

Phone conversation between Children's Agenda (Danforth R. Ross, Member of the Board of Directors) and GiveWell (Holden Karnofsky and Simon Knutsson) on September 24, 2010

GiveWell: What is your characterization of how the Nurse-Family Partnership program received state funding in Rochester and how The Children's Agenda was a part of that?

Children's Agenda: When the Children's Agenda first approached the department of social services, I was the Planning Coordinator for the department. –I met with the DSS Service Director and representatives from the Children's Agenda about the possibility of funding Nurse-Family Partnership. There was funding available from the state for what they call Community Optional Services, which required coordination with the DSS which had to sponsor the program and request approval of it from the New York State Office of Children and Family Services

This funding stream requires a 35% match from local funding (i.e., the county Department of Social Services had to provide 35% of the funds, and the state would match). For preventive services the match can be through private local donations, as opposed to tax dollars, but those funds have to come to the county without restrictions on what specific program they're going to be used for, although it's perfectly okay for there to be an understanding of what the funds are likely to be used for. I checked with a number of state people and found out that we could in fact do that, and I'd known about the NFP for quite a while (it's hard not to if you're a human service person in Rochester, because NFP was originally a University of Rochester Medical School project).

Technically the funds from private donations could only account for half of the local contribution. What took people a while to realize was that you could effectively fund the program with no local tax dollars as long as you did your homework because while half of the local share of the total preventive services program had to be tax levy that applied to the total program not to particular projects, the county already had a large preventive services program with the local share funded through tax levy dollars so we could expand and develop new programs by using donated funds as the local match. We were probably the first group in the state to read the regulations and figure out what they really were and figure out that we could do that.

NFP had never been implemented locally, so then it was a matter of doing the application to New York State, and I walked the NFP folks through the application process because what they needed to do was to request a number of fairly specific regulatory waivers that required specific language and I happen to be good at that kind of language. I worked with our county budget folks to make sure they knew that there would be no local cost other than some minor administrative costs. Then we had to do a legislative referral to the county legislator to appropriate the funds. Once the program was approved by the State and the County Legislature, implementation was the responsibility of NFP and we were fairly "hands off." What made this all possible was when Jeff said, essentially, "I can raise the local funds if you can walk us through the rest of the process." I was skeptical, but he came back with a commitment from a local businessman for 1/3 the cost

of the program and from there it was mostly a matter of a number of technical hurdles that we had to overcome.

GiveWell: This sounds like it was a somewhat unique opportunity. Do you believe The Children's Agenda is positioned for more successes? If so what do you believe are the opportunities?

Children's Agenda: They're still in the position to advocate for more programs and more evidence-based programs, they've done some extraordinarily effective lobbying around funding for child care, and there continue to be opportunities for them to push for evidence-based programs as they have done with some school based and after-school programs.

I don't think there are many opportunities in the particular area we've been discussing because the state realized it had sort of an open-ended commitment, the way the regulations were, and the state put a cap on it. And once the county administration found this approach was available, it used it to fund some other new or expanding programs.

The Children's Agenda has been instrumental in a huge restoration of day care funding. They've worked closely with the county government and United Way and the local business community to present a united front, to make a deal on two levels - one on the administrative level, with bureaucrats, and the other on the political level, to get funding restored, this is \$7 million. They were also very good at taking a local philanthropist and convincing him to fund programs that had pretty good evidence bases.

The Children's Agenda is somewhat unique. It does not fund programs directly or administer them, rather it advocates for evidence based programs and is highly respected by local governmental agencies, the philanthropic community, and service providers. It is highly opportunistic (in the good sense of the word) but it creates opportunities as much as it seizes them.