

Family-Serving Organizations doing Systems and Policy Change Work

An Exploratory Study

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A network diagram background consisting of a grid of orange dots connected by thin lines, with some dots being larger than others, set against a light green background.

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INTRODUCTION

Direct-service nonprofit organizations (DSOs) serving families—or **family-serving organizations** (FSOs)—have a unique role to play in ensuring policies reflect families’ lived realities. This is because of their direct service role in communities, their connections with families, and their involvement in policy and systems change work. FSOs have the potential to influence policy and decision-making in a way that better meets the needs of families and engages and centers them in systems and policy change.

THE RESEARCH

This exploratory report is part of a larger ecosystem scan of FSOs doing systems and policy change work, funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). This report uses a review of literature and interviews with 5 experts to understand the following questions:

- 1.**
How do direct-service nonprofit organizations that serve families (FSOs) identify themselves, and how do they differentiate themselves from other types of direct-service organizations (DSOs)?
- 2.**
What is known about the characteristics and external conditions that facilitate or constrain DSOs from engaging in the policy and systems change ecosystem, especially as they may be relevant to FSOs?
- 3.**
What is known about the models, frameworks, and approaches that DSOs draw from to center most affected people in their systems and policy change work, especially as they may be relevant to FSOs?

Our analysis is also supported by learning conversations with 6 RWJF staff and 5 researchers working with FSOs. The purpose of this report is to ground the next phase of the research in **what is currently known** about the systems and policy change work of DSOs, especially those that serve families, and how they engage their constituents in this work. Since the literature specific to DSO and FSO advocacy is limited, this report also draws on a wide range of literature on nonprofit advocacy and identifies relevant gaps about DSOs and FSOs, specifically, that can be filled in the next phase of research.

***A note on language:** Throughout this report, we occasionally use the term ‘advocacy’ in place of ‘systems and policy change work’ (RWJF’s preferred term) to reflect the state of the research and how FSOs and other nonprofits refer to their work. In this report, these terms refer to a broad range of work to influence legislation, regulations, policy, practices, funding, relationships, power dynamics, narratives, mental models, and behaviors of key actors in the ecosystem (which may range from policymakers to the general public).*

ECOSYSTEM DYNAMICS

Nonprofit organizations have long played a vital role in delivering services to communities and advocating for systems and policy change, acting as intermediaries between different interests and providing valuable insights to political leaders. Many direct service nonprofits believe that engaging in systems and policy change work is an important complement to the services they provide to communities, since the challenges individuals and families face are often due to structural and systemic causes.

Nonprofit DSOs are legally allowed to engage in a wide range of systems change work, from educating the public, engaging with officials, and even some lobbying (Council of Nonprofits, n.d.). This work can be funded by government, philanthropy, individual donations, earned income, etc. Some forms of funding are associated with different forms of systems and policy change work. For example, government funding is often associated with engaging in general advocacy, while earned income and individual donations tend to dissuade organizations from lobbying (Kim, MacIndoe, & Faulk, 2024).

Organizations have different structures for engaging in systems and policy change work. DSOs that have some sort of service-advocacy hybrid (e.g., participating in coalitions, having a sister 501c4 organization, collaborating with external advocacy firms, or having dedicated advocacy staff) are more likely overall to engage in systems and policy change work (Beaton, MacIndoe, and Wang, 2021). An organization's service orientation also affects their advocacy work. Organizations with a practice framework focused on increasing access to services or creating structural change (rather than an individual service-provision) are more likely to engage in advocacy for social benefits (rather than for their organization's increased funding) (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014).

COVID-19 exacerbated the need for direct services, and DSOs were especially hard-hit by the pandemic (Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2020). While the ability of DSOs to engage in systems and policy change work is affected by time, resources, and skills (Donaldson, 2007), which were all challenged by COVID-19, some DSOs actually expanded the amount of advocacy work they were doing (DC Policy Center, 2020). Still, fewer nonprofits are engaging in advocacy than two decades ago (Faulk, Kim, & MacIndoe, 2023). Moreover, just because DSOs work directly with communities, they are not always able to represent their constituents in their advocacy work (Mosley, 2012). This has led many DSOs to recognize the importance of directly engaging them in systems and policy change efforts, though they may be more limited in doing so than advocacy organizations (Aspen Institute, 2019).

Having laid out some key dynamics in the ecosystem, we now explore what it means for a DSO to be, specifically, *family-serving*, how FSOs engage in systems and policy change work, what factors may affect FSOs' systems and policy change efforts, and how they may go about engaging families in this work.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE 'FAMILY-SERVING'?

