

# **Youth Transitions: Media Relations and Community Outreach Strategy Memo**

Building on the Release of the 2004 National Kids Count Data Book

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## **Preface**

On June 3, 2004 the Annie E. Casey Foundation and its state Kids Count partners will release the 2004 Kids Count Data Book. The theme for this year's Data Book focuses on supporting youth at risk to make a successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. This represents a major opportunity for the many organizations around the country that are trying to strengthen supports to improve the odds for youth at risk to become responsible adults.

In addition to a national release in Washington, DC, each state Kids Count grantee (or grantees) will be planning a state media release, event or other activity.

While Kids Count grantees will be responsible for any activities connected with the national release of the 2004 Kids Count Data Book, many other nonprofit organizations working to improve programs and policies for youth at risk can take advantage of the theme of this year's Data Book to garner media attention and to organize state and local efforts to address the needs of marginalized youth and solutions to strengthen the supports they need to make a successful transition to a productive adulthood.

In this memo Kids Count veteran Jack Levine outlines a number of suggested strategies to:

- Generate maximum state and regional media attention to the issues addressed in the "Successful Transitions for Youth" theme of the 2004 National Kids Count Data Book
- Design a community outreach plan to garner support from key audiences for policy initiatives and model program development
- Solicit the support of community-based organizations in designing comprehensive youth development policy and initiatives
- Encourage youth to lend their voice to the mix, and educate adults about the challenges they face and the opportunities they see for a productive future.

There are many more ideas here than any one organization is likely to implement. But hopefully you will find among these strategies a few that match your community's needs and your strengths. And remember – you're not alone! Be sure and hook up with your state Kids Count grantee and other potential allies in these efforts.

Good luck!

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## INTRODUCTION

As a member of the Kids Count family for 14 years, I've learned that the most effective way to use Kids Count is to highlight the findings' policy implications and present these clearly to national, state and community leaders.

Data-driven advocacy, long a hallmark of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's initiatives, is an effective method for creating positive change. But data alone cannot do the job—as the first four letters of the word “number” remind us.

 In the right research-based tools, advocates can engage media professionals, community opinion leaders, and policymakers—without numbing them. Accurate statistics are particularly useful for lawmakers and media alike, and can spur improvements to public policy, boost resources to refine or expand services, and generate volunteer energy and philanthropic investment.

The Kids Count Data Book not only provides these statistics and identifies challenges facing youth, but also examines initiatives that offer potential solutions. Advocates, too, must balance the use of data with information on policies and programs that can work to address these issues. By presenting only problems, we risk disheartening and disengaging our audiences—leaving them convinced of the intractability of certain conditions. Spotting critical needs *and* highlighting practical solutions can mobilize involvement.

Across the country, Kids Count grantees are preparing for the June 3 release of the 2004 Data Book. You can find your state's Kids Count grantee online ([www.kidscount.org](http://www.kidscount.org)).

This memo is intended to help state and local youth advocates coordinate with these grantees the Kids Count release and beyond. In particular, this memo can help advocates create a strategic communications framework to use the book's theme and its policy implications to reach influential audiences and spark community dialogue on the importance of positive action to assist youth transitioning to adulthood.

The following sections of this memo provide guidelines for reaching media, community leaders, donor organizations and youth themselves.

### **REACHING THE MEDIA -- PREPARING FOR JUNE 3<sup>RD</sup>**

About a month before its official release, the Kids Count data and a draft of the overarching introductory essay are made available to Kids Count grantees, so they can prepare media materials.

If you are not a Kids Count grantee, your first step should be to talk with your state's Kids Count grantee to be sure you align your plans with theirs. Only the press and the state Kids Count organizations have access to the embargoed report prior to June 3.

## REACHING COMMUNITY LEADERS

There's a leadership "Who's Who" in every community. These are the people who make most of the policy decisions, sit on the corporate and charity boards of directors, and influence candidates for office. They are involved in and usually credited with envisioning community projects to improve the quality of economic, cultural, and civic life—and they have the access, influence, and resources to make things happen.

