

Conversation between GiveWell (Elie Hassenfeld and Simon Knutsson) and The Children's Agenda (Carolyn Lee-Davis, Policy Analyst), September 2, 2010

GiveWell: Can you explain what your organization does?

The Children's Agenda: We've been around for 7 years and were originally started by a community foundation. There had been another children's advocacy organization that was dismantled, and when they put us together they wanted an organization that was a voice for kids but independent from government and service providers, someone that could step back, look at the data for the kids in the community, and then say, what do we know about what works here? What does the research say? What programs have real evidence that long-term outcomes for kids are positive and that kids are better off?

The other thing they wanted us to do was watch public dollars around kids and when public money was being spent on kids that they're being spent as effectively as possible. Our goal was to help encourage policy makers spend dollars wisely.

Regarding public dollars, we do an analysis of the county budget and see how dollars are being spent for kids. We started doing that before we were formally incorporated. Three years ago, we did the same thing for the Rochester City budget to see how dollars are spent around kids in the city.

GiveWell: What specific areas do you focus on when you engage the government to spend funds more effectively?

The Children's Agenda: There are 3 and starting to be 4 areas where we spend most of our time.

One is the reduction of child abuse and neglect; one is to improve access to quality early childhood care; and, one is improving access to quality after-school programs.

For those three things, we do a little research ourselves, but what we're mostly trying to do is bring the voice of research that's already been done to the conversation, how we can learn from other people's lessons, and how we can spend money on what we know works well.

We sit – or try to sit – at different tables around the city to bring that voice and it's different depending on the area. In child abuse and neglect, we work with the county because they fund a lot in terms of child protective services.

The fourth area that we devoting a little time to and would like to devote more is Juvenile Justice – looking, across time and system, at how children end up in the juvenile justice system.

GiveWell: What criteria do you use to decide which programs to support?

The Children's Agenda: We look to see if a program has had a randomized-controlled trial (RCT), ideally replicated in another community (in particular, for Rochester, has it been replicated in an urban area like Rochester), if there are outcomes for kids that extend beyond 18 months after the program end, and if the effects are sizeable. Those are the main things we look at.

So, when we looked to reduce child abuse and neglect, those drove us to Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP).

When we're looking at a problem, we try to look at the whole thing. With child abuse and neglect, we saw two areas for improvement: (a) the country was understaffing its services and we advocated for increased staffing, and (b) we said NFP is out there and shows that if you work with moms from the time they're pregnant, you can dramatically reduce child abuse and neglect.

We looked at lots of programs, including the Healthy Families program, but nothing had the same level of evidence as NFP.

In many areas, there isn't that level of evidence. And, in areas where we can't find something with the NFP-level of research, we feel comfortable advocating for something with less evidence. And, in our 2010 Community Action Plan report, we're explicit about our different levels of evidence.

The reality is that in Rochester, there are lots of programs being funded that have little or no research supporting them. And, people will ask us, "are they effective or are they not effective?" We try to be the voice that says we would guess that some of those programs are doing good work, and we try to encourage funders to put money in to evaluation to see if these local homegrown programs are as effective as we hope they are.

If we're going to really stand up for a program, we look for something that's at the standard I described before. If that type of program doesn't exist, it's tougher. In after-school, the Carrera program is the only program that meets that standard. There's the Teen Outreach Program that has promising evidence, but the RCT wasn't perfect.

So, there was a group here that wanted to start an after-school program, and we encouraged them to look at Carrera. But, they weren't comfortable with Carrera, so we eventually settled on the Coping Power program.

GiveWell: Can you tell us more about the Coping Power Program? Does it meet your evidence standard?

The Children's Agenda: Coping Power meets our top standard.

GiveWell: Do you happen to know why it's not on the Evidence-Based Programs site (<http://evidencebasedprograms.org/wordpress/>) from the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy?

The Children's Agenda: We asked the Coalition about that. The outcomes data (reduced aggressive behavior) is self-reported by both parents and teachers, so that may be a weakness.

We're working with the program designer in Rochester to implement it as an after-school model which it wasn't originally, and the program designer was OK with it. And, we are putting additional evaluation into it. About a third of our emergency room data are due to assault or a violent act, so we're looking at emergency room data and not just looking at self-reported data.

We have an agency in town called the Children's Research Institute and they do a lot of local and national evaluations of kids programs, and they've taken over evaluations of it. I can send you more information about this.

GiveWell: Isn't a pretty thorny issue to implement a program in a new way (i.e., changing Coping Power into an after-school program when it wasn't after-school initially)?

The Children's Agenda: Yes, it's definitely an issue. We are working with the program designers to put it in place here. They thought it'd work this way, but we're concerned: are we still showing outcomes that RCT showed? The first evaluation results will be available this year.

GiveWell: I want to understand better the full scope of what you do. Are you advocating for one program in each of your three focus areas: child abuse and neglect, child care, and after-school?