How do direct-service nonprofit organizations that serve families (FSOs) identify themselves, and how do they differentiate themselves from other types of direct-service organizations (DSOs)?

This research focuses on a subgroup of direct-service organizations—those that specifically center 'families' in their work. One goal of this exploratory research phase was to understand how these FSOs differentiate themselves from other DSOs.

A family-serving approach is not about defining what families are. It is about engaging with a family unit, within wider systems.

Interviewees defined 'family serving' as not only focusing on children and the adults in their lives, but looking at how to support children and adults *together*. This aligns with the [2-Gen Approach](#), which was referenced by one interviewee, although others alluded to it. This approach builds "family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together to integrate services and supports to move the whole family forward." (Ascend Aspen Institute, n.d.).

According to interviewees, a family-serving approach centers families in the services they receive. It also means learning (through programming) about what issues or experiences families face to incorporate them into the FSO's advocacy work. Interviewees saw FSOs as having a 'first hand account' of the impact policy changes may have on the community. Their policy and systems change agendas are driven by needs identified by the community, which involves listening to families and centering their needs. Interviewees recognize that looking at issues that families have identified as important may require looking beyond their organizations' specific issue areas of focus to more systemic multi-sectoral issues, like changing healthcare systems, economic security, housing, etc. The key aspect they mentioned is that the issues are those that families identify as important.

Interviewees we spoke to are also thinking of systems and policy change broadly, and are interpreting 'systems' even more expansively. Three of the five FSO representatives we interviewed spoke about systems change in terms of collaborating with institutions like hospitals and schools and making programming accessible, in addition to engaging policymakers. For these organizations, systems change is not just policy change and advocating for funding—it's inclusive of the services provided and the service providers, such as parents advocating for their children in school.

SYSTEMS & POLICY CHANGE

WORK OF FSOs

What is known about the characteristics and external conditions that facilitate or constrain DSOs from engaging in the policy and systems change ecosystem, especially as they may be relevant to FSOs?

This research is based on the assumption that **FSOs are well-placed to advocate for systems and policy change that better meets the needs of and represents the lived experience of families** given their direct connections through their services and programming. While we found no literature specific to FSOs, our interviews largely supported findings from our literature review on DSOs doing advocacy work.

Most DSOs engage in some form of systems and policy change work, when we define that broadly.

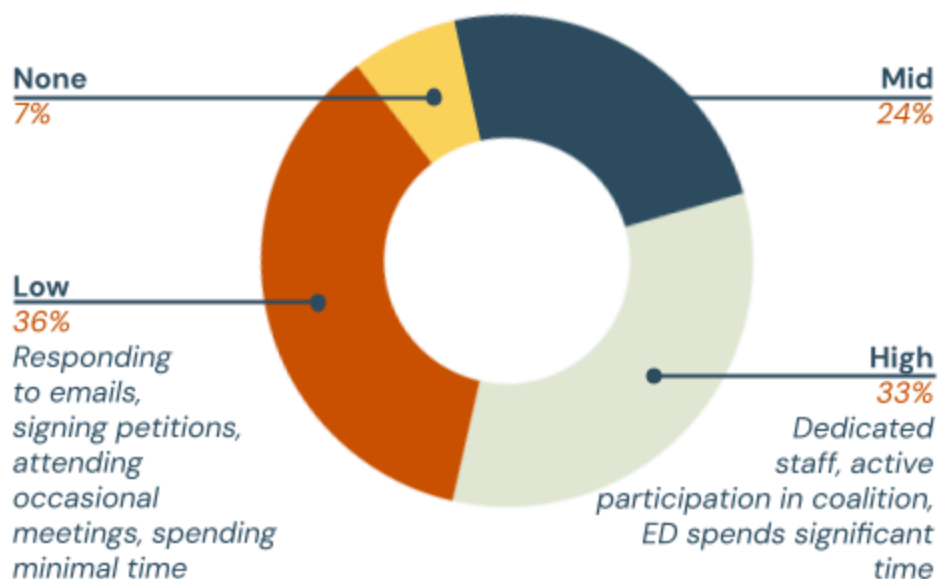
Systems and policy change can mean a range of influencing activities—from educating the public, engaging voters, interacting with officials, policy advocacy, lobbying, and more. When a broad definition is used, **the majority (50% to 95%) of DSOs in the literature engage in some amount of systems and policy change work**. Likewise, our interviews show that FSOs specifically engage in many types of systems and policy change work, including:

- Policymaker education
- Community education, peer support groups, and powerbuilding
- Influencing policy and funding through advocacy, campaigns, technical assistance, developing policies and making policy recommendations, etc.
- Strategic litigation
- Research and data collection
- Partnerships with coalitions and other organizations
- Storytelling, narrative change, and thought leadership
- Influencing different institutions (e.g., schools, hospitals)

Many DSOs, including the FSOs we interviewed, view systems and policy change work as an important aspect of, or complementary to, the services they provide to communities. What varies is the **extent** to which organizations are engaged (low, mid, and high levels of engagement), their **tactics** (direct vs. indirect) and **motivations** (for social benefit vs. organizational benefit), and the **structures** they set up for this work (coalitions, sister or external advocacy organizations, or dedicated advocacy staff).

Extent of Engagement

DSOs that do systems & policy change work do so to varying degrees, ranging from responding to a few emails and occasionally attending meetings to dedicating significant amounts of staff and ED time.



Data from: Mosley, 2012

Tactics



DIRECT/INSIDER
Working directly with policymakers, developing policy, participating on commissions, providing testimony



INDIRECT/OUTSIDER
Influencing from the 'outside', participating in coalitions, educating the public, writing letters and policy reports, demonstrating

Motivations



SOCIAL
Influencing systems change to meet constituents' needs



ORGANIZATION
Advocacy to align with org services or acquire funding

Source: Mosley, 2011; Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014

Structures

Three-quarters of DSOs that do systems & policy change work have some sort of hybrid structure.



Data from: Beaton, MacIndoe, & Wang, 2021

FACTORS AFFECTING SYSTEMS AND POLICY CHANGE WORK

Substantial research has identified contextual and organizational factors that influence DSOs’ systems and policy change work. Many of these were mentioned as enabling and constraining factors by FSO interviewees, as well. **Size, budget, funding source, advocacy infrastructure and commitment, and a favorable context** support organizations to engage, while **low capacity/resources** and **faith-based status** are challenges.

Factors that <u>support</u> advocacy	Factors that <u>inhibit</u> advocacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger size and budget • More government funding • Advocacy infrastructure and commitment • Favorable political environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low org capacity/resources • Faith-based status

Size and budget

Larger DSOs (defined interchangeably by staff size, caseload, and budget) engage in systems/policy change work to a greater extent than smaller DSOs (Donaldson, 2007; Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Mosley, 2010; Mosley, 2011; Mosley, 2013; Fyall and Allard, 2017; Roth, Park, and Grace, 2018). One study also found that larger DSOs also engage more in intentional hybrid service-advocacy structures (i.e., participate in coalitions, have a sister organization, engage external firms, and/or have dedicated advocacy staff) (Beaton, MacIndoe, and Wang, 2021). This may be due to having increased capacity and resources for activities beyond their primary direct-service mandate.

Funding source

Government funding is consistently positively correlated with increased engagement in systems and policy change work (Donaldson, 2007; Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Grogan and Gusmano, 2009; Mosley, 2010; Mosley, 2012; Mosley, 2013; Fyall and Allard, 2017; Lu, 2017). However, the tactics for engaging may be influenced by funding type. While one study showed that government funding was associated with the use of insider tactics only (e.g., participating in the development or revision of policy, participating on commissions or committees), another showed that government funding was more related to indirect tactics (specifically grassroots activity and collaboration) (Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Mosley, 2011). A third study suggested that organizations with more government funding were less likely to

have internal staff focused on advocacy and more likely to partner in coalitions, with sister organizations, or work with an external advocacy firm (Beaton, MacIndoe, and Wang, 2021).

This may be connected to a desire to maintain positive relationships with, rather than directly confront, funders.

More private, individual, and church funding, on the other hand, may be associated with less systems and policy change work (Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2012). One study showed that earned revenue and philanthropic funding was positively associated with communications with state legislators (and, for earned revenue only, local officials), but negatively associated with voter engagement (Fyall and Allard, 2017).

Importantly, creative financing options enable more staff in FSOs to engage in advocacy work. Some interviewees shared that because it can be hard to get funding for systems change work, some organizations cross-fund positions so staff can work on both direct services and advocacy.

