

# Strategic Communications for Influence: Lessons From the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Its KIDS COUNT Initiative

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## Key Points

- This article describes how the Annie E. Casey Foundation is using the KIDS COUNT Network in a new way: as a strategic communications tool in its focused efforts toward policy change, broad social change, and improved conditions for vulnerable children and families. An outcome map illustrates links between this strategy and the intended outcomes.
- Case illustrations of KIDS COUNT grantee activities surrounding the release of the *2008 KIDS COUNT Data Book* describe the efforts of grantees in six states where the quantity and quality of media coverage surrounding the national data book reflected the kind of coverage that Casey believes will help achieve its desired outcomes.
- Strategic communications approaches such as relationships with journalists, use of locally relevant information, use of locally relevant media advocacy strategies, good preparation, and a solution orientation were present in states demonstrating desirable media coverage.
- Prescribing specific communications tactics matters less than supporting the network's general capacity to engage in year-round strategic communications approaches to create conditions (e.g., reputations, relationships) that will contribute to successful media advocacy related to a specific event such as the release of the national data book.

## Introduction

Over the past two decades, the Annie E. Casey Foundation (Casey) has accumulated a wealth of

experience and data about effective strategies that contribute to the foundation's intended results: *improved conditions for the nation's most vulnerable children and families*. As Casey approaches its next generation of work, the foundation has a deepened commitment to align and integrate efforts on behalf of these children and families. Such alignment and integration reflect an intentional and strategic expression of a philanthropic "influence role." This function reflects the foundation's view that informing, influencing, and shaping federal- and state-level policy and practice are essential to achieving significant, sustainable change. Recognizing that achieving its intended results requires much more than a single foundation's resources, the Casey Foundation is sharpening thinking about how the organization can further its mission by influencing critical public systems entrusted with supporting populations about which the foundation is most concerned. This article describes how Casey has employed the KIDS COUNT Network as a channel to influence public policy and offers an example of how a foundation, through a capacity building approach, can infuse its key messages into public discourse and the policy process.

KIDS COUNT is a national and state-by-state program that tracks and documents the status of children in the United States. Casey's KIDS COUNT initiative integrates two important tools: (1) The highly credible *Data Book*, published annually since 1990, presents data about indicators

of child well-being and features an essay on a selected policy topic that reflects Casey's influence priorities and (2) the KIDS COUNT grantee network, made up of strong advocacy organizations in all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Grantees put good data and strong policy solutions in front of state and local decision makers throughout the year. Through KIDS COUNT, the Casey Foundation is able to harness and maximize its influence on awareness, discourse, and policies that address the needs of disadvantaged children and their families.

One of Casey's key assumptions about the power of the KIDS COUNT Network is that it can be used to influence policy through the integration of strategic communications: identifying strong messages and delivering these messages to the right audiences at the right times. Casey's technical assistance to the network is directed at helping KIDS COUNT grantees to know what makes messages strong, who are the right audiences, and how to read the local context and recognize opportunities for delivering messages at the right time. To develop and communicate strong messages, it is important to understand the types of changes being pursued. Depending on the conceptual model of change being implemented, messages can be either specific to the adoption or implementation of particular practices or policies or more broadly directed toward the achievement of a large-scale change in social conditions (Guthrie, Louie, & Crystal-Foster, 2005). Casey's approach addresses both policy change and broader social change. Using examples from Casey's 2008 KIDS COUNT release and rollout, this article addresses how the implementation of strategic communications at both the foundation level and through a state grantee network serves to further Casey's policy influence and promote broad, long-term change.

In addition to describing how Casey implements KIDS COUNT as a policy influence strategy, this article presents findings from a study that Organizational Research Services (ORS), an independent research and evaluation consulting firm, conducted on Casey's behalf. The study explored strategic

communication efforts associated with the 2008 *KIDS COUNT Data Book* state-by-state rollout. Through case illustrations, the study highlights factors that contributed to exemplary media coverage in six states. It also presents broad lessons about actions and conditions that lead to desirable media coverage and that also may contribute to positive policy-related activity in areas of interest to Casey and grantees.

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The case illustrations illuminate just one link in a longer chain of intended change the foundation believes will ultimately lead to results for children and families, as shown in Figure 1. The 2008 case illustrations explored questions related to how KIDS COUNT Network media advocacy practices yielded desirable media coverage — that is, the specific kinds of media coverage that Casey believes will influence policy-related change. Earlier studies (Academy for Educational Development, 1996; Appelbaum et al., 2004) explored questions about how decision makers and influencers are exposed to, view, and use KIDS COUNT data. To further test its theories and improve its efforts, Casey will continue to explore questions and test assumptions associated with each link in Figure 1's outcome chain. Such questions include What media and other advocacy practices most effectively contribute to adoption of the intended frame and issue prioritization, desirable changes in public will, and changes in public policy? And, the ultimate question: Do new policies bring about the desired results for vulnerable children and families?

