PUTTING CHALLENGES ON THE TABLE:

The First Meeting of The Learning Circle

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Background

The Illinois Asset Building Group invited the asset-policy leaders in eight states to take part in a close-knit, closed-door discussion of best practices and challenges about their work. Hosted by the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago with the generous support of the Ford Foundation and the Levi Strauss Foundation, the goal of the meeting, held on August 18, 2006, was to create a safe environment that would foster candid discussion of the challenges facing asset leaders within their state coalitions regarding coalition management, policy, communication/marketing, and their collective role as state asset-policy leaders. Before arriving in Chicago, participants were asked to specify their top two challenges in the four topic areas. The meeting facilitator, Heather McCulloch, used their responses to formulate questions for each topic area, and this became the agenda for the meeting (see Appendix C). The Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago provided a boardroom, a round table, and food.

As the day progressed, the participants grew comfortable and became engaged in sharing their particular issues in each topic area. Before adjourning, the participants discussed their role as a collective group of eight states. Although new participants were suggested, the group agreed to keep the meeting small and the scope limited to the participants' common challenges and opportunities.

The participants completed a written evaluation of the meeting—what they liked best, what needed to be changed, and what their discussion format preferences were. All in all, the participants were satisfied with the format and, with suggestions for next time, would take part in a discussion again**.** Many agreed that there was not enough time allocated for this meeting, and some suggested another half-day together next time.

About This Document

A collection of challenges and advice from seven of eight of the leading state asset-policy groups, this report aims to document the participants' key points as great advice for emerging coalitions from pioneers reflecting diverse constituents around the country.

Executive Summary

Here are the participants' thoughts and comments, elaborated on in later sections of this report:

- State asset-policy leaders need a forum in which they may talk openly and honestly and put their challenges on the table. This type of candid, self-directed discussion around a small table allows asset-policy leaders to share with and learn from others what works and what does not in order to create new strategies at the state level.

- While national intermediaries play an important role in nurturing state asset policies, resources should be available to support the different work of state coalitions and national intermediaries. More resources are required to continue and enhance state coalitions' championing of asset policies—developing policies, building constituency, perfecting effective messages, and building and fostering the coalition.

Coalition Management

- State asset-policy coalitions need to be state-specific in structure and management.

- Asset-policy leaders have created coalitions that are specific to political circumstances, legislative interest, grassroots support, available resources, and contacts.

Policy Agenda

- Personal relationships forged and fostered are critical to the success of the asset-building policy agenda. Joining outside coalitions and supporting outside efforts have helped foster relationships with other organizations and advocates.

- State asset-policy leaders need to develop messages that connect asset building to the broader policy of moving people from poverty to prosperity.

Communication/Marketing

- Although the overall asset-policy message should be consistent, tailoring messages for different audiences is effective. For example, legislators may respond better to research and analysis of how asset building benefits the entire state.
- For antipoverty allies, the message must be to connect asset building to the broader policy of moving people from poverty to prosperity.

Evaluation of the Meeting

- The participants strongly agreed that crucial to the success of their meeting was in having a small number of participants to allow for openness. The size of the group was large enough to have different perspectives and experiences, but small enough so that open conversation could be held among the entire group around one small table and not in smaller, breakout sessions. The topics were limited to four big areas and the top challenges in each, allowing for more time on the challenges.

- Some participants suggested that the meeting should be slightly longer than one workday and one dinner, perhaps a day and a half, to cover long travel times and to make the most of a workday. Participants suggested spending more time at the end of each session to reflect on the day's discussions, plan action steps, and talk with individual members. The one-workday format allowed little time for reflection and side conversations.

State Asset-Policy Initiatives

The Learning Circle participants summarized their policy initiatives as of the time of the meeting in August 2006 and in the following year. Most members made significant progress on developing coalitions and advancing asset policies.

