Cradle To Career in Orange County, Florida

Stakeholder Perspectives on Child and Family Challenges, Opportunities, and Success

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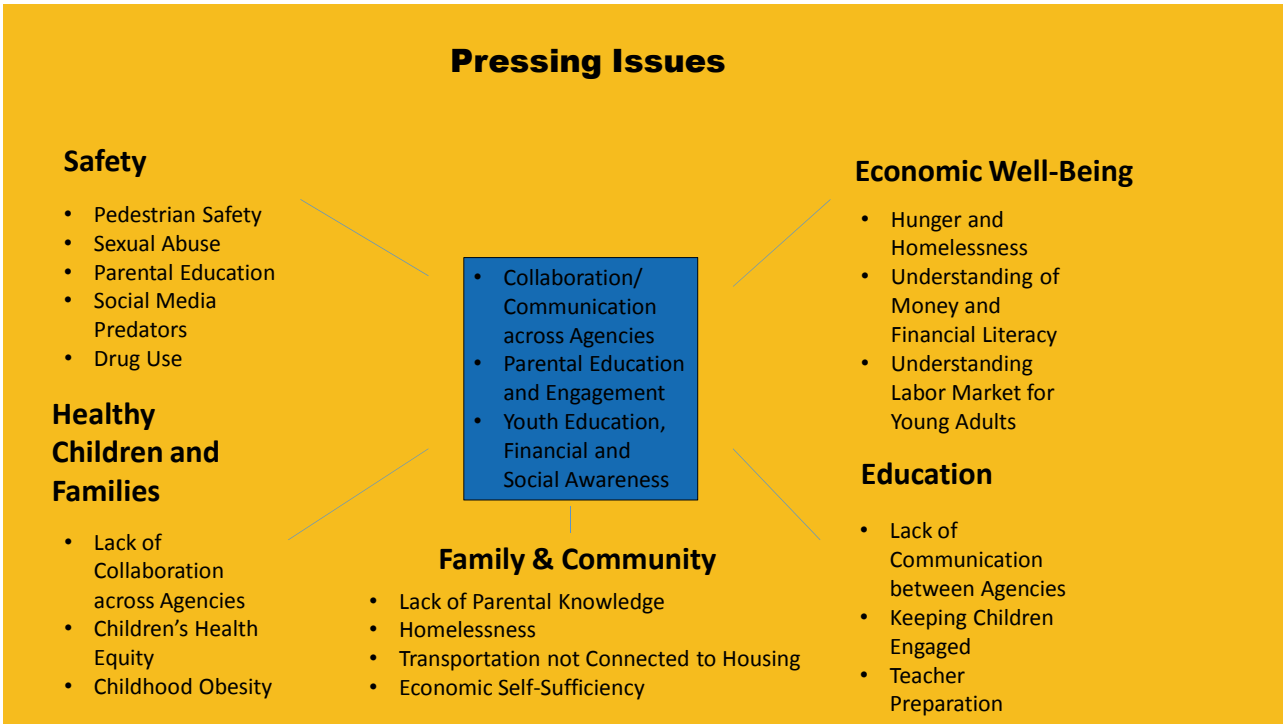
In July 2013, five focus groups were conducted with officials from government, nonprofit, and faith-based organizations active in one of for social service domains that impact children in Orange County, Florida: Safety, Healthy Children and Families, Economic Well-Being, Family and Community, and Education. Each group was moderated by Dr. Thomas Bryer, Director, Center for Public and Nonprofit Management, University of Central Florida, with assistance from Heather Lambert with the UCF Center for Community Partnerships. The focus groups were conducted through a contract with the Heart of Florida United Way.

Participants in each group were asked the following core questions:

1. Think about [safety, healthy children and families, economic well-being, or education]. What would you identify as the most pressing issues in Orange County with respect to that issue? Please provide details and/or examples as to why this is a pressing issues.
2. Thinking about the issues you identified, what resources are available in the community to address the issue, if any? What are the examples of organizations doing well with respect to the issues, both within and outside Florida?
3. Think ahead 20 years. What does success look like if we adequately address the issues identified? What are the indicators of success?
4. Thinking about measuring success, what metrics would be beneficial to you that you currently cannot access? (Note, this question was not asked to every group due to time constraints).
5. Thinking about those definitions of success, who needs to be at the table to achieve it for the issues identified?
6. Looking at the different issues identified, which, if any, rose to the top as most important?

