

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

Greater access to data can improve the lives of children and families

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Every state publishes data through an open data portal, but [the types of data that are made public varies](#) from state to state.

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 their data portals for advocates, and publishing a state data inventory.

State governments across the country have embraced the open data movement through data portals that promote transparency and put greater information in the hands of many users. But publishing data is not enough. State governments should engage users and encourage more effective use of open data.

In particular, greater access to child and family data can help stakeholders advocate for kids and improve their lives. 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 state governments can take to accelerate the use of data for improving child and family well-being. (See our brief or our companion fact sheet for steps child advocates can take.)

1. ENGAGE WITH STATE CHILD AND FAMILY AGENCY STAFF

Open data efforts should include not only data managers but program staff. Program staff who work with child and family advocates can share what kind of data requests they receive and may know what questions and emerging issues are of interest to advocates.

Also, explore the need for data internally. Ask program analysts, caseworkers, and others in the field what data they use and what new data they need to make their work easier and more efficient.

2. PROMOTE OPEN DATA TO IMPROVE CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Advocates interviewed reported that they did not know what an open data portal was. State governments can spread the word about the data they have available by promoting information on social media and in newsletters across different agencies.

3. LEARN ABOUT THE NEEDS OF USERS INTERESTED IN CHILD AND FAMILY ISSUES

Ask advocates, service providers, and staff in child-related agencies in city and county government about their data needs. Asking "What data do you want?" may not yield helpful responses. Instead, ask "What questions do you want to answer?" or

“What are the pressing issues on your organization’s agenda?” You can meet users by attending conferences about child and family issues or hosting trainings about open data.

Another strategy for thinking about users’ needs is developing user personas and creating strategies tailored to those personas. For example, a parent advocating for investments in the local elementary school will need different data, and perhaps in different formats, than a staff member at an advocacy organization focused on reducing child homelessness. To learn more about engagement and user personas, state agencies can review the [Sunlight Foundation’s guide](#) and [library of user personas](#).

In some cases, the data are collected but not always in a way that lets us answer the question we want.

—Analyst from a child advocacy organization

4. ENHANCE THE DATA AND PORTAL TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CHILD AND FAMILY ADVOCATES

By engaging with users, you will learn about high-priority topics for child and family advocates and can connect them with the agency owners to improve the data offerings. You can also refine your portal’s design and structure. When naming datasets, consider what words or phrases users might search for and include those terms in descriptions or keyword tags.

Developing clear documentation and guides will also help users more effectively access and use data. This starts with clear and thorough metadata for individual files, explaining the meaning of the fields and any limitations. Tailored guides can help users navigate data portals to find data across agencies on specific issues, such as child health.

5. CONDUCT AND PUBLISH A STATE DATA INVENTORY

Child and family advocates have important questions that data could answer, but they often do not know what high-quality data are available. A public inventory of all state government data would help answer their questions and promote sharing across agencies. State agencies will also be better able to work together and avoid duplication once they know what data other agencies collect.

The Center for Government Excellence recommends state data inventories as a best practice. And they provide case studies and [a step-by-step guide](#) to conducting these inventories.

Ideally, state governments would conduct a comprehensive inventory of data from all government agencies, but states could pilot a data inventory for one issue, such as data related to children’s physical and mental health.

ADDITIONAL READING

BRIEF

Harnessing the Power of Open Data for Children and Families

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FACT SHEET FOR CHILD ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

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