Arkansas

The Arkansas Assets Coalition started in 2000 after the Arkansas Individual Development Account (IDA) legislation was passed. Since then, the coalition has focused on crafting successful IDA programs across Arkansas through technical assistance and capacity building. In 2006 the coalition worked with the Arkansas Department of Economic Development to use community development block grant (CDBG) funds to support IDAs, gathered and presented data crucial to the future funding of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) IDA program, and created the coalition's website www.arassetpolicy.org, a comprehensive source of information for members, the general public, and legislators.

In 2007 the Arkansas Legislature approved an increase in state funding for IDAs from $550,000 a year to $1.7 million a year. The state funds IDAs by using federal TANF funds. The legislature also passed a matched savings component for the state's 529 college savings plan called the Aspiring Scholars Matching Grant Program. Funding for Aspiring Scholars comes from fees that the state collects from administering 529 accounts. The Arkansas Department of Higher Education has committed to provide $200,000 in fee revenue over the next two years to fund the savings match. A three-member advisory committee that includes a coalition member, Southern Good Faith Fund, will propose a framework for implementing Aspiring Scholars.

California

The Asset Policy Initiative of California (APIC) is a statewide network of stakeholders from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors committed to increasing asset-building opportunities for California's working families. In 2006 APIC completed a Local Asset Poverty Index for Michigan (the index looks at asset poverty by age, race, education, and housing tenure), worked with the New America Foundation to submit six bills on asset building for California, and advocated the passage of two of those bills: allowing Californians to split their state refunds and safeguarding the savings of CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids) recipients by excluding IRAs, 401ks, and 529s from consideration in counting assets.

APIC adopted a strategic plan to focus on a policy agenda within its asset-building framework. The agenda includes policies and strategies to help low- and moderate-income Californians accumulate, invest, and preserve assets. Its two main policy ideas are homeownership and Children's Savings Accounts (CSAs). APIC is organizing a Homeownership Policy Task Force to develop a strategic policy agenda to encourage and increase homeownership for families making less than 75 percent of area median income. APIC is also working to build a coalition in support of a policy to create matched savings accounts for all California-born children. APIC has increased its website functionality to help "move the message." APIC developed the online Asset Policy Action Center, which has information on asset-building legislation pending in the state legislature and can send targeted and timely e-mail for immediate policy action.

Connecticut

Connecticut Voices for Children promotes the well-being of all Connecticut's young people and their families by advocating strategic public investments and wise public policies. Its policy priorities include asset accumulation, increasing financial literacy, adopting state earned income tax credit (EITC), expanding funding for IDAs, asset leverage, implementing a state housing trust fund, asset preservation, supporting state legislation on antipredatory lending, expansion of access to health care, and expansion of state employment insurance.

Connecticut Voices for Children created a state IDA initiative, and a state housing trust fund, and $300,000 to fund housing IDAs. Connecticut Voices for Children preserved and expanded health insurance coverage under the state's HUSKY (Healthcare for UninSured Kids and Youth) program. Connecticut Voices for Children also created the Connecticut Jump$tart Coalition for Youth Financial Literacy and participated in the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative.

Connecticut Voices for Children has again been selected by CFED to partner in the release of CFED's *2007 Assets and Opportunities Scorecard*. As a part of that work, Connecticut Voices committed to preparing an in-depth state-specific report, *Investing in Asset Building in Connecticut* (completed in February), highlighting family asset outcomes in Connecticut and the policy remedies to advance family asset development and protection within the state. Connecticut Voices has also continued to build partnerships with asset-policy leaders to advance a range of asset-building and asset-protection initiatives and, in particular, is focused on supporting efforts by Connecticut's State Treasurer Denise Nappier.

Delaware

In 2006 Delaware's accomplished asset-building initiatives by way of an increase in the minimum wage, the implementation of the Delaware EITC program, the creation of an array of Financial Education Programs across the state, and the implementation of the SEED (Savings for Education, Entrepreneurship, and Downpayment) program by the Boys & Girls Club of Delaware.