The intent of this article is to offer lessons and insights for grantmakers that are looking to be intentional regarding their use of influence. In

particular, this article illustrates (1) how strategic communications can be implemented through a grantee network and how this practice relates to policy changes and a foundation's intended results; (2) what it takes to implement strategic communications through a grantee network, including organizational capacity building; and (3) what questions to pursue more vigorously in the evaluation of strategic communications for influence.

### **KIDS COUNT: Purpose and Intent**

As the Casey Foundation has adopted a policy influence role, the foundation has examined how, as well as the degree to which, each of its various programs support overall objectives. Casey initially conceived KIDS COUNT to provide a source of credible data on children's well-being (Academy for Educational Development, 1996). The KIDS COUNT brand, and hence the Casey brand, was intended to be viewed as objective, credible, respected, reliable, and impartial. The foundation's belief in the importance of good data for decision making reflects the values of its founder, Jim Casey, and his company, UPS. KIDS COUNT has operated from the belief that accurate, relevant data enrich public discourse, enable greater public accountability, influence good decisions, and contribute to policies that will improve children's lives.

In addition to publishing the annual *Data Book*, Casey also has made grants through KIDS COUNT to state-based organizations. Initially, the foundation's intent was to support each state to produce a local version of the *Data Book*. In addition to producing local data, the foundation has increasingly come to see grantees as a network through which priority policy messages can be promoted. While striving for cohesive and aligned messages, the Casey Foundation's intent is that grantees localize data and messages and respond to their particular state context, thereby extending the foundation's influence and respecting the state grantees' autonomy. Casey recognizes that states have localized policy agendas that may or may not align with the foundation's focus in a given year. When priorities are aligned, however, the foundation sees the great opportunity to amplify messages. Grantees' relationships with key influencers in their own states as well as their knowl-

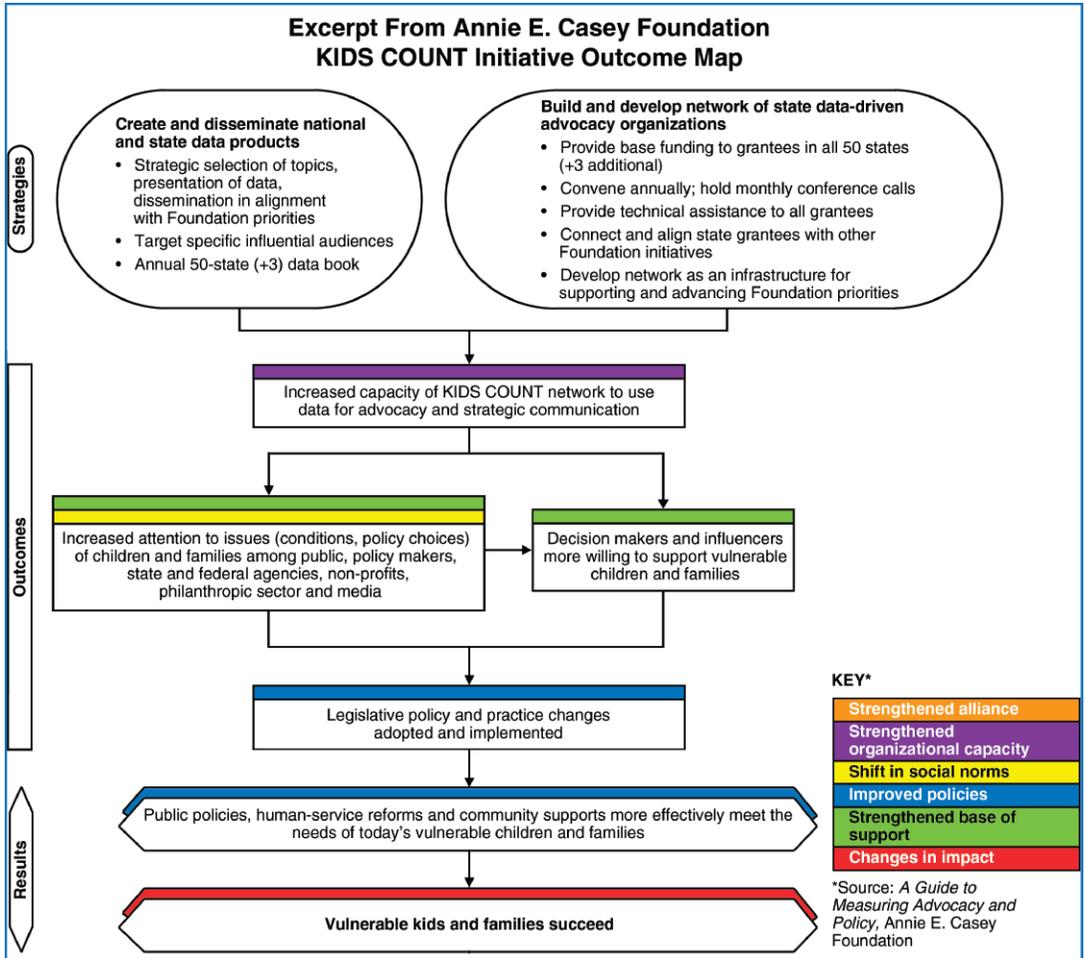
edge about the best opportunities to put data and solutions in front of state-level decision makers have the potential to advance a state grantee's own agenda as well as the Casey Foundation's.

