Five Steps Child Advocates Can Take to Expand Access to State Data

Harnessing open data to improve the lives of children and families

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Every state publishes open data through a portal—data that anyone can **freely use, reuse, and redistribute.**

Child advocacy organizations and state governments should **work together to leverage open data** for child and family well-being.

Child advocates can promote open data on children and families by assessing their own data needs, building relationships with state data managers, and advocating for releasing new data and preserving existing data.

State government can accelerate the use of data by engaging with child and family agency staff, promoting open data to child and family advocates, learning about those users' needs, improving data portals for advocates, and publishing a state data inventory.

Child advocacy organizations have proven the value of using data to improve the lives of children and families. Data allow stakeholders to understand the complex challenges facing children and families and to uncover emerging issues. Data may show, for example, that the number of children receiving social services is falling even when the child poverty rate is rising.

Although data sharing and use have advanced over the past few years, communities can do more. Interviews with child advocates and open data providers confirmed the opportunity for both groups to work together and better leverage open data. But accomplishing this goal will require new practices on both sides.

Here are five actionable steps child and family advocates can take to expand access to state data to advance their missions. (See our brief or our companion fact sheet for steps state governments can take.)

1. CREATE A DATA WISH LIST

To create your data wish list, first ask yourself these questions:

- What questions do you have about children and families that new data can help answer?
- What data could help make the case for achieving your goals?
- What barriers prevent you from accessing those data?

Check your state's open data portal to generate more ideas. Most likely, the portals will not have a specific section on children and families, so you will have to search. Include data that you think the government already collects but also some "long-shot" data the government may not currently collect.

Next, look at the data you have and consider whether more disaggregated or fine-grained data would answer questions the current data cannot. For example, you may know how many kids receive food stamps. Would you be better able to advocate for these children if the data were broken down by race or age?

2. CONNECT WITH STATE DATA MANAGERS

Advocacy organizations often have relationships with staff in relevant agencies. These agency experts are a great first stop for starting a discussion about your data

needs. You can also make new connections in technology departments that manage the open data program. To connect with state data managers, look for contact information on the state's open data portal. Ask if the data manager can meet with you to get to know your organization and data needs. You can learn their criteria for what data to publish and their plans to improve the portal. Ask if there are ways to get involved. Some states have public meetings or advisory boards that give you an opportunity to get to know the state data manager and his or her staff. Your state may also organize special commissions or work groups to improve data in specific areas, such as child behavioral health.

I frame conversations around the questions you have, and then think how I can work with agencies to get the data you need.

— Tyler Kleykamp, Connecticut Chief Data Officer

3. ADVOCATE FOR NEW DATA RELEASES

Your input will help state data managers keep children and family issues in mind as they plan for future releases. The easiest new data to access are data that agencies have already tabulated internally but have not yet posted. Sometimes, agencies avoid publishing data that need the extra work of summarizing to scrub identifying information, but they may be more likely to take this step if they have an explicit request. Finally, for data on your wish list that are not collected, you can make the policy case for why the information is needed. You should also ask other child and family organizations about their data needs. Requests coming from multiple organizations will demonstrate stronger demand.

4. PUSH FOR EXPANDED ACCESS TO CURRENTLY SHARED DATA

Many organizations rely on informal data sharing through state agency contacts, but this process can be inefficient. Instead, ask state agencies to publish their data regularly on the state's open data portal. Doing so makes the data available to different types of users, which can elevate child and family issues, lead to new allies, and build a constituency that can lobby for continued data access.

5. IDENTIFY AND RESPOND TO THREATS TO DATA ACCESS

Data availability should not be taken for granted. Preserving existing data is just as important as advocating for new data. State governments may cut data collection to save money or remove data because of perceived privacy concerns. An engaged user base can argue for keeping the data public and can educate agencies about how to share data in a way that keeps confidential information private.

ADDITIONAL READING

BRIEF

Harnessing the Power of Open Data for Children and Families

Kathryn L.S. Pettit and Rob Pitingolo https://urbn.is/2CH7X6N

FACT SHEET FOR STATE GOVERNMENTS

Five Steps States Can Take to Advance Child Well-Being through Open Data

Kathryn L.S. Pettit and Rob Pitingolo https://urbn.is/2TbTM0o