Infrastructure and commitment

When DSOs are committed and put infrastructure in place, they are more likely to engage in systems and policy change. Several studies show that commitment of the Executive Director (Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2013; Mellinger, 2017), staff (Mosley, 2011), and constituents (Lu, 2017) is positively associated with DSOs' engagement in the work. Likewise, integrating advocacy into an organization's mission is positively associated with engagement in systems/policy change work (Mellinger, 2016; Mellinger, 2017; Roth, Park, and Grace, 2018) and in having an intentional advocacy structure (budget, dedicated staff, or hybrid service-advocacy structure) (Beaton, MacIndoe, and Wang, 2021), which increases engagement (Donaldson, 2007; Fyall and Allard, 2017; Roth, Park, and Grace, 2018; Beaton, MacIndoe, and Wang, 2021).

This is true for FSOs, as well. Interviewees shared that when direct service work and policy advocacy work are central to the organization from the inception and built into the mission, this supports their ability to engage in systems and policy change and provides clarity and consistency for staff. Interviewees also mentioned the importance of having strong internal clarity, communications, and systems across direct services and advocacy teams. This included support from organizational leadership, communication across teams to ensure that direct service and advocacy work isn't siloed, and time to engage collaboratively.

Political environment and contextual factors

The policy and political environment in which DSOs operate affects engagement in systems and policy change work. Presence of negative or restrictive policies, coupled with a supportive political environment (e.g., political liberalism in the state), was associated with more engagement in systems and policy change work (Nicholson-Crotty, 2007; Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Roth, Park, and Grace, 2018).

The need for policy change, alongside a supportive political environment and collaboration with other organizations, is a favorable context for engaging in systems and policy change.

In contrast, collaboration with other DSOs (for services and/or advocacy) was positively correlated with systems and policy change work (Mosley, 2010; Mosley, 2011), and collaboration on services, specifically, is positively associated with engagement in advocacy towards the goal of shifting systems (rather than funding-focused advocacy alone) (Garrow and Hasenfield, 2014).

For the FSOs we interviewed, serving as a connector between advocacy and direct-service organizations also supports their own advocacy work. Interviewees shared that having a hybrid service-advocacy model enables them to act as the connector between organizations that solely do advocacy and organizations that solely do direct service. This enables them to connect their constituents with additional resources they may not provide and also helps increase impact and collaborate across advocacy organizations, because “families aren’t one-dimensional” and there is “intersectionality in the causes and initiatives.”

Lack of capacity and resources

Overall, DSOs that lack time, skills, or other resources face barriers to engaging in systems and policy change (Donaldson, 2007; Roth, Park, & Grace, 2018). However, competition with other DSOs for funding was positively associated with systems and policy change engagement (Grogan and Gusmano, 2009; Lu, 2017), likely because organizations may focus on advocating for changes that increase their funding.

Lack of resources and capacity also affected FSOs’ advocacy work. FSO interviewees also shared that limited funding for organizations to do both direct service and advocacy and capacity of the organization to take on more advocacy work were barriers. There are fewer donors that provide funding for advocacy and systems change work and that fund organizations that combine this with direct services work. Because funding is limited, organizations are not able to hire as many staff to work on advocacy, and the advocacy work can be intensive and time consuming.

Faith-based status

Two studies showed that DSOs with a faith-based designation were less likely to engage in systems/policy change activity (Donaldson, 2007; Fyall and Allard, 2017).

Other factors

Several other factors were examined in the literature on DSO advocacy, as well as the broader nonprofit advocacy research, but with mixed or limited results:

- **Bureaucratization, professionalization, and formalization.** Some studies show that bureaucratization, professionalization, and/or formalization may increase engagement in systems/policy change work, while other studies show a decrease (Nicholson-Crotty, 2009; Mosley, 2010, Mosley, 2011, Mosley, 2013, Anasti, 2017; Lu and Park, 2018).
- **Location/population served.** Overall, there is not a consistent relationship between having a large minority caseload and political activity. The exception is where most clients are a minority, organizations tend to have increased voter-related activity (Fyall and Allard, 2017). However, one study showed that organizations in high-poverty areas are more likely to engage in advocacy for social benefits, while another study showed that those in high poverty areas may be less likely to engage in certain types of systems and policy change (namely, communications with state legislators) (Garrow and Hasenfield, 2014; Fyall and Allard, 2017).
- **Service sector.** The literature on nonprofit advocacy more broadly showed that DSOs were less likely than other organizations to engage in systems/policy change than other nonprofits (Faulk, Kim, and MacIndoe, 2023). The literature is mixed on service fields and extent of engagement in systems and policy change work, but one study showed that DSOs that were most active were multi-service organizations (Donaldson, 2007). Across service sectors, DSOs that are oriented around lack of access to services or structural/systemic root causes (as opposed to organizations oriented around individual service provision/deficit model) are more likely to engage in advocacy for social benefit/systemic change (as opposed to simply for funding) (Garrow and Hasenfield, 2014; Fyall and Allard, 2017).
- **Lack of knowledge of tax law or IRS rules.** Research on nonprofits broadly showed that organizations' advocacy activities may be hindered by their lack of understanding of what they are allowed to do given their nonprofit status (Faulk, Kim, and MacIndoe, 2023). One study specifically on DSOs showed confusion over rules was common, but it did not prevent organizations from participating in systems and policy change (Mosley, 2013). Another study showed that increased knowledge of lobbying law was positively associated with having some type of advocacy structure, which could facilitate systems and policy change work (Mellinger, 2014).