The Casey Foundation selected KIDS COUNT grantees for their common expertise in assembling and communicating data for their states. Casey also seeks to build long-term relationships with grantee organizations that share the foundation's values and philosophy, including a commitment to leading advocacy efforts with good data and dedication to the broad social change goal of improved well-being for the most vulnerable children and families. Also important is that grantees exhibit a good understanding of conditions and the context of policy decisions in their states. Casey views all of these grantee characteristics as assets to the foundation and important to its role with regard to policy influence.

Despite similarities in philosophy and mission, notable differences exist across the KIDS COUNT Network. Some grantees are advocacy organizations, others are more general child-service organizations, others are research departments housed in academic institutions, and still others are state government agencies. In addition, the size, budget, and capacity of grantees vary. Therefore, another key aspect of Casey's overall policy-influence strategy involves providing particular support to KIDS COUNT grantees to obtain, analyze, and interpret data; to develop communications capacity; and to be strong messengers in their states. Casey maintains and develops the KIDS COUNT Network throughout the year. KIDS COUNT grantees attend an annual conference and participate in regular conference calls and webinars. Grantees access technical assistance, delivered by Casey's staff and partners, in areas such as evaluation, communications, and data analysis.

The foundation sees its role as capacity builder as a long-term one; if a grantee's philosophy aligns with the foundation's, there is great potential for mutual benefit in maintaining the grant relationship over many years. Casey's view is that over time, technical assistance can help advance a grantee organization's reputation and credibil-

FIGURE 1 KIDS COUNT Outcome Map Excerpt



ity. This not only helps the grantee, it also helps Casey because the foundation then has a known “channel” through which key messages can flow to state-level audiences. Although KIDS COUNT grantees experience the kinds of organizational and staff changes typical of many advocacy organizations and nonprofits, Casey’s experiences suggest that as long as there is a shared commitment to both good data and social change goals, capacity will continue to grow over time.

In addition to credible data, Casey views strategic communications as fundamental to both the *KIDS COUNT Data Book* and the network. This view has manifested in Casey’s well-researched selection of a salient annual essay topic, identification of a series of strong messages that will accompany

the *Data Book’s* release and ongoing publicity, and alignment of Casey’s messages with those of the network. Integrating strategic communications into KIDS COUNT involves development of a yearlong series of events, publications, and activities that reinforce the message of the *Data Book* (instead of a single annual release event). In addition, Casey has provided targeted support to its grantee network to develop strategic communications capacity. Furthermore, the foundation has begun to pay close attention to how states localize Casey’s messages so that it can learn and lift up effective local influence approaches.

KIDS COUNT has been creating a more deliberate picture of change that depicts this transformative view. This picture builds upon the strong

foundation of the KIDS COUNT statewide network and the compilation and publication of credible data. It also integrates the states' efforts more deliberately into the foundation's efforts and lifts up the relevance of effective and strategic communications. Furthermore, it crystallizes the anticipated outcomes of the KIDS COUNT strategy as more directly influential to policy change.

*For KIDS COUNT, being strategic means that communications are well-timed and well-framed and are delivered to impact specific, influential audiences as well as the general public.*

The excerpt depicted in Figure 1 demonstrates the relevant portion of the KIDS COUNT picture of change. This visual display is called an outcome map.

The outcomes shown are viewed through two lenses: (1) What are important outcomes relative to the KIDS COUNT initiative? and (2) How do these relate to the Casey Foundation's desire to influence policy-related outcomes?