It's not easy to identify and reach these people. Most guard their privacy, time, and resources. Once engaged, however, they're usually open to new information, creative ideas, and solutions that make practical sense.

Direct access to policymakers (elected and appointed public officials) is usually best accomplished through intermediaries. Involving people who have the means and methods of influence—including campaign contributors and social and business partners—gives advocates a natural path to progress.

Community leaders tend to have three priorities that advocates can leverage to underscore the urgency of improving successful youth transitions:

- Improving access to education to foster economic development and workplace skills
- Enhancing public safety by preventing crime and reducing risk behaviors
- Translating the values of democracy, civic engagement, and service citizenship to a new generation.

To achieve these goals, community leaders gather in work groups that go by a diversity of names—Community Visioning, 2020 Leadership, Tomorrow Society—but have a unified purpose: setting an agenda that, with proper investments and monitoring, will improve the quality of life in the community.

To reach community leaders, advocates should position themselves to participate in events, conferences, meetings, workshops, forums, and other community gatherings at which the youth transitions challenges can be discussed, debated, and consensus reached.

Here are some specific strategies to engage and collaborate with these community opinion leaders, especially the three key groups: business, law enforcement, and influential elders (over age 55).

1. **Develop a Communications Plan.** Media messages are important methods for reaching opinion leaders. A strong and sustained communications plan is an advocate's most cost-effective megaphone. News coverage, editorial opinion, columnists, guest columns and letters to the editor help raise awareness across the spectrum of community leadership.
2. **Host Issues Forums.** A forum provides a non-threatening means to educate leaders on the challenges facing youth, and potential solutions. The forum should be sponsored and invitations issued by a community leadership organization such as a

bank, civic club, university or Chamber of Commerce. During a two-hour “Conversation on the Future of Our Youth” forum, a media/news personality would moderate a dialogue among three or four panel members, who may include a professional in the youth field, a business leader, a member of local law enforcement, and a youth/parent/grandparent. The panelists should weigh in on concepts, statistics, and policy/program options, and then participate in a question and answer period. Before the forum, be sure to prepare a presentation packet with information and the Kids Count materials, and distribute this to participants.

3. **Find a Soap Box.** Make it your business to get invited to civic and community service clubs as a program speaker. Prepare a 15- to 20-minute presentation on a topic like, “Youth Transitions: Investing in Tomorrow’s Community Leaders.” Involve a young person who tapped the help of a strong service program to overcome challenges and stay on track—and note the number of youth who are *not* being served due to lack of resources. Media coverage can usually be negotiated if the young person’s story is pitched in advance as the lead.
4. **Widen the Advocacy Network.** There are a number of ways Kids Count grantees and advocacy organizations can do this. For example, by organizing advocacy strategy sessions with the Board of Directors of service agencies, or encouraging nonprofit allies to create public policy and advocacy committees on their Boards. You might also provide local, state and federal lawmakers with briefing materials and recommended agenda items on pending policy decisions. Engage volunteer boards, usually comprised of community leaders, to promote strong messages to reach elected officials in settings other than the state capitol.
5. **Know Your Lobbying Rights—and Limits.** Nonprofit organizations have a legal right to educate their communities and lawmakers about policy issues, but the rules governing nonprofit advocacy and lobbying are in flux. The Alliance for Justice ([www.allianceforjustice.org](http://www.allianceforjustice.org)) posts updated information on defining and structuring advocacy activities.
6. **Recruit Powerful Allies.** Campaign contributors are the “board of trustees” of politics. You can use campaign contributor lists (usually available on the Web through a state’s Division of Elections) to identify community leaders who can be influential in policy outreach. Usually some contributors are known as “community good guys and gals” who would be willing to serve as advocates if asked. Many serve on the community agency boards referenced above, and recruiting them is an on-going opportunity.
7. **Create a Community Legacy Project** that targets messages to grandparents (ages 50-75) to compare their experiences with challenges families face in today’s fast-paced, media-saturated world. Information can be shared at churches, synagogues and mosques during meetings that concentrate on the economic, social, and family structure challenges many youth face. Many elders identify with the theme of “overcoming adversity” and remember their own challenges, despite the differences. Making room for their stories, in the presence of youth, can bridge the generations and create powerful commitments to causes, agencies, and policy change.