The Children's Agenda: Child abuse is just NFP. There are other home visiting programs in the community that have a similar goal and certainly we try to partner and work together, but NFP is the one we promote.

In terms of after-school, we decided to name Coping Power as one we're focused on. The way Coping Power is done, it's just 1 day per week after school. It doesn't have all the key things that after-school has to be effective.

A couple years ago, our mayor wanted to put together a model after-school program, for our community, and we went back to a Harvard meta-analysis and pulled out the key things of what after-school needed to, say, increase attendance, and we built it off of that. And, ultimately what we want to see in the community is the comprehensive model.

We'd love to see the Carrera model here. But, teen pregnancy is a dicey issue here as it is everywhere. And, Carrera used to be here. Rochester was the location for the federal grant for one of the original evaluations of Carrera. We'd love to see Carrera here, but we'd really love to see a more comprehensive program.

We also get 21st Century money here.

GiveWell: The evidence we've seen for after-school programs, particularly the evaluation of the 21st Century initiative and a Campbell Collaboration literature review on after-school programs hasn't reported strong effects. What's your take on the research?

The Children's Agenda: Carrera has shown outstanding outcomes. It's a high quality, intense model. That's where the strongest evidence is in after-school. Otherwise, there's a lot of promising but nothing definitely compelling.

I put after-school, except for Carrera, and Teen Outreach Program is close, but beyond those, I'd classify the rest of the after-school as emerging evidence. I think it's mostly common sense, and there are some programs that are promising, but it's not the same as being able to pull an NFP off the shelf.

The 21st Century evaluation is really hard. In our community a few years ago we were funding 14 programs of 21st Century and there was a lot of variability between programs and some were high quality and some weren't, and it's implemented so many different ways, even within one community, that it's tough to say that overall, it wasn't effective.

GiveWell: I want to change gears a little from talking about your standards of evidence and instead discuss your work and how you evaluate yourselves. How do attribute changes to your work?

The Children's Agenda: I think that's a hard question. I think Rochester is really lucky because there are a lot of people that work together. We have a childcare table, an after-school table. And when there's a need to do something, there's an effort to advocate together. A lot of the things that have happened have been community wins and not attributable to one group vs. another.

With NFP specifically, it shows that you need a voice that isn't government or a service provider that can take a scan across local landscape and national research to say these are things we need to try. Because everyone gets caught up in what they're doing and it's hard to step back.

GiveWell: Can you explain what role the The Children's Agenda, specifically, played in bringing NFP and Coping Power to Rochester?

The Children's Agenda: NFP happened before I was here, but it was under our current Executive Director, Jeff Kaczorowski.

The board who put us together said, "We want you to keep analyzing the public budget but also do something about child abuse and neglect." And, as Jeff looked into what he could do, he went and read tons of research to see all the things you can do to attack this problem.

He did all the legwork and said, here's a program that without a doubt is going to reduce it. He did the selling of the idea by using the evidence of effectiveness. He did the original private fundraising for it. He got local business leaders and foundations to put in money for it and did work to work with county to find a funding stream. He worked with county to write an application to secure state money.

The first families were served in 2006 and it was our intention to stop focusing on NFP in 2007, so we could move on to the next thing. But, we realized we can't yet. Even though you put so much out there in the community to get them excited, everyone's ready to move on to the next program.

So, at this point, even though we don't have a need to raise money for NFP, we need to be a voice of why the program is necessary. And, also we need to watch how it's implemented. For example, if there's money for 300 families but we're only serving 200, what do we need to do to fix that?

With NFP, there's a national office and they do a lot of the collection of the data. But, we have a slightly different population than NFP as a whole: our moms are younger and poorer, so we continue to watch the numbers to see if we get the outcomes we expect.

With Coping Power, the story is different. Jeff, our Executive Director, is part-time and he's a pediatrician. He started something awhile back to try and encourage pediatricians to come out of the office and get to know families in the community better. As a result of that, two of the pediatricians in his program were shocked by violence they were seeing on the streets and they went out and found the Coping Power program.

They met with the program designer, they got him to say that it's OK as an after school program – the school board wanted after-school, so that's what they had to do – and for a couple of years we had it in place, and we had money for staff but a very low budget. The two pediatricians were volunteering their time to help make things work.

The Children's Agenda is a prevention-focused organization. A lot of the evidence-based stuff is around early childhood, and as we were looking for programs to prevent youth violence, we saw Coping Power which these pediatricians had been helping to run.

So, we read the research and we redid the work the pediatricians had done and we also felt like this was something that met the standards. We talked with the program designer, talked to people in the schools, and saw it as the type of program the community should get behind. One of the main roles we play is help make people aware of the program.

GiveWell: What do you mean by “make people aware?” Are you running advertisements, conducting meetings? With whom?

The Children's Agenda: Every year we have a meeting of 40 local leaders: business leaders, legislators, etc. At last year's meeting, part of the presentation was devoted to

Coping Power. We included it in the Action Plan. We've met with school Superintendent as well as principals. We meet with the mayor as well as state delegation.