### **Determining Effectiveness of Strategic Communications to Influence Policy**

Answering questions related to a continuum of shorter- and longer-term outcomes can help gauge the effectiveness of communications efforts. The continuum of outcomes includes the reach of communications; quality and synergy of approaches; capacity to promote key messages; alignment across multiple deliverers of key messages; identification of best-fit communication models (in a marketplace of multiple models); whether messages reached target audiences; whether target audiences changed opinions, beliefs, or actions; and whether there were policy-related results. Identifying and exploring questions all along the continuum of outcomes

can help the Casey Foundation determine ways to improve its efforts.

Typically, the success of communications strategies is measured in ways that are "countable" and reflect the audience, reach, or size or placement of the media element. Common metrics are number of articles, placement of article, size of readership, the number of radio spots, in what markets and what times of day, media hits, and so on. Casey's intentional integration of communications with the KIDS COUNT strategy nudges the effectiveness measures farther along the outcome chain. For KIDS COUNT, being strategic means that communications are well timed and well framed and are delivered to impact specific, influential audiences as well as the general public. For Casey, the desired focus is how KIDS COUNT influences specific groups — in particular, decision makers such as state officials, legislators, and judges and opinion shapers such as advocates, editorial columnists, philanthropists, and community leaders. Seen in this way, relevant outcomes for Casey's efforts relate to the degree to which those groups support or adopt Casey priorities and/or policy recommendations either in the media or through their actions.

Casey identified key questions related to effective strategic communications and the KIDS COUNT Network. These questions included how best to expend media advocacy resources, whether coverage in large national media markets or state and local markets is most influential in terms of policy change, how to obtain desired media coverage, whether desired media coverage reaches and moves target audiences, and whether such coverage leads to policy change. These questions were the context for a study of the 2008 KIDS COUNT rollout, as captured via data from six grantees regarding their media advocacy efforts.

### **Casey's 2008 KIDS COUNT Data Book and Policy Messages: A Strategic Communication Approach in Action**

As mentioned, each year the KIDS COUNT national *Data Book* includes two basic components. The bulk of the book consists of detailed profiles, benchmarks, and a state-by-state ranking of 10

key indicators of child well-being. In addition, each year's report includes an in-depth essay on a significant children's policy issue. The 2008 essay, "A Road Map for Juvenile Justice Reform," includes a substantive critique of current juvenile justice practices and then lays out a series of research-based recommendations, including examples of promising practices and policy approaches. Casey pursued a comprehensive approach to promote the 2008 *Data Book* and key policy-related messages of the essay, engaging directly with the media and supporting the KIDS COUNT Network's *Data Book* and essay promotion efforts.

Casey's overall approach included expanded technical assistance to the KIDS COUNT grantee network prior to the release to support and align the grantees' strategic communications efforts related to the *Data Book* and the juvenile justice messages. Casey also deployed internal and partner resources<sup>1</sup> to conduct communications and public relations efforts with national media outlets and national policymakers and opinion leaders. Supported by the foundation and the network, KIDS COUNT grantees in each state engage in communications strategies tailored to the conditions and issues most relevant to their state.

For the 2008 *Data Book* release, Casey assembled an array of communications and content experts to contribute to the development and execution of a comprehensive communications plan. Bart Lubow, the director of programs for high risk youth and their families at the Casey Foundation, authored the 2008 essay on juvenile justice reform. He and his team, along with two longtime Casey partners — the Campaign for Youth Justice (<http://www.campaign4youthjustice.org/>) and the Justice Policy Institute (<http://www.justicepolicy.org/>) — collaborated with the strategic communications team on the *Data Book* media outreach plan. This team of content experts also provided technical assistance to grantees to help them define and refine their

locally relevant messages related to juvenile justice. Casey strategic communications staff teamed up with Hager Sharp, a public relations consultancy (<http://www.hagersharp.com>), to collaborate on the development and execution of the communications plan at the national level and provided support to KIDS COUNT grantees in their states.

In 2008, Casey made a concerted effort to tap into those resources and others to expand the level of technical assistance and materials available to the KIDS COUNT grantees, tailoring its approach to input received from the KIDS COUNT Network Communications Work Group. To support grantee public relations and media outreach efforts, Casey and its content experts and public relations partners produced written public relations materials for grantees (such as a sample op-ed, talking points on the national data and essay, and a fact sheet on juvenile justice reform); conducted three conference calls with grantees; and, in coordination with grantees, produced and distributed press releases and radio "sound bites" to the media in each state.