In 2007 the Delaware Asset Building Group (DABG) is working to develop a business plan and policy agenda for a group of ten "thought leaders" who will work to increase the number of low-income households served by the state. DABG is also working on two major asset-building initiatives. *First State Save* was launched by Delaware Money School as part of the *America Saves* nationwide campaign, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation in Wilmington is promoting the *Alliance for Economic Inclusion*.

Hawaii

From 2004 to 2006 the Hawaii Alliance for Community-Based Economic Development (HACBED) core asset-policy goals were to adopt a state EITC, reform predatory and payday lending, and support the appointment of a statewide volunteer income tax assistance (VITA) coordinator. HACBED made progress in all of its asset-policy areas. The alliance secured state funding for a VITA coordinator at the Aloha United Way, the state EITC campaign was successful in building strong partnerships and advocacy efforts, and in 2005 the legislature adopted a resolution requiring the state auditor to review the impact of the potential regulation of payday lenders.

The 30 policy recommendations in HACBED's 2007 report, *The Hawai'i Asset Policy Initiative*, served as the basis for the 2007 legislative session that included 14 bills focusing on teaching asset building, helping people save and start businesses, and helping people purchase homes. Two bills were passed: House Bill 928 provides state funding to match federal funds for Section 8 and family self-sufficiency homeownership programs. H.B. 1007 exempts the family self-sufficiency escrow accounts that help families buy homes from benefit eligibility tests.

Illinois

The Illinois Asset Building Group (IABG) is a statewide coalition advancing Children's Savings Accounts and other asset-building policies for the stability and strength of Illinois families and communities. In 2005 IABG conducted outreach with its grassroots partner organizations and, through their feedback, made CSAs a priority as the "big" policy idea. IABG held policy briefings and a policy forum in 2006 to raise awareness of and support for CSAs and the coalition.

In 2007 IABG members decided to pursue the creation of a CSA task force that would explore options, make recommendations, and develop a plan of implementation for CSAs. Members educated policymakers about the benefits of a CSA program, and Governor Rod Blagojevich has signed House Bill 1662. Along with IABG, the Illinois Governor and Treasurer will co-chair the CSA task force. IABG membership has grown to over 150 organizations from 80. IABG members were also active in successful efforts to pass legislation making utility rates affordable, expanding healthcare and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and protecting consumers from predatory mortgage lending.

Pennsylvania

Born from the Governor's Task Force for Working Families convened by Gov. Edward G. Rendell, the Pennsylvania Office of Financial Education was established to increase the availability and quality of financial education in Pennsylvania's schools, communities, and workplaces.

The Office of Financial Education works to help Pennsylvania's teachers incorporate age-appropriate personal finance principles into the reading, math, and other subjects in the curriculum; show Pennsylvania's employers how to provide personal finance tips, tools, and training to their employees in ways that complement their business objectives and boost their bottom lines; and connect existing community-based efforts and help more community-based organizations offer high-quality financial education and counseling throughout the commonwealth.

Participants

Arkansas	Challenges
Michael Rowett Matt Price Southern Good Faith Fund	How do you bring people to the table, how do you get everyone involved to speak as one group?
California	
Stephanie Upp Ben Mangan APIC/EARN Heather McCulloch Asset Building Strategies	How do you get people to buy into asset-building topics in light of current priorities? Need for a solid communication strategy, words and language.
Connecticut	
Doug Hall Connecticut Voices for Children	How explicit does asset-building policy need to be?
Delaware	
Genevieve Marino, YWCA/Task Force for Financial Independence	No real asset-building coalition—how do we structure and develop consensus among constituents?
Hawaii	
Brent Dillabaugh, HACBED Andrew Aoki, 3 Point Consulting	Getting people to participate in advocacy. Developing an asset-building structure that directly engages families and continues national outreach.
Illinois	
Dory Rand, Jami Schlafer, John Bouman Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law/IABG Gina Guillemette Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights/IABG	How do you prioritize asset building in the context of state budget issues, skepticism, and other priorities? How do you involve the grassroots voice in a meaningful way?
Pennsylvania	
René Bryce-LaPorte Office of Financial Education	How do you work with community groups and schools?
National Intermediary	
Jennifer Brooks, CFED	
Host	
Harry Pestine, Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago	

Policy Agenda

Challenge: Building Political Support for Asset-Building Policies

Are there ways to work together to expand resources for working families?