Over the last 6 months, business leaders have been going downtown and having more meetings with the leaders. There have been a lot of meetings, a lot of sharing of information. We've coordinated tours so leaders can see the program: show people the evidence, show the programs here, show it's effective, and make people aware of it.

We also look for opportunities to find funding for it. We were in the running for a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant to expand Coping Power. As part of that grant application, the community foundation had funded Coping Power program locally but they needed a match, and so we asked two local funders to each donate \$50,000 to save the private match we had.

GiveWell: Do you need additional money to maintain your current operations? What would you do with additional money? Could you effectively utilize it?

The Children's Agenda: We would like to grow a little bit. We hoped to hire additional staff and we're not at a point where we can do that yet. The areas that we put in that action plan are the things we're going to work on for the next few years: expand enrollment in NFP and find more funding streams to do it; expand enrollment in quality early childhood programs, and doing a lot of policy work around trying to improve where the kids are at right now.

I think regarding NFP, we'll invest a lot of time but given our track record on it, I think we'll be successful in continuing to push the community forward on it.

When we wanted to grow this year, we wanted to add one more policy person. We have high levels of youth violence, and that's an area where an additional voice is needed in the community because we have a long history of not doing things around youth violence. We need a voice to bring together everyone: judges, cops – but we don't have the capacity to take it on. Because Jeff and I keep going to meetings and we try to be involved but we don't really have the time, and we were hoping to add someone to do that.

GiveWell: So meetings are happening and you can't attend them?

The Children's Agenda: To be honest, we do OK at showing up. But, you need to be effective at meetings, and you need to be prepared with how am I going to bring this idea up that half the people in the room won't like. We have to think about how to convince people of the idea and bringing the idea to the table so that they'll accept it.

We want to be at those tables and want to be effective and we don't want to keep showing up without being effective. And, we need another staff person to help with that.

GiveWell: So, the full goal is one more person this year?

The Children's Agenda: We also have the goal of a part-time development person because it's hard for us to raise money for us. A lot of people would rather fund the service provider. And, we don't accept money from service providers, themselves, or government because we want to maintain independence

GiveWell: How large is The Children's Agenda now?

The Children's Agenda: We have two full-time employees: Michelle Yale (an administrator) and myself. Nancy, who you spoke to, is part-time, and focuses on grantwriting and marketing/communication. Jeff is the part-time executive director.

GiveWell: Are you primarily adding money to funds going to proven programs or helping Rochester access money that's currently going to other areas (e.g., Buffalo, Yonkers)?

The Children's Agenda: The majority of time is spent is on trying to get local dollars spent more effectively. Our county spends \$22 million on "preventive services" and that's very much open to influence. So, we try to think how those dollars can be best spent.

Or, the city is spending \$300k on pregnancy prevention and what they're doing doesn't have strong evidence behind it, so we try to direct that money to something that will actually reduce teen pregnancy.

For the most part, it's not on spending more, but it's on spending dollars in a more effectively.

Advocating at the state level is new for us. For example, New York has had a funding stream for extended day and violence prevention and for years, and the same people get it each year. You don't have to report outcomes. This year, they said, we need to change the way we're spending this money and make sure we're spending it effectively. This year, we went to people we had relationships with at the state level and asked them to put in language around evidence based programs into the RFPs. We also suggested they recommend some programs grantees would put in place and direct them to things as opposed to not guiding them at all, including the Coping Power program, specifically, and we were effective at that.

Another conversation with the state and this mostly has been unsuccessful has been to increase amount of money in certain areas. Here in Rochester, we've joined with Syracuse and Buffalo saying, "We have some big problems too and 70-80% of the funding goes to NYC and can we get some more up here. You have to be more fair in how you're distributing the money across the state." The way they give dollars out is they score the proposals and supposedly the best scores get money, but ultimately the legislators make the choice. And, some communities don't have the resources to develop a good application to compete with NYC and the kids shouldn't lose out just because the people in their communities can't write applications as effectively.

One area where that's been different is around child care. There's a child care funding stream from state to counties which counties give to families while they work and a number of counties have a history of taking money and not using it and then, we've said at least give it to counties that will actually use it.

GiveWell: You've mentioned a lot of individual accomplishments. Do you have a document that summarizes your track record?

The Children's Agenda: It's something we're in the middle of putting together right now, and we can share that with you next week.

GiveWell: Do you have/can you share something that breaks down how you spend your time across different program areas?

The Children's Agenda: Yes, and we can send that to you.

GiveWell: Do you know of any other orgs like you?

The Children's Agenda: On a national level – the Coalition for Evidence Based Policy. Otherwise -we have really looked because we've really wanted to connect with someone else like us because we're still young and want to learn.

We've found a lot of advocacy groups, but not too many that combine advocacy with a focus on evidence.