CENTERING FAMILIES IN ADVOCACY

What is known about the models, frameworks, and approaches that DSOs draw from to center most affected people in their systems and policy change work, especially as they may be relevant to FSOs?

This research is also based on the assumption that **directly engaging families in systems and policy change work is an effective means of ensuring their voices and experiences are represented.** While the literature we found on constituent engagement was about DSOs and nonprofits more broadly, the interviews provided further support and nuance to our findings.

DSOs are often assumed to represent their constituents' interests because of their proximity to communities. However, research shows this is not always the case.

DSOs and other nonprofits may represent communities' interests as 'platforms' or 'proxies' (Mosley and Grogan, 2012). As platforms, they amplify community members' voices and facilitate their direct participation in systems change and interactions with the policy-making process. This is what Guo and Musso (2007) call 'substantive' representation—that the organization is acting in the interests of its constituents in a way that is responsive to them.

As proxies, DSOs stand in place of community members. Leadership may be asked to participate as a shortcut to community engagement because they are assumed to have insider knowledge or because of the optics of having 'local representation', even if they are not members of communities themselves (Mosley, 2016). But representation by proxy can also be considered legitimate, in what Guo and Musso (2007) call symbolic representation. This is when an organization's constituents view and trust the organization as their representative. This trust can be built by the DSO's ability to listen to the community, have ongoing communication with constituents, represent the whole community (not just one subgroup), have a record of tangible changes, and have direct contact with them through services and staff (Mosley and Grogan, 2012).

FSO interviewees also shared that their direct service work gives legitimacy to their advocacy work and gives organizations the knowledge and ability to truly represent community needs. By engaging in direct service work, organizations have "on the ground knowledge" that supports staff to understand what their constituents' needs are.

Organizations have built trust through long-term engagement with the community, so organizations that have started to do advocacy more recently have found that this gives them legitimacy with both community members and policymakers.

APPROACHES FOR ENGAGING FAMILIES

There are many ways that FSOs (and other DSOs) can engage with constituents in order to legitimately represent their concerns. These can be categorized by three types of practices (Guo and Musso, 2007):

Formal Representation	Descriptive Representation	Participatory Representation
When an organization has processes in place for constituents to elect its leadership or keep leadership accountable.	When an organization’s staff and leadership demographics and lived experiences mirror that of their constituents (as relevant to their issues of focus).	When an organization has processes that allow for constituent input and contribution to its governance and/or activities (e.g., advisory committees, etc.)

FSO interviewees described a wide range of mechanisms for engaging families in their systems and policy change work, many of which are supported by wider research (Guo and Musso, 2007; Andrasik and Mead, 2019; Mosley and Grogan, 2012):

- Getting feedback from program staff based on what they are hearing from families receiving direct services to inform policy agendas or advocacy approaches.
- Asking families what issue areas the organization should focus on, often through surveys, focus groups, or needs assessments.
- Creating advisory boards or committees made up of families or including family members on the organization’s Board of Directors.
- Conducting community-based participatory research with families.
- Holding community convenings before a program begins to build relationships with community members and explain programming.
- Educating and informing the community on the impact of laws and policies.
- Taking on a convening role and using organizational privilege to partner with organizations that policymakers may not typically reach out to as a way to bring others in and give them access.

Interviewees also said that FSOs may also build the capacity of families to engage in advocacy. This is supported by research on nonprofits, including DSOs, who may also be capacity-builders for their constituents to engage in systems and policy change. DSOs and other nonprofits are places where families can learn about issues and ways of engaging with systems and institutions (Britton, 2018; Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, 2019; Evans, Raymond, and Perkins, 2015; Dodge and Ospina, 2015; Guo and Saxton, 2010).

