They can also encourage citizens to approach decisions with a broad perspective and to consider both the social and the economic consequences of alternatives. Educators can help citizens to realize that their decisions affect marketplace public policy.

The greatest difficulty for educators may be to help citizens see themselves in roles that can make a difference. Frequently, citizens may perceive that their vote doesn't count or that their voices won't be heard. (Staff, 1990) Educators can help citizens recognize that it is to their advantage to take the time and interest to work through the decision-making process.

Developing An Informed Public By 'Coming To Public Judgment'

"Public Judgment is the state of highly developed public opinion that exists once people have engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make. . . . For democracy to flourish, it is not enough to get out the vote. We need better public judgment, and we need to know how to cultivate it. The public is not magically endowed with good judgment. Good judgment is something that must be worked at all the time and with great skill and effort. It does not exist automatically; it must be created."

(Yankelovich, 1991)

Analyzing Public Policy Issues From A Family Perspective

Public policy issues seldom have clear-cut right or wrong answers. Each issue evolves from and is a product of facts, myths, and values. Facts describe the issue, myths surround it, and values are held by each of those involved. Solutions to public policy issues are typically based on value judgments. (House, 1988) Even when several citizens have similar values and are presented the same facts, they may still reach different conclusions about which policy is appropriate.

Several factors make it difficult for policymakers to agree on how public policy affects families. First, policy that is still based on a traditional family may not be realistic for many families because of an increasingly diverse family structure. Therefore, policymakers may need help in broadening their views and realizing that no particular family form is standard or best for everyone.

Second, the lack of popular consensus on a definition of families makes it difficult for policymakers to agree on which policy to implement.

Third, the effect of complex technology on family life make family policy impact difficult to evaluate.

Critical Thinking Sustains A Healthy Democracy

Critical thinking is the process of reflecting on the assumptions underlying our own and others' ideas and actions, and then considering alternative ways of thinking and living.

Thinking critically does not mean being disrespectful of the democratic process or the values of others but understanding the connection between public policy decisions and personal circumstances and then questioning how the decisions were made. For example, reducing budgets of regional mental health services may deprive families of counseling service in times of crisis. As a result, citizens may force a re-examination of budget reduction decision-making.

(Brookfield, 1989)

In 1986, the House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families directed a task force to develop criteria to guide policymaking and program evaluation from a family perspective. The report entitled *A Strategy For Strengthening Families: Using Family Criteria in Policymaking and Program Evaluation*, provides the following six principles as guides:

1. "Policies and programs should encourage and reinforce family, parental and marital commitment and stability, especially when children are involved.
2. The first assumption of policies and programs should be to support and supplement family functioning, rather than substituting for family functioning.
3. Policies and programs must recognize the strength and persistence of family ties, even when they are problematic.
4. Policies and programs must treat families as partners when providing services to individuals, to strengthen families' capacity to fulfill the various tasks society expects of them.
5. Policies and programs must recognize the diversity of family life.
6. Families in greatest economic and social need, those determined to be most vulnerable to breakdown, should be the primary priority for government policies and programs."

Each of these six principles carries an underlying question about the role of government in family-related

activities. The answers to each question will be based on values and may vary as widely as does the diversity of the families and the values they hold.

Family impact criteria for policymaking and program evaluation are increasingly used as a framework for family policy education projects that bring together policymakers at the federal, state, or local levels. Executive Order 12606 was signed by the President of the United States on September 2, 1987 to coordinate and review government-wide policy that may have impact on families.

Family Impact Seminars in several states including Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Illinois are now beginning to educate policymakers about the impact of policy on families. Various community groups are studying these criteria and using them to evaluate the effect of policies from schools, hospital services, or community organizations on families. (Studies are available from the National Committee for Citizens in Education in Washington, DC, the Association for Care of Children's Health in Bethesda, MD, and community organizations in Ohio and Quebec, Canada)

Using a Family Perspective to Evaluate Public Policy Proposals

The following questions will help evaluate public policy proposals from the perspective of families:

1. What social, economic, environmental, or political values from global to personal have influenced the development of the policy? How do family values affect one's thinking? (For example, does your personal family situation influence your opinion on care for children versus care for the elderly?)
2. Does the proposal put one group of families over others? Is there discrimination toward families of high or low income, white or minority races, or of diverse make-up? (For example, what public health services or health insurance options are available to families? Are families excluded?)
3. What will be the impact on families and communities in the short or long term? What are the social and economic costs and benefits to the family and to society? (For example, how might subsidies for child care or parental leave influence workplace productivity?)
4. Does the policy develop or deter family stability? How does it contribute to the stability of the community? (For example, which transfer payments, such as food stamps, effectively reduce economic hardships for families that are underemployed or displaced? Do food stamps contribute more to family stability or to family instability?)

(Stevens, 1990)

How Policymakers View The Public's Role in The Policy Process

- Elected officials at the state and local levels generally do not actively seek or use citizens' views to develop or choose policy options.
- While most leaders believe public involvement is important to the policy process, they do not make special efforts to find and include such involvement.

(Harwood, 1989)

How Can Families Act Public Policy?

The fundamental principle behind public policy education is Thomas Jefferson's belief that democracy functions only if citizens are informed and have the opportunity to participate fully in the policymaking process. The citizen role therefore requires that citizens increase their understanding of public issues and processes for making policy, understand rights and responsibilities, improve their ability to participate effectively, stay current on public concerns, and work to resolve public issues affecting people and communities. Greater competencies in the public policy arena are vital as the United States approaches the challenges of the next century.

Citizens Want Their Voices Heard On Technical Issues

- Ordinary citizens believe they can have a voice in making public policy regarding scientifically and technically complex issues over which even experts do not agree.
- Citizens feel strongly they have the right to that voice. (Based on research conducted by Public Agenda Foundation of 402 panelists in cities, examining issues of solid waste disposal, and the threat of global warming caused by the greenhouse effect.)

(Doble and Johnson, 1991)

Families can affect public policy when they are informed and participate in the processes for making policy that shapes their lives. Families must realize that their opinions are important to public decision making. They can make a choice. In the United States, we believe that citizen participation is essential to government decisions--but we do not always match that belief with action.

When families actively participate in the policymaking process, then basic social institutions are more likely to respond to family needs. When families are educated in critical thinking about public issues, policy making processes, and opportunities for effective participation, they can interact more directly in the public decision-making process.

Good family policies result from dialogue between families and policymakers. Each must be responsible for action or inaction in policymaking which addresses issues that affect families. Policymakers and families can work together to develop a balanced view of expected impacts on individuals and families. Involvement and participation are possible when policymakers and families commit themselves to the basic principles of the American democratic system.

What's Your Family Citizenship Style? (An Assessment Exercise)

Think back to your citizenship activity as a family during the last year. Individual family members may answer some questions while the whole family answers other questions.

	Possible Points	Family Score

1. Name the local legislator representing you in state legislature.	10	

2. Name your Senators and Representative in Congress.	10	

3. List three local, state, or federal legislative issues of prime concern to your family.	30	

4. Describe the effort you make to be informed on legislative issues, such as daily reading of newspaper, watching TV news, listening to radio, attending public forums.	30	

5. Give yourselves 10 points if you have called or written in the last year to support or to speak against proposed legislation.	10	
6. Give yourselves 10 points if you have contacted and brought together your friends, relatives, neighbors and community to discuss an issue of concern.	10	
80 - 100 points	Almost a pro--keep up the good work.	
60 - 80 points	Keep working at becoming informed and active.	
Under 60 points	Consider contacting the League of Women Voters, a political pad, or your local legislator for information.	

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