

Phone conversation between The Children's Agenda (Carolyn Lee-Davis, Policy Analyst) and GiveWell (Elie Hassenfeld and Simon Knutsson) on October 26, 2010

GiveWell: What is your room for more funding and what would you do at different levels of more funding?

The Children's Agenda: We want to add an additional full-time policy analyst and a part-time development person. Our board approved that plan in January 2010, but we held off because we didn't have the funding. We just found out that we've received a grant that is specifically to be used for a part-time development person, so we're going to hire such a person. But we don't have the funding to help with additional policy work, so the next thing we would spend additional funding on is a full-time policy analyst.

The main goals of having an additional policy analyst are to work in additional areas where we only can have limited capacity now, for example, we'd like to participate a lot more in areas such as youth violence. An additional person would also help fortify what we're doing in different areas.

We're more of a local organization in the city and county, but for the last two years, we've been working more with statewide groups, and an additional policy analyst would help us do more work at the state level as well.

It would be a junior person and we've budgeted \$50,000–\$60,000 per year for such an employee (a \$42,000 per year salary plus benefits)

GiveWell: What would you do if you got less, say \$30,000?

The Children's Agenda: We would check if it were viable to hire a policy analyst on a less than full-time basis. There's a good chance it'd be viable, and even a part-time person would be very beneficial.

GiveWell: And if you got more, say \$140,000?

The Children's Agenda: This would probably be a good question to ask Jeff [Executive Director, The Children's Agenda]. I think we wouldn't increase our staffing beyond what we've suggested at this time. We've been small, staying at 1.5 staff for about 3 years and then 2.5 staff for another 4 years. We're growing slowly, and that suits us. We try to exist with about 6 months cash reserves, but now we're working on slightly less than that. A part of the decision what to do with that amount of additional funding would be to look at what made sense in terms of securing reserves and growth.

GiveWell: Regarding the coming year, do you have specific plans that donors could hold you accountable to?

The Children's Agenda: Last year, in October 2009, we released our 2010 Community Action Plan for Greater Rochester's Children, which included intermediate goals and our

2015 goals, which are our goals for the next 4 years. We're also realizing that we need to have capacity in the juvenile justice area.

The highest level goals in the plan are not just to get children into programs but to see meaningful improvements in children's outcomes. But checking that is very difficult, so we've been thinking about what we can show the community each year to show the progress or lack of progress toward improved child outcomes.

We're planning the next update of the 2010 Community Action Plan for winter 2011, after the first year of efforts, and we plan to do annual reporting every year after that.

GiveWell: We don't have a clear picture of how you select programs to advocate for; we're especially interested in how you chose to advocate for Coping Power. We are familiar with your 2010 Community Action Plan and the criteria in it for what you consider evidence-based. Our impression is that there's evidence for the effectiveness of Coping Power but not that strong.

The Children's Agenda: Coping Power was first brought to the community by doctors, which we discussed last time we spoke.

When we reviewed the research we came to the same conclusion as you, that Coping Power doesn't have the level of evidence that the NFP program has. The initial reports on Coping Power, done by staff, primarily discussed suspensions. There was a community group that applied for Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant to increase the use of Coping Power in our community. That's around the time we got more involved in the conversations around Coping Power. The plan was to have strong evaluations in place both to bolster existing research and because Coping Power was being implemented here as an after-school program, which is different from how the developer implemented it.

The Children's Institute does the evaluation of Coping Power. It believes in a continuum of programs in schools and favors jointly implementing the three programs PATHS, Primary Project, and Coping Power.

We wanted to support the expansion and evaluation of Coping Power because

- we thought that Coping Power showed promising effects
- it was already in the community, which was willing to evaluate it more
- it was targeting kids in grades 4th to 6th, and we had felt that we had to target these younger children.

GiveWell: Regarding the evidence for Coping Power, The Children's Agenda wrote, "The Coping Power program has been shown in a long-term study to produce reductions in drug dependence, teen pregnancy, and criminal activity." We haven't found any results showing reductions in teen pregnancy, and we only found studies with follow-up one-year after end of intervention.

The Children's Agenda: I can send you information on the where the results on teen pregnancy are from.

GiveWell: Do you have available the total cost per person served in the Coping Power program (i.e., including costs to all relevant actors such as organizations, schools, and the government).

The Children's Agenda: The way the program was initially put together, when the doctors were overseeing it before it was put into schools, there was little overhead and the cost was low. A year ago, the Children's Institute made it more formal and improved evaluation, which increased the cost per student.

It is hard to determine the cost per student served because the program has gone into the Children's Institute and they want to provide the program as part of an array of programs and the budget is for the combination of programs.

GiveWell: Can you tell us more about The Children's Agenda's role in terms of advising on existing programs such as Coping Power vs. bringing evidence-based programs to Rochester.