Family Engagement Frameworks & Guiding Principles

While interviewees did not mention specific frameworks for engaging families in their systems and policy change work (besides the 2-Gen approach), several frameworks exist that offer organizations principles and tools for self-assessment, such as:

General frameworks	Frameworks for engaging families
Spectrum of Public Participation (IA2P)	Framework for Assessing Family Engagement in Systems Change (Family Voices)
Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership (Movement Strategy Center)	Parent Leadership Indicators Framework (Parent Leadership Evaluation Network)
	Family Engagement to Leadership Continuum (Center for the Study of Social Policy)
	Principles for Engaging and Centering Parent Voice (2-Gen) (Aspen Institute)

Taken together, the frameworks assume that **more constituent ownership of systems and policy change work is better.** For example, when constituents contribute to advocacy priorities and strategies and lead advocacy tactics they have greater ownership than simply providing testimony or attending events. The value of constituent engagement in systems and policy change is premised on the belief that communities affected by certain issues are the best-placed to design solutions for the issue (ORS, 2020; Britton, 2018; Gonzales, 2019). Constituent engagement creates:

- ✓ **Sustainability:** Decisions where constituents had input and decision-making power are more sustainable because they will address the stated needs and interests of constituents.
- ✓ **Relevance:** Using constituent knowledge of their context helps design more effective and appropriate solutions.
- ✓ **Equity:** Giving marginalized communities input and voice in decision-making is a central tenet of equity.

These assumptions are rooted in Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969), which is based on the belief that true democratic participation requires sharing power.

Engaging families requires treating them as experts, building relationships, and meeting them where they are at.

The frameworks, alongside the interviews, highlight several other principles for engaging families in systems and policy change work. First, transparency is crucial to develop true partnership with families. Families are experts on the issues that affect them (Hoover et al., 2018; Franklin, 2018). The **FSO interviewees highlighted the importance of shifting power** by treating them as the experts and centering those who are most impacted by the issue, rather than tokenizing them. Second, relationship-building is important not only between organizations and constituents but between constituents themselves. This can translate to building community and peer support (Geller, 2017). Finally, FSOs interviewed highlighted the importance of tailoring family advocacy engagement based on interest and capacity and meeting families where they are. This may be complemented by enabling parent and family engagement through, for example, compensation, childcare, scheduling meetings outside normal business hours, etc., which was emphasized in several of the frameworks on parent engagement (Aspen Institute, n.d.; Franklin, 2018; Geller et al., 2017).

FACTORS THAT AFFECT FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

FSO interviewees and the literature identified a range of organizational and external factors that can support (or constrain) family engagement in systems and policy change work:

Factors that <u>support</u> family engagement	Factors that <u>hinder</u> family engagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organizational infrastructure and processes• Being realistic about how an organization can engage families• Power-shifting relational practices• Practices to help families frame their own problems and solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organization’s lack time, money, and capacity• Organization’s lack of relevant issue expertise• Families’ lack of time, money, capacity, and/or interest• Negative perception of family engagement as a funder checkbox

Several factors within the literature and shared by FSO interviewees **support** engagement of families in systems and policy change:

- **Organizational infrastructure and processes.** FSO interviewees shared that having infrastructure and processes in place to engage families, which takes intentionality and financial investment, can support family engagement. This includes internal organizational alignment around ways of working so staff can truly center families, which can look like including family engagement in job descriptions.
- **Being realistic about how an organization can engage families.** FSO interviewees highlighted that it was important to be realistic about what is possible, by thinking about families' needs, interests, and bandwidth. This includes adapting and being creative to align with family capacity, like having 'bite sized' ways of engaging, because families have many priorities. Interviewees mentioned that parents have given feedback that they don't always want to be engaged in a more intensive way because they're too busy parenting their children, face other barriers to engagement, or do not want to engage in the types of advocacy actions the organization is requesting of them (e.g., calling their representative).
- **Power-shifting relational practices.** Existing research highlights relational practices that shift power to constituents and help them hold the organization to account. This helps create space for constituents to be heard and have their expertise valued. This may involve transparent communication, open discussions of power, or plans for navigating disagreement between constituents and the organization (Dodge & Ospina, 2016; Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program, 2019). FSO interviewees also emphasized **building relationships and trust** with community/family members and taking a 'families first' approach, which an interviewee described as engaging with the mindset that the community has what it needs to heal itself, and the organization is just there to give them the tools.
- **Practices to help families frame their own problems and solutions.** Existing literature highlights the importance of giving constituents the space and skills to understand an issue and form an analysis of its causes and potential solutions. This can include having opportunities for constituents to develop their critical analysis and reframing skills to "conduct social analysis of authority and power in communities and to examine the larger social and political forces at play" (Evans, Raymond, and Perkins, 2015). This could also include developing constituent leadership (Dodge & Ospina, 2016; Franklin, 2018) .