The originally transcribed notes are available online at: http://childrensnexus.weebly.com/focus-groups.html#/. In the pages that follow, the findings are summarized for questions one/six, three, and five. The reader is referred to the focus group notes for responses to the second question and the fourth question, when asked.



Dozens of individual issues and challenges were identified by focus group participants. Despite the wide array, several issues rose to the top as most important or pressing within each domain, and three issues rose to the top across domains. The figure above summarizes these issues, with those listed in the center blue box as the cross-cutting issues.

⇒ **Collaboration/Communication Across Agencies**. There were many substantive issues identified (such as sexual abuse, obesity, homelessness, and financial literacy), but a common concern was not substantive but process—*how can agencies do a better job working across their boundaries?* There were repeated refrains across groups on the damage organizational and agency silos cause on the lives of children, families, and communities.

⇒ **Parental Education and Engagement**. Parents were perceived as vital across domain areas, and, at the same time, they were viewed as one of the most challenging barriers to successfully meeting the needs of today and tomorrow's children. This was seen in questions of keeping children safe from sexual predators (online and off), providing nutritious food and physical activity options to children, encouraging children to explore a range of career opportunities, and keeping children in school.

⇒ **Youth Education, Financial, and Social Awareness**. Related to parental engagement is the cross-cutting issues of youth preparedness for school and for their future. At issue here is not just the lack of youth engagement but the ability for parents, teachers, and other community service providers to ensure wrap-around and reinforced services and opportunities for children in the community.

A variety of "success indicators" were identified within each domain for the period twenty years out from today. Despite the wide array of indicators, several four were common across domains. The figure below summarizes these issues, with those listed in the center yellow box as the cross-cutting indicators of success.

⇒ **Strengthened Collaboration.** A core cross-cutting challenge, this is also a core indicator of success. In twenty years, participants hope to see funding systems that encourage collaboration, reduced programmatic silos, and easier "one stop" access points for citizens to receive needed services.

⇒ **Enhanced Parental Involvement.** Also a cross-cutting challenge, participants hope to see more parents, particularly young parents, engage with each other, with the schools, and with social service agencies both for their own advancement and to ensure the needs of their children are met educationally, economically, socially, physically, and emotionally.

⇒ **Working with Today's Children.** Numerous participants observed that today's young children will be young parents in twenty years time, and thus to "turn the curve" on some of the challenges requires interventions with today's youth, so that they will be better prepared parents and more educationally, socially, and economically self-sufficient, healthy adults.

⇒ **Increased Social Awareness.** Participants perceived empathy to be lacking among today's youth and the general population. This is not unique to Orange County; empathy is low amongst the general population in the United States. With more education, a "new meaning" of homelessness, poverty, and need can emerge.

A variety of key stakeholders were identified within each domain for These are categories of people who need to be "at the table" in order to achieve the twenty-year success goals. Five stakeholders were common across domains. The figure above summarizes these stakeholders, with those listed in the center white box as the cross-cutting stakeholders.

⇒ **People Being Served.** These are parents, children, the homeless, community residents, and other service recipients. Focus group participants consistently identified the community and community members as essential to include in discussions about future service, service coordination, and service enhancement.

⇒ **Political Leaders.** Local, state, and federal political leaders were consistently identified as important, as any future success or change in service implementation may likely require new legislation, new authorization, new funding, or a combination thereof. Multiple levels of government are necessary given the complexity of federal, state, and local programs and policies that impact the ability to serve children and families.

⇒ **Business Community.** As current and future employers, visible community members, and stakeholders with a very clear interest in the strengthening of our communities, business owners and leaders (including Chambers of Commerce) are seen to be essential participants in future plans and discussions.

⇒ **Service Providers.** Clearly, as a core challenge is enhanced collaboration, those who are on the ground providing direct service need to be "at the table." This was affirmed across focus groups.

⇒ **Faith Community.** Faith organizations are increasingly recognized as a vital participant in delivering services or referring citizens to agencies for service. As such, they require a seat at the table.

Special Thanks To:

Heart of Florida United Way

University of Central Florida College of Health and Public Affairs—

Center for Community Partnerships

Resources:

http://www.hfuw.org/

http://cpnm.ucf.edu/

http://childrensnexus.weebly.com/

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