

Lifting Up Authentic Voices of Disenfranchised Constituencies

New civic engagement program aims for paradigm shift

Volunteers and families paint a hallway mural at Family & Children's Service, Minneapolis, National Family Week 2007 Connections Count Award Winner.

NEW VOICES
at the CIVIC TABLE



Helping youth who are transitioning out of the foster care system by educating them about self-advocacy, civic engagement, and civic action ...

Assisting elderly and disabled legal immigrants to obtain citizenship in order to continue receiving public benefits and assistance ...

Implementing a Citizens Leadership Initiative to empower citizens through civic leadership training to gain knowledge about community issues and take action on matters of public policy ...

Alliance for Children and Families member agencies have used a myriad of strategies to successfully involve their clients, boards, staff, and other supporters in specific civic engagement activities as a way to affect positive change. In many instances, their efforts have been supported by three separate Alliance programs: National Family Week, Building Community Voices, and New Voices at the Civic Table.

With a goal of better facilitating constituent participation in the democratic process in order to achieve positive change for children, families, and communities,

the Alliance established these programs to provide financial support, information, learning opportunities, tools, and technical assistance to members to help them establish thriving practices on the local level.

While the Alliance observed the positive results each program generated, their successes have often been accomplished in isolation from the measurable changes in the civic engagement and public policy processes that the Alliance strives to enhance.

As the Alliance continues to seek out more ways to support members in civic engagement, staff realized that the overall goal to facilitate civic participation

could be achieved most effectively by integrating these three successful efforts into one cohesive program.

By drawing together the best aspects of National Family Week, Building Community Voices, and New Voices at the Civic Table, the higher level of cohesiveness will help the Alliance more effectively build the capacity of member agencies to plan and engage their constituencies in civic engagement activities.

With generous support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008 commences an exciting new program with many possibilities for supporting and enhancing civic engagement efforts among Alliance members.

The integration of National Family Week, Building Community Voices, and New Voices at the Civic Table provides an opportunity for a new goal:

The new program will create a seamless, multi-year effort aimed at developing and supporting authentic voices for social change through effective deployment of civic engagement tools and tactics in local communities.

Seeds of Success Planted

What the Alliance hopes to achieve is nothing less than a paradigm shift. While that may seem daunting, the Alliance believes that this one collective program offers the Alliance and its members a strong foundation from which we can begin to stimulate this change, together.

This new and cohesive program represents a concerted effort to move away from civic engagement used as a "sometimes tool" toward civic engagement as an everyday process integral to agency activities so that their efforts will ultimately stimulate community activism. The ultimate goal is to lift up the authentic voices of disenfranchised constituencies.

Importance of Civic Engagement Grows

Alliance members witness daily the wide-ranging and ever-increasing complexity of issues that afflict the individuals and families coming through their doors. Indeed, the vast majority of issues and problems

increasingly require more attention than can be paid by routine services provided by any given organization.

While the human services sector is well positioned to care for the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized, the Alliance believes the sector must also position itself to address the serious economic and social structural barriers faced by the people it serves. These barriers must be broken down so they no longer impede individuals from creating better lives for themselves and their families.

A number of Alliance member agencies have gone beyond direct service delivery to incorporate civic engagement strategies that help clients find their own voices in the democratic process. With the more streamlined program in place, the Alliance will provide further assistance and guidance as member agencies increase their efforts, and as more members get on board with incorporating civic engagement strategies.

Indeed, the Alliance has come to embrace the belief that one very important way agencies can better serve vulnerable children and families is to encourage and support their clients' active, informed civic engagement. At all levels, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement, to voting, all members of society ought to be provided opportunities to engage in the civic life of their community and nation.

The Alliance believes that the effort we are embarking on through this new program will create the conditions necessary among the membership to help amplify authentic voices for constructive social change.

Pat Heinz, Nancy Kunkler, and Linda Nguyen of the Alliance contributed to this article. ■

Civic Engagement Philosophy and Values Drive Initiative

The Alliance has adopted a philosophy and values that underpin all our activities related to the newly configured civic engagement program:

We believe human service agencies have a vital role to play in enabling, motivating, supporting, and mobilizing their constituents' active participation in advocating for social changes that

provide positive opportunities to enhance the quality of their lives, and that strengthen the possibilities for their families to succeed.

Driving that philosophy are five values:

1. Community residents have a right to influence and determine the course of their own lives.

2. Community residents possess the capacity to identify the social barriers blocking their path to success, and the creativity and wisdom to formulate strategies to remove those barriers.

3. Community residents—especially those in lower socioeconomic neighborhoods—must have access to the civic participation tools that are

available to everyone in a civil society in order to organize and convey their "authentic voices."

4. Nonprofit human service agencies can—and should—serve as liaisons to connect their constituents to civic engagement practices, and as facilitators to support them in the

application of advocacy tools required to advance social change.

5. Nonprofit human service agencies themselves must be adequately prepared and supported before assuming a leadership role to foster and support these "authentic voices" in their communities.