

Educating Elected Officials: Getting Ahead of the Budget Crisis

The election is over. The campaign signs have been taken down and the ads have vanished from the television. Now what? How do we ensure that campaign promises are kept and elected officials are held accountable for their votes on children and family issues? How do we accomplish new goals during one of the most dramatic economic situations New York has ever faced?

As the State's fiscal crisis worsens, there is increasing pressure for striking budget cuts in the coming year. Before that happens, take the time to meet with your elected officials. Very few have had a chance to learn about children and family services, including child care, child welfare, health mental health and nutrition or early care and education. They are probably unfamiliar with the laws, budgets and policies that professionals and parents must cope with day-to-day. They may not understand how important human service programs are to the most vulnerable members of their communities.

Elected officials need to know and understand the benefits you provide to the families in the community so they can assess the impact of proposed cuts. If you don't tell them, they won't know: children and families are in need of sound education, primary and preventive health care and strong support services.

- **Meet with new elected officials.** Make an appointment to meet with new officials so you can tell them about your program and the families you serve. Give them a chance to learn about children's issues first hand. Invite them to visit. Provide them with documents and evaluations that show your program successes.
- **Re-establish your relationship with existing officials.** Now is the time to reacquaint officials with your program. Let them know about the added challenges the families you work with now face. Have you seen increases in families needing assistance? Do families need more services?
- **Educate the families in your program.** Prepare family members to talk about the benefits they have received and keep them up-to-date of the budget situation. The best advocates for children are their parents and you want to be ready for opportunities for families to tell their stories.
- **Remind policy makers that budgets are really about children because their future is our future.** Let them know that the community will gauge their commitment to children by how they vote and not what they say.

Get ready. Be prepared. The steps you take now can make a difference to how your elected officials vote when the tough decisions are made.