- The national team of Hager Sharp and Casey communications staff produced materials including a national *Data Book* news release and fact sheet; state fact sheets; and talking points focused on the overall child well-being indicators, national- and state-specific bar graphs showing well-being indicators, state fact sheets and talking points focused on juvenile justice reform, and sample op-ed pieces.
- Casey and Hager Sharp staff arranged for three conference calls (each offered two times) for KIDS COUNT grantees — one focused on describing the trends in the data on overall child well-being and introducing a national communications resource person assigned to each state (either Hager Sharp or Casey strategic communications staff); one with Bart Lubow talking through the essay and responding to grantee questions about their state issues; and a final planning call just prior to the *Data Book* release.
- The News Generation, Inc., public relations firm (<http://www.newsgeneration.com/>) created and distributed radio actualities or sound

<sup>1</sup> More than 45 national outreach partners including the National League of Cities, the National Foster Care Coalition, and the American Bar Association helped disseminate the KIDS COUNT *Data Book* message.



eral key journalists across the country to provide information on the essay topic and the indicators, including a prerelease webinar for journalists, targeted media pitching, and a carefully executed national op-ed strategy. As part of the release, Casey distributed the *Data Book* and a collection of related materials to governors and lieutenant governors, governors' press secretaries, state attorneys general, and leaders of key state agencies (e.g., human services and juvenile justice) as well as all members of Congress. Casey conducted a release-day policy briefing on Capitol Hill, sponsored by a bipartisan team of representatives from the House Committee on Education and Labor. Finally, Casey reached out to national decision makers and opinion leaders, pursuing opportunities to speak at targeted group events and publish articles in media targeted to those groups.

### Understanding Successful Communications of KIDS COUNT 2008: Study Design and Methods

At the request of the Casey Foundation, ORS designed an evaluation study, collected data, and prepared a report that described strategies, or combination of strategies, employed by KIDS COUNT grantees. ORS subcontracted with Cohen Research & Evaluation, LLC, to contribute to this work. The study explored which strategies or strategy combinations seemed to yield desirable quantity and quality of media coverage and, potentially, increased the positive policy-related activity. The purpose of the study was to provide guidance to Casey by describing strategies and approaches used by grantees' states where the media advocacy related to the KIDS COUNT national *Data Book* release generated particularly desirable media coverage. Rather than present a comprehensive assessment of the full set of state activities, the study's intent was to illustrate and suggest themes and exemplary practices that could inform Casey's future efforts and to evaluate media advocacy and communications as an influence strategy.

Case illustrations were developed that focused on the media advocacy efforts of the KIDS COUNT grantees in six states that were selected in consultation with Casey staff: Alabama, Arkansas,

Kentucky, Michigan, Tennessee, and Wyoming. These states were selected from a list of 18 "outlier case" states (Patton, 2002, p. 243). The outlier case states were those with particularly desirable media coverage in the two weeks immediately following the *Data Book's* release (see Figure 2 for an example). A combination of factors influenced Casey's definition of desirable media coverage and the identification of the outlier cases, including quantity of media coverage immediately following the *Data Book* release; the presence of multiple media sources (i.e., print plus broadcast); the incidence of at least one op-ed or editorial; and the incidence of at least one "excellent" article. (Casey staff selected a list of articles that particularly reflected Casey messages and priorities and presented them to the board of directors in the weeks after the *Data Book's* release.) This definition reflects the Casey Foundation's belief that media coverage with these characteristics is likely to influence policy change. From a list of 18 outlier case states, the six case study states were selected by Casey staff based on the foundation's interest in learning about successful media outreach strategies within certain local contexts and different media markets.

Data collection strategies included telephone interviews, a review of grantee reports and Web sites, and a close examination of media coverage related to the KIDS COUNT national *Data Book* during the period of June to August 2008.<sup>2</sup> Interviews were conducted with three categories of informants, identified in the following ways:

1. Representatives of KIDS COUNT grantee organizations in the six states, identified through consultation with the Casey Foundation. One to three informants from each state grantee organization participated in the interviews.
2. Journalists or other representatives of the media in the targeted states, identified through the media review or through interviews with KIDS COUNT grantee-representatives. A total of 11 journalists and media representatives were interviewed.

<sup>2</sup> National and regional media coverage was compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation for a 30-day period surrounding the 2008 KIDS COUNT release.

3. Representatives of Casey familiar with KIDS COUNT media efforts, identified through existing relationships with ORS and through referral from Casey KIDS COUNT staff. Three representatives from Casey participated in interviews.