A few participants noted that the personal relationships forged and fostered were critical to the success of the asset-building agenda. One participant noted that joining outside coalitions and supporting outside efforts had helped foster relationships with other antipoverty advocates.

All agreed that if there were any tension among allies, it needed to be managed. The participants said that they needed to develop their message more in order to put the asset-building agenda on the continuum of moving people from poverty to prosperity (see Appendix H for the continuum diagram).

One way to jump into the conversation may be through hot topics such as predatory lending. Begin with asset protection and move to asset building.

“Keep working it even if it doesn’t get through to someone the first time. **Walk the walk—join their networks, too.** Sit in on working groups and be the ‘asset voice.’ [What has] been really beneficial to their case [is] to show how it fits in.”—Stephanie Upp

“Resistance has been from natural allies. **For people [who’ve been] playing defense for so long, they see it as another way to pull the rug out.”**—René Bryce-LaPorte

One participant suggested that tackling two agenda items per legislative session was more time-efficient. For example, the participant said, get behind the things with the most momentum and build an argument that is not a zero-sum game. “This would improve the overall economy”—a message that was gaining traction.

Personal relationships forged and fostered are critical to the success of the asset building agenda.

Challenge: Determining How Broad or Deep an Asset-Policy Agenda Should Be in Light of Coalition Makeup and Political Environment

Participants agreed that, although focusing on three to four bills or policies per legislative session could still help link issues to the broader policy agenda, time was the biggest constraint on advocating on more issues. In one case, a coalition published a policy roster of bills that supported or did not support the coalition's priorities in addition to defining one big policy priority.

Some participants felt that building coalitions was critical to their work in advancing a broad agenda. Others found that starting with specific issues kept people engaged and that when the focus became wider, people tended to stop listening.

The presence of a broad or deep asset policy agenda is likely to be determined based on the political environment of the state.

"Because there is no formal structure in Hawaii, [we] can bring people in on specific issues. If [we] stop talking about assets and talk about something bigger, fewer people will take up the mantle. **Suggest focusing on certain things in the short term so people know where it fits into the bigger vision."**—Andrew Aoki

"Pennsylvania Credit Union Association came up with a product to compete with payday lenders. Because we had a broad agenda, we were able to pull them in as a natural partner. **Because we had a broad agenda, different players can find a place."—**René Bryce-LaPorte

Other suggestions:

- Limit the focus to three or four policies per session. This allows for opportunities to connect issues to the broader policy agenda because submitting testimony and getting down to meet with legislators take a lot of time.
- For policies outside the group's primary focus, there should be a few people engaged to allow advocates to weigh in on important issues.

Challenge: Convincing Legislators of the Value of Asset-Building Policies in Tight Budgetary Times

Does passage of asset-building policies necessarily mean taking funds from other programs?

Illinois participants noted that a "gentleman's agreement" among colleagues was that **no one says, "fund us, not them,"** and, when required, the parties proceed with a unified front.

Participants noted that having data and research available could show legislators how assets and asset-building policies could help the state's economy.

Ben Mangan noted that a legislator had asked him to "compete against himself" regarding whether he should support IDAs or EITC. Mangan noted that both were important and referred to the poverty-to-prosperity continuum.

The Continuum Message

Asset-building policies are consistent with and complement traditional income-support policies. Support for asset policies does not have to result in a loss of safety-net programs. Support does not mean making an either-or choice or a new game. Rather, income-support policies are a part of a continuum helping people move from poverty to prosperity. See Appendix H for a copy of the Continuum of Asset-Building Opportunities by Heather McCulloch