FSO interviewees also noted some factors that **challenge** family engagement, which were also supported by the broader literature:

- **The organization may lack time, money, and capacity to engage families.** FSO interviewees emphasized that organizations may only have capacity to engage a limited number of members of the community, or they may not currently be able to engage families as deeply as they would like. For example, an interviewee mentioned that their organization doesn't have the capacity to have the broader community

shape their policy agenda, so their Board subcommittee on public policy advocacy includes community partners. Existing research shows that funding is needed for organizations to hire the necessary staff and dedicate the appropriate time and resources to engaging constituents (Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program, 2019; Evans, Raymond, & Perkins, 2015). Moreover, organizations often find they lack time to build trust with constituents which could enable deeper engagement (ORS Impact, 2020).

- **The organization may lack relevant expertise.** When soliciting input from families about what issues to focus on, families may identify topics that the organization does not have knowledge or expertise in. Interviewees mentioned the importance of making connections with other organizations that may be able to lead on these issues or that the organization could partner with, which requires a thorough understanding of the ecosystem of direct service and advocacy organizations.
- **Families may lack time, money, capacity, and/or interest** to engage with organizations and in systems change work. FSO interviewees explained that this can be affected by wider systems that the organization may not be able to control. Examples shared by interviewees included legislative hearings being held during the day so working families can't participate and social determinants of health, like intimate partner violence, that can preclude families from engaging. This was supported by the wider literature on constituent engagement, as well (Aspen Planning and Evaluation Program, 2019; ORS Impact, 2020; Annie E. Casey, 2013).
- **Family engagement may be perceived poorly.** Existing literature suggests that there is at times the perception that constituent engagement is simply a funder 'checkbox' for organizations. This erodes trust with constituents and disincentivizes organizations from investing in engagement (Annie E. Casey, 2013).

Organizational infrastructure, strong relationships, and being realistic about how families can engage help FSOs engage families. Lack of resources, time, and capacity on the part of both families and organizations hinder family engagement.

NEXT STEPS

This exploratory report is intended to ground the next phase of the research in **what is currently known** about the systems and policy change work of DSOs, especially those that serve families, and how they engage their constituents in this work. Through our literature review and interviews, we have identified several potential questions for future research:

- 1. What will it take to strengthen FSOs' participation in collaborative spaces, such as coalitions, across the systems and policy change ecosystem?** Our research suggests that a major way that DSOs, including FSOs, engage in systems and policy change work is in coalitions, and that engaging in collaborative ways with other organizations supports their systems and policy change work. However, these organizations may be tokenized and may not be considered as legitimate and full partners in the advocacy space. Further research could examine how FSOs show up in collaborative systems and policy change spaces, how they are perceived by others, and what is needed to allow them to engage in authentic, sustainable ways that value their expertise.
- 2. What will it take to enable FSOs to best represent their constituents' interests in systems change and policy work in a manner that is sustainable and suitable to their direct service structure and focus?** Our literature review and interviews showed that while DSOs, including FSOs, have the *potential* to represent constituents' interests and needs in systems and policy change work, they are not always able to do so as fully as they may desire. Further research could explore how FSOs engage families along the spectrum of engagement to ownership, and what that looks like specifically for a direct-service (rather than advocacy) organization. It may also be of interest to understand families' perspectives and interests on their own engagement, as well as what is unique/special about organizations that are representing families well.
- 3. What will it take to shift money and resources to FSOs so that they can pursue the systems change and policy work they want to engage in?** A major challenge identified by the literature and interviewees was lack of time, capacity, and resources to engage in systems and policy change work. Organizations that have designated resources (e.g., staff, partner organization, or representation on coalition) and explicit infrastructure and intention to engage in systems and policy change are more likely to do this work that they deem so important. Future research could aim to understand what is needed, both by individual actors like funders as well as wider structural changes, to allow FSOs to have the time, money, and other resources they need to engage in systems and policy change efforts.

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APPENDIX: RESEARCH APPROACH

LITERATURE REVIEW APPROACH

From September 2023 to July 2024, we conducted an in-depth review of academic and gray literature on nonprofit advocacy and constituent engagement in systems and policy change efforts, paying particular attention to research focused on direct-service nonprofits and (when possible) family-serving organizations. To identify literature, we conducted keyword searches in Google Scholar and reviewed bibliographies of several significant literature reviews, articles, and reports.