### Case Study Key Findings: What Was Learned?

Which media advocacy practices yield desirable media coverage? Case examples of the 2008 KIDS COUNT rollout efforts in six selected states indicated that certain strategic communications approaches such as relationships with journalists, locally relevant information, locally relevant strategies, good preparation, and a solution orientation were present in states demonstrating desirable media coverage. Analysis of the six case examples revealed that prescribing specific communications tactics, such as convening a press conference versus contacting journalists individually, seemed to matter far less than general capac-

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ity to implement a broad set of strategic communications activities, infuse data into advocacy, and work year-round to create conditions (e.g., reputations, relationships) that will contribute to desirable media coverage related to a specific event such as the release of the national *Data Book*.

The study also found that the experiences of each of the six states were unique to the grantees' state environments; organizational structures; and existing relationships with advocacy organizations, policymakers, and the media. At the same time, the study revealed interesting and replicable

practices that Casey was able to discern and share among the KIDS COUNT Network.

### Effective Media Advocacy Practices: Key Lessons

One aspect of the case study design was to solicit candid remarks on communications strategies from those media representatives who covered the *Data Book* release. The evaluation team conducted a total of 11 phone interviews with editorial page editors, reporters, radio news directors, and television talk show hosts. Questions included the following: What made this topic seem newsworthy? What was the role of the advocacy organization in your decision to run the story? What advice would you give to advocacy organizations to make it easier for you to report/write editorials on these kinds of stories?

In many respects, the journalists' advice affirmed the existing KIDS COUNT approach and confirmed the value of existing network strategies. For example, as noted above, grantees are supported in learning how to conceptualize and create a media plan and in developing concrete tactics. This support contributes not only to building relationships with the media but also to crafting effective messages that journalists can take, rely on, and run with. Through interviews, journalists offered numerous examples of how grantees exhibited effective communication practices. It was validating for both Casey and the grantees alike to hear this confirmation of their media-related activities. At the same time, the specific how-tos offered by the journalist interviewees added to the body of knowledge on planning and executing an effective strategic communications approach. The following advice is drawn from the collective findings.

#### *Build Relationships*

Relationships with the media are two-way streets, and members of the media need thoughtful, knowledgeable advocates as much as advocates need accessible, interested media contacts. Being available and immediately responsive to media queries throughout the year was a significant relationship-building factor. One reporter described the executive director of a KIDS COUNT state grantee organization as "the first person I

think of” to go to with questions about children’s issues throughout the year. Specific examples of advice from journalists to grantees included the following:

- Make sure you are accessible. Journalists should have your direct phone number and not get a recording.
- Invite journalists to visit your organization and let them see real people, for instance, children waiting to be adopted. Say, “Let us show you what we are doing, what we are about.” This will give them a firsthand view of why your issues are important.

#### *Make Information Accessible*

Reporters have limited time to conduct extensive background research or contextualize information. As one noted, “If we can’t grab something and get a pretty good feel of why it is important to the community, it will get lost.” Other advice was as follows:

- Remember that less is more. Don’t put in too many numbers and details—it becomes overwhelming.
- Have a good Web site so that if a reporter needs to do some quick research in a hurry, it’s there. You want to make sure that the information on the Web site is supporting your mission, so to speak, but it also needs to be reliable, verifiable, and responsible so that the media don’t have any reason to not trust what you’ve got on it.

#### *Craft Content So It Is Locally Relevant*

Time and again, interviewees emphasized the importance of locally relevant information, that is, showing why the story and policy changes are important to the local community. One advised: “Be as specific as possible to where things are going on in our community. ... That gets our attention. This isn’t just a bunch of numbers; this is really about you and your community.” Other advice included the following:

- Don’t just send a press release; include a brief summary of why the issue is important to this particular media audience. For example, hav-

ing key words, such as *Michigan*, or better yet, *rural*, upfront is an eye-catcher.

- Humanize the story behind the statistics. Say how it affects families. Offer to bring someone who can provide a personal perspective. For example, introduce someone who can share issues of children in poverty because he or she works with poor children.
- Frame policy solutions in a local context. As one journalist noted, “If you can’t break it down closer to where they are living, people will not be impressed.”

