

Using Data to Make Your Case

- D**ata used as an advocacy tool can generate public awareness of issues needing attention as well as progress being made. Specifically, they can be used to:
- ♦ Determine where a county, state, or the nation stands on a given well-being indicator.
 - ♦ Compare counties with other counties, the state, the nation, or a goal.
 - ♦ Track changes in well-being over time.

Determining where you stand. Data on various child and family well-being indicators can provide you with information on how your county or state is currently doing. Keep in mind:

- ♦ When determining how you are doing in a well-being area, examine multiple indicators that will shed more comprehensive light on the area. Using multiple indicators increases your chance of gaining a comprehensive and accurate picture. For example, if wanting to know how child care is working in your county, you could look at the education level of the providers, staff turnover, availability, and cost of care.
- ♦ Use caution when dealing with small numbers. Because of the way percentages and rates are calculated, smaller as opposed to larger counties can show large percentages or rates for relatively small incidents.
- ♦ When using rates or percentages, know the raw numbers. For example, if examining the rate per 1,000 children of out-of-home placements for your county, also keep in mind just how many children that rate represents.
- ♦ Look for patterns over time to see if the current performance represents an ongoing pattern or just an unusual year.
- ♦ Look at factors (the numbers representing the factors) that may cause the well-being to be what it is.

Comparing performance. Sometimes you will want to know how your county or state is doing compared to other counties, states, the nation, or some predetermined goal. When you do this:

- ♦ Try to find counties that are similar to your own in terms of factors such as size, rural/urban composition, and economic situation. Using similar counties will allow for a cleaner comparison on the well-being indicator(s) of interest.
- ♦ When wanting to compare county or state performance to a goal, keep the prior performance in mind. Expecting a county to reach a goal that is significantly out of reach may set it up for failure. Instead, focus on whether progress is being made toward the ultimate goal.

Tracking change over time. Often times, you will want to know if issues in your county or state are improving or getting worse. Seeing a *continued pattern* for the better or worse can strengthen your case.

- ♦ Keep in mind that definitions and formulas of certain data sometimes change. If the definition of a well-being indicator changes, odds are that you will not be able to compare data from the former to the current definitions.
- ♦ Use caution when dealing with small numbers. Because of the way rates and percentages

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are calculated, smaller counties will show larger fluctuations from one year to the next. For example, a small county might have no childhood deaths one year, but one the next, which results in a large percent change in its death rate.

- ◆ Although the amount of change over time can be informative, look for patterns in change – has the county continued to increase over the last few years? Looking at patterns rather than just amount of change is particularly important for small counties, where small differences will look like large changes.
- ◆ Use at least three years of data when looking at change over time. The more years you examine, the better chance you have of seeing whether the performance is actually improving, worsening, or staying about the same.

Use data responsibly. Successful advocates build a reputation for competence, reliability, and integrity. Information that is used inaccurately or irresponsibly will detract from your ability to be a credible resource. When seeking data:

- ◆ Use official data sources and cite your sources.
- ◆ Check and double-check your numbers.
- ◆ Use the most recent data available.
- ◆ Make sure you know what the data actually represent and what time period is being reported.
- ◆ Look not only for the problems needing attention but also for the progress being made to address the issues.

Sources:

Kansas Action for Children (2004). Kansas Kids Count Data Book 2004. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2003). 2003 Kids Count Data Book: State profiles of child well-being. Baltimore, MD.