8. **Congratulate Leaders.** Scan the newspapers for announcements of awards, recognitions, or accomplishments of key community leaders. Use that coverage as an opportunity to write a personal note of congratulations to the person honored and perhaps his/her family. As a wise hotel maitre 'd used to say at waiters' training sessions: "Only two types of people respond well to an honest compliment; males and females." This easy investment in a new or existing relationship can pay bountiful dividends.

## **REACHING DONORS – ENGAGING PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT FOR ADVOCACY, POLICY AND PROGRAMS**

Over the past decade, philanthropists and public officials have increasingly engaged in discussion about the importance of data-driven and research-based public policy development. This dialogue has been propelled in part by efforts by the Council on Foundations ([www.cof.org](http://www.cof.org)) and an array of such COF Affinity Groups as the Youth Transitions Funders Group, and individual national, regional, community and family foundations.

The work of philanthropists and public officials shares many similar focus points. Among them are ensuring the most effective:

- Policy initiatives (statutory and administrative rule reform)
- Budgetary allocations, including financing and sustaining services
- Oversight and assessment
- Accountability and outcomes measurement
- Ability to reach states goals

Given the choice between investing in success or paying for failure, responsible public, private sector, and philanthropic leaders choose the former. Promoting policies that recognize youths' capacity for doing good and their potential for greatness is worthy of coordinated philanthropic initiatives. Many leaders are looking for ways to target precious resources toward *effective* systems of support that can save lives, improve the quality of life, and enrich the community.

Within the bounds of permissible nonprofit advocacy, many groups—including members of Voices for America's Children ([www.voicesforamericaschildren.org](http://www.voicesforamericaschildren.org)), Kids Count affiliates, and an array of state, regional, and community-based nonprofit organizations—have found it valuable to engage in issue-specific policy analysis and to share information, perspectives, and policy options with community leaders, policymakers, and the media.

In a time of tight budgets (philanthropic and public sector alike), careful targeting is essential to gaining support from potential funders. Here are some strategies to engage philanthropic organizations in policy initiatives and debate.

1. **Bridge the Town/Gown Divide.** Connect higher education research faculty and students with grassroots groups and advocates, to enable collaborations—including

professional opportunities like intern/externships or guest adjunct faculty positions. Solicit support for research and policy professionals within advocacy organizations.

2. **Seek Sponsors for Community Forums.** Seek sponsorship for seminars or forums highlighting research-proven policies and program initiatives that create positive options for transitional youth.
3. **Propose Media Strategies.** Use these to brief reporters, editors, and broadcast journalists on the key issues, and program/policy options available at the national, state, regional and community market levels.
4. **Enhance Grassroots Communications Capacity.** Recruit and train youth, parents and grandparents to develop media communications and public speaking skills so that success stories can be shared clearly and convincingly.
5. **Create a Youth Promise Council.** Organize local community leaders in a Youth Promise Council to seek consensus on how employment opportunities, community service options, and mentoring/role-modeling programs can reach all young people who need such support.
6. **Map the Community.** Begin with a community/neighborhood assessment. Locate new programs and target resources where the need is greatest instead of trying to create more programs in already well-resourced neighborhoods. Make sure all efforts build upon existing community assets to bolster services, housing, safety, health access, and intergenerational literacy/education opportunities.
7. **Create Scholarships.** Support “Youth Community Service Scholarships” that reward time given to community service with tuition and stipends for living expenses. There is a philanthropic community connection with AmeriCorps, YouthBuild, and other model youth development projects.

## REACHING YOUTH – YOUTH VOICES AS THE ADVOCACY ADVANTAGE

Opportunities abound for engaging and recruiting youth to be strong and effective advocates improving policies that affect them. After all, young people know youth best. For many of us, a common side effect of adulthood is amnesia about our own youth.