The Children's Agenda: We play a variety of roles that depend on what's already in place and what we, based on research, think about what's in place. We played the role of bringing an evidence-based program to the community in the case of the NFP program. Jeff reviewed the research and thought that one of the best things we could do was to bring it here. He did the fundraising and the advocating to bringing it to our community.

As we have looked into research on what's most important for children to have in place in their community, we feel there should be a continuum of preventive services for children to put them on the right track to adulthood.

The very beginning of that continuum is the NFP program. And we believe strongly in high quality early child care and education. Our role in early care and education is looking at how our county and state policies are affecting both access to quality programs and ability to increase the capacity of quality programs, and what policies we would need to have in place to improve those. That's another area where the research shows you can accomplish large impacts.

Regarding accessibility to early child care and education, we advocate to the county in terms of which families can apply for a subsidy to pay for their child care costs so that more working class families can pay for child care. And they should be able to access good child care, not just safe.

At a federal level, there are recommendations made for how much child care providers should be reimbursed. For instance, a working class family sends their child to a child care provider and gets a subsidy, which the county pays the provider. There's a question

of who can get the subsidy and how much the county should pay. And there're questions about how much the family should pay.

We also talk about standards; we'd like every provider to have a high school diploma.

Those are some examples of the types of things we work around in early childhood.

GiveWell: Can you share the specific child care policies you advocate for?

The Children's Agenda: There are a couple that are ready and I could share them with you.

One policy we advocate for locally is that a child care provider that is accredited gets paid a higher rate of reimbursement. It's both an incentive for providers to get accredited but also lets them hire better educated staff and provide better care. It's an issue we need to advocate for every year because it's always in danger of getting cut. For the last two years, we've written a letter and that we could send you.

Another piece we wrote that we could send you was a 3 page letter to gubernatorial candidates with policies we'd like to see.

GiveWell: How do you assess the impact of that advocacy?

The Children's Agenda: We've been working on an internal review (which we can share externally) to see if we're getting done what we plan to get done in terms of intermediate outcomes such as getting the meetings we need to have, the Governor implementing certain policies, and community leaders signing off on the policies.

We also have a strategy plan for the organization that includes whether we get done our activities and achieve our big goals by the time we want. We created it in 2007 and over the summer have been doing the update since we've had about 3 years to see where we are and what needs to be added. This regards both what some of our big goals should be and whether we are doing the work to get there.

GiveWell: How does The Children's Agenda allocate staff time?

The Children's Agenda: Primarily, we've allocated our time so that Jeff focuses on the NFP program, and I only do some work on it. I mainly work on early child care and education, and he only works a little on that. I work on after-school programs in general and Jeff works on Coping Power.

One of the other things I spend time on and we'll start in another week is the analysis of the city and county budgets. Some of our real work in advocacy comes out of seeing how effectively dollars are being spent around kids and to see whether there are opportunities for advocacy and improvement.

That's, for example, how the NFP came to Rochester. We were looking at the county budget and seeing such high rates of abuse and neglect, and thought our community was really struggling. There were two avenues there. One was bringing NFP. The other was trying to advocate about how child protective services is run and how that affects child abuse and neglect rates.

We already had home visiting programs here that tried to do what NFP does, but our analysis of their evaluations was that they were not effective and there was another program, NFP, that would be.

In general, we start with the issue and then go the route of what we think will most effectively solve the problem—it could be policy advocacy, it could be bringing a new program—and then we figure out the right role for us. I think it's actually going to be a rare occurrence that we're doing the type of work we did when we brought the NFP program to Rochester. There aren't a lot of gold standard off the shelf programs to bring.

The money to fund new things is really limited. It's constant and difficult advocacy to take money away from something and direct it to something more effective. We do that type of work in a lot of conversations, and that's often how we see ourselves (both in terms of new dollars and dollars being spent on less effective things).

GiveWell: What about the programs on the Social Programs That Work web site (<http://evidencebasedprograms.org/>) by the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, would you advocate for those?

The Children's Agenda: It would be great to have the programs on that site available to the children in a community, but it's complicated, for example, you can't just pick the Carrera adolescent pregnancy prevention program and bring it here. With the NFP program, no one wants to see kids abused, so it is easy to talk about. But there are differing moral views on the Carrera program.

GiveWell: How will Coping Power be different because of your involvement?

The Children's Agenda: When the community applied for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant, it put together a committee to think about how to do it, and Jeff is a part of the committee. It's a small group, also including one of the original doctors and a couple of funders. The role that Jeff has at that table is thinking about how and when it's best to grow the program and what's the best way is to do the evaluation. You may want to speak with Jeff about our work with the Coping Power program.

I can also send you a monthly update we present to our board.