### **Using a Network for Strategic Communications: Key Lessons**

The study identified five key lessons in using a network for strategic communications:

1. *The importance of credible information cannot be overemphasized.* The known credibility of KIDS COUNT data appeared to be a critical success factor in getting stories and editorial pieces published. The Casey investment in providing high-quality research and data analysis, producing data in a consistent reporting format, and carrying out multiple dissemination strategies clearly pays off in the media arena. Journalists volunteered that they did not have to conduct extensive fact-checking on figures or rankings and that KIDS COUNT data were “nonpartisan.” In the rapid-pace media environment, the ability to rely on the credibility of data means that information has a better chance of being used. The consistency of the *Data Book* format also seems to add to its credibility and usability. One reporter who commented on credibility said, “I guess honestly, part of it is seeing that it [the *Data Book*] is cited in a lot of places. ... It’s very well laid out and you can tell that it’s scientifically accurate and statistically accurate.” Other statements from media representatives were as follows:
  - “If we didn’t find it credible we wouldn’t use it. ... I think it speaks for it right there. We might argue with the conclusions, but not with the data.” (managing editor of a public radio network)

• “KIDS COUNT and Casey are so credible. ... They are recognized as a source that is not partisan, doesn’t have a dog in the political fight, doesn’t endorse candidates, doesn’t get in the middle of political squabbles, and doesn’t allow themselves to be co-opted by political groups. When they issue the *Data Book*, it’s something you can take to the bank—it has good, reliable information. Unlike some reports, it also draws conclusions but they’re reasonable and they’re not ‘spun’ — they just are ‘there.’ Here are some data, here are some reasonable solutions.” (editorial page editor)

2. *Skilled and practiced communications make a difference.* Grantees related how both the interactions with Casey national staff and the technical assistance and communications tools provided by Casey partners, such as Hager Sharp and FrameWorks Institute, increased their overall capacity to engage the media. For example, one cited her organization’s “diligent use” of the FrameWorks Level One messaging strategy in a carefully prepared scripting of its statewide press conference.<sup>3</sup> Another noted how the conference calls offered to KIDS COUNT grantees clarified the intricacies of juvenile justice reform policy issues. She related that the experience of having Bart Lubow walk through the essay on the conference call and talk about the key areas of focus for her state enabled her to tie it into locally relevant issues and to better articulate implications of racial disparities.

One grantee characterized support from the national level as “superb,” elaborating as follows: “When you send out that huge book, it’s a little daunting. The national project is great about giving us backup data; the spreadsheets that help clarify which of the indicators are significant in the trends. All of that information makes us a lot more comfortable about going out there and

making statements about what’s happening to kids in the state” (ORS, 2008, p. 35). They also valued the conference calls and the opportunity to be briefed, to ask questions, and to hear questions from other grantees. Finally, they described the national-level press events and press coverage as useful in obtaining state and local press coverage. For example, a June 12 article written by an Associated Press reporter (Crary, 2008) spurred articles in national and local newspapers.

In addition, several grantees described how having a skilled, media-savvy internal staff member who takes the lead in communications strategy was a definitive factor in their success. Internal communications directors helped prepare a comprehensive media plan and develop press materials. Other efforts included conducting interview practice sessions for executive directors, other staff, and even the grantees’ advocacy partner organizations who were in a position to respond to press inquiries. One grantee described how, for a radio broadcast, she prepared the interviewer, providing questions and briefing her beforehand. Underscoring the importance of this role, some grantees strongly suggested that Casey provide funding to support a communications director position or a staff member whose role includes developing a state-specific media relations strategy, tailoring press releases for local audiences, and coaching staff members.

3. *Target multiple media sources with the policy message.* Casey’s strategic communications plan is grounded in an understanding of the value of targeting multiple media sources (e.g., print, broadcast, online) as well as multiple levels within the same medium (e.g., newspaper reporters and editorial writers). The Casey KIDS COUNT staff provides concrete support to the network through vehicles including sample press releases, op-ed templates, talking points, and recorded radio sound bites. In interviews, grantees provided specific examples of how they used these materials to get their policy message out to the local media. For example, several modified the op-ed templates to write an op-ed tailored to their state. Grantee partners also adapted

<sup>3</sup> A Level One frame places stories and data within a context of big ideas like freedom, justice, community, success, prevention, and responsibility. Finding the right higher-level (e.g., Level One) frame for issues and stories helps to evoke policy-oriented consideration of solutions (FrameWorks Institute, 2002).

the op-ed templates; a state council on crime and delinquency, for instance, used one of the templates to craft its own opinion piece.

This multilevel approach can be especially effective in combination with other strategies, such as building ongoing relationships with journalists. Exemplary advocacy organizations recognized that media representatives at all levels — whether reporters or editorialists — can choose to cast a story with a frame that contributes to policy goals. One KIDS COUNT grantee described how the staff seek out and nurture relationships with members of the media who demonstrate a “willingness to shape the public agenda.”