Articles were included that were published from 2004 onward (past 20 years) and focused on or included U.S.-based nonprofits providing services/advocacy in the US. The literature review on DSO advocacy includes articles specifically about direct-service nonprofits (not nonprofits generally) doing systems and policy change. Included articles were those focused on the extent to which organizations are involved in systems/policy change, their tactics/motivations, and their structures (including collaboration with other organizations). Articles were excluded if they were focused on a very specific strategy (e.g., social media advocacy, coalition building, movements), were outside of the US, or were on nonprofits generally (not just direct-service organizations). The literature review on constituent engagement includes articles focused on constituent or community engagement and decision-making in policy and systems change work, rather than representation and engagement in and about services provided.

In total, our literature review included 43 articles and reports:

- 21 studies on DSO advocacy
- 6 models/frameworks on constituent engagement in systems and policy change
- 16 studies on constituent engagement

INTERVIEW APPROACH

In May 2024 we held interviews with staff from five FSOs, reaching out to organizations from a wide range of types of FSOs, including differently sized organizations with various scopes of direct service and systems change work, working across different sectors and areas of focus, and with different structures/approaches to doing systems and policy change work.

Interview inclusion criteria:

- We focused on direct-service organizations, and excluded membership organizations and organizations that provide/oversee a model or curriculum which are implemented by partners such as schools/CBOs;
- We included only those with a self-identified explicit focus on families, which excluded those that may serve families as part of their wider constituency but don't articulate on their website an explicit focus on families;
- We prioritized FSO leaders/staff who have a clear line of sight across their organization, are knowledgeable about both direct service and systems/policy change work, and also organizational/administrative work (e.g., structure, funding);
- We excluded larger national organizations like the YMCA, Boys and Girls Club, and United Way, and sought to speak with medium and smaller, more place-based organizations that operated at the state or multi-state level

Interviews were held with:¹

- **Kristin Bernhard**, Chief Policy & Research Officer, Start Early
- **Mimi Demissew**, Executive Director, Our Family Coalition
- **Jared Make**, Vice President, A Better Balance
- **Shonvá Millien**, Assistant Vice President of Organizational Strategy, HealthConnect One
- **Otayme "Otto" Valenzuela**, Associate Director, Public Policy & Advocacy, Hispanic Unity of Florida

Interviewees represented organizations covering different geographical areas and levels of advocacy and actors. The organizations are multi-sectoral and cover multiple issue areas. Their direct service work tends to be more local (e.g., in one or multiple counties) or at the state level, with some national/non-place-based direct service work (for those that provide online, remote services like helplines and educational training). Their systems change work is conducted at every level from municipal to federal, and it is targeted at actors like policymakers, healthcare systems, and schools.

Name	Geography	Scope	Direct Services	Systems Change
A Better Balance	New York, Colorado, Tennessee (Southern office with staff in multiple states), Washington, DC	Work-family rights (caregivers and pregnant workers)	National	Local, state, federal
HealthConnect One	New Jersey with partner sites in New Jersey, North Carolina,	Birth equity	State, national	State, federal

¹ Interviewees were compensated at a rate of \$200 per 60-minute interview and were given the option to receive the compensation directly as a gift card or as a donation to their organization.

	California, Illinois, and New York			
Hispanic Unity of Florida	South Florida	Immigrant families	County	Municipal, county, state, federal
Our Family Coalition	Bay Area, California	LGBTQ+ families	Multi-county, state, and national	State
Start Early	Illinois and Washington state	Early childhood learning	State	State and federal

LIMITATIONS

This phase of the research was intentionally exploratory, and thus is limited by small interview sample size and limited existing research on family-serving organizations.

Although the 5 representatives from FSOs we interviewed come from a wide range of organizations, they may not fully represent the broader population of FSOs. The intention of this phase of the study was to begin to gather initial reflections from a small sample, to help shape the future scan and begin to answer the research questions, but they will be built upon in further phases of the research.

Additionally, while there is a large body of literature on nonprofit systems/policy change efforts, there is a much smaller body of work on DSOs doing that work, and even less on those focused on organizations that serve families specifically. Therefore, throughout this exploratory report we draw on a wide range of literature on FSOs, DSOs, and (occasionally) on nonprofits more broadly. While we are beginning to see substantial similarities in the experiences reported by the FSOs we interviewed and those documented in the literature on DSOs, we recognize that organizations that serve families, specifically, may have different barriers, supports, and experiences. These will be further explored in subsequent phases of the research, as well.