There are many emergent economic, emotional, and environmental stressors on family life and youth today—and partly for this reason, solutions to problems cannot come solely from the adult/elder generations. Of course, experience and education carry weight in the policy debate; but young voices bring needed enthusiasm, innovation and an “on-the-ground” understanding of conditions and the challenges to and options for positive development.

Young people need guidance from experienced adult role models, but building positive relationships requires adults to share—to listen and offer, not impose—ideas.

Here are some strategies to invigorate and mobilize youth voices for improving policy and programs.

1. **Create a “Voting Stories” Project.** An intergenerational project wherein adults can share their experiences in fighting for gender equality, civil and immigrant rights, disability justice and other social change movements, can be influential way to engage youth in civic activities.
2. **Initiate “Youth Service Saturdays/Sundays.”** During these meetings, groups of youth can participate in community service projects that give exposure to the positive contributions young people make to their neighborhoods everyday, often without adult orchestration. Organized programs can provide youth with a new perspective on the community’s needs and opportunities for careers—and engage adult volunteers. Among the ideas are:
  - Collecting children’s books door-to-door, and pledging a half hour of reading at pre-schools for every book collected.
  - Conducting environmental clean-ups at parks, lakes, streams and seashores emphasizing the need for vegetation and animal life to exist pollution- and litter-free.
  - Participating in oral history conversations at elder care centers, listening to the stories of battle, overcoming hardship, invention, investment and dedication to causes.
  - Volunteering at hospitals, clinics, abilities service centers, shelters and other agencies serving individuals in need.
3. **Establish “Youth Philanthropy Trusts.”** These trusts, within community foundations, can accommodate donations celebrating youths’ birthdays, holidays, Mothers/Fathers Days. Through a granting cycle and a youth board, teens can decide how to use these trusts to benefit the community, a favorite cause, or a

specific project. Leveraging youth philanthropy creates a powerful message of community investment which can last a lifetime.

4. **Develop Peer Partnerships.** Youth can partner with—or start local—programs serving youth in transition. By doing so, they learn about the challenges facing foster youth or teens re-entering the community after substance treatment or delinquency services. Model programs can be identified by checking grant-making activities for local and national philanthropies. Or check the Youth as Resources website (<http://www.yar.org>).
5. **Create Youth News Bureaus.** School and neighborhood Web-publications, journalism internships at local media outlets, and agency-hosted communications projects (video, audio, and newsletters) are all opportunities to bring youth voices to larger audiences and help teens develop reporting, editing, and design skills. They can interview their peers, provide analysis of trends, highlight model programs, and cover community events and political forums.
6. **Organize Youth/Candidate Political Forums.** Connect youth to candidates for public office, and let the questions fly! For example, the Florida-based Children’s Campaign, Inc. [www.iamforkids.org](http://www.iamforkids.org) has created a system for briefing the youth on critical issues, empowering them to develop a set of questions, and the organizing coverage of the “Teens Take on Politics” forums by the media.
7. **Include Youth in Hiring and Decision-making.** Include youth in policy development decision-making on the boards of youth service agencies, school boards, and other organizations. Youth can generate ideas for long-term planning, youth-focused activities, and effective program design. Allowing youth to interview prospective management and direct-service employees creates a balance of power and promotes youth investment in the success of programs.

## CONCLUSION

This strategy memo is intended to be a work in progress. We welcome your reactions, and hope this memo generates an ongoing series of conversations among youth advocates, researchers, philanthropists, service agency managers, community opinion leaders, government officials, and family members and youth.

## MORE RESOURCES

Best Practices in Youth Philanthropy  
[www.ccfy.org/toolbox/youth\\_philanthropy.htm](http://www.ccfy.org/toolbox/youth_philanthropy.htm)

Youth on Boards  
<http://www.youthonboard.org>

Public Opinion on Youth, Crime and Race  
<http://www.buildingblocksforyouth.org/advocacyguide.html>

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