4. *Locally relevant content and locally relevant strategies are key to media success.* As noted in the synthesis of journalists’ comments above, casting the message in a locally relevant context is the key “hook” in engaging their attention. In addition, successful media outreach strategies build on local and regional realities of media engagement. For example, Wyoming and Michigan grantees used radio news and talk shows to reach small rural media markets where people spend a lot of time in their cars. The Alabama grantee blanketed the television talk show market with four staff members fanning out across the state to appear on television talk shows, a strategy that reached an audience that does not necessarily read the newspaper. The Kentucky grantee strengthened its relationship-building efforts with journalists at smaller regional newspapers and experienced media coverage successes in each major region of the state. These successes validate the design and execution of the KIDS COUNT Network approach. Casey aims to use its national perspective and access to technical and content expertise to leverage the power of the KIDS COUNT grantees’ understanding of state and local contexts and their on-the-ground ability to build and maintain relationships with journalists.
5. *Focus on a solution orientation.* Each year, the *Data Book* provides a wealth of data, indicators, and trends, as well as an essay that fo-

cuses on a specific policy and solutions. Some grantees believed that negative information—a drop in rankings, for example—generates press, and to some extent this appears to be true. However, many journalists and grantees emphasized the importance of providing information about what can be done. In particular, they underscored the importance of tying together a clear description of the problems, the implications of the KIDS COUNT data and essay, and state and local level solutions. Several journalists noted the KIDS COUNT materials and information from grantees present data alongside “reasonable” nonpartisan solutions. One editorial page editor stated how much she appreciated the grantee’s op-ed piece because it was solution-oriented and also highlighted areas where improvements had occurred.

*Successful media outreach strategies build on local and regional realities of media engagement. For example, Wyoming and Michigan grantees used radio news and talk shows to reach small rural media markets where people spend a lot of time in their cars.*

### Conclusion

The Casey Foundation has become more intentional and strategic regarding its aims to influence both policy and social conditions to achieve meaningful improvements in the lives of vulnerable children and their families. After nearly two decades of building the KIDS COUNT Network, establishing credibility, and honing its strategic communications approach, Casey is using the network in a new way: as a powerful tool in the foundation’s focused efforts toward policy change.

In collaboration with KIDS COUNT grantees and national partners, Casey crafts and puts forth messages about policy changes needed at the national and state levels, as well as messages that call for broad social change. Recognizing that achieving these types of results requires more than the efforts of one foundation alone, Casey leverages the strengths of the KIDS COUNT Network and continues to improve its use of the network for strategic communications to maximize policy influence. The KIDS COUNT Network approach includes long-term grant relationships

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with state organizations as well as substantial technical and capacity building assistance to grantees, including support in the area of communications. In addition, Casey is paying greater attention to creating the most powerful combination of local and national efforts and expertise so that data about children's well-being and priority messages about policy can be amplified to expand their influence.

For the 2008 KIDS COUNT national *Data Book* release, KIDS COUNT grantees combined their internal capacities and strengths with Casey's technical assistance and external supports to engage in strategic communications. The media-advocacy case illustrations describe the skills and efforts used by KIDS COUNT grantees in states where the quantity and quality of media coverage surrounding the national *Data Book* reflected the kind of coverage that Casey believes will help achieve its desired strategic communications outcomes. The skills and capacities highlighted in the case illustrations affirm the strength of Casey's approach, that is, effective use of a grantee network to engage in strategic communications in order to increase attention

to the conditions of children and families, increase attention to the policy choices that shape those conditions, increase will of decision makers and their "influencers" to support vulnerable children and their families, and ultimately achieve policy changes that are likely to improve conditions for those children and families. The case illustrations also describe how specific tactics are less important than data skills and strategic communications approaches tailored to local contexts.

Casey will continue to hone the strategic communications efforts of the KIDS COUNT Network. The case illustrations show how the network produces media stories that are likely to be influential, as well as the practices that contribute to desirable media coverage. In 2009, the KIDS COUNT media outreach effort will incorporate an ambitious social media outreach plan to take advantage of the growing use of online outlets, such as Twitter, Facebook, and Digg. Casey will explore the impact of these efforts and investigate questions such as the following:

- How can Casey hone and enhance its capacity building efforts for grantees to maximize their positive impact?
- Conditions and contexts vary in states and are constantly changing. Grantees vary in their freedom and desires to advocate for policy changes. What is the most powerful combination of state and national expertise, and how can Casey best achieve that combination?
- To what extent do these articles and other KIDS COUNT Network activities impact changes in decision makers' and opinion leaders' attention to priority issues and messages? How do they contribute to policy change?

Improving strategic communications, however, is just one link in the overall chain of outcomes that ultimately leads to improved conditions for vulnerable children. To learn how best to achieve the desired long-term results, Casey will continue to explore how its strategic communications and other efforts contribute to key policy changes and, ultimately, the impacts of those policy changes on the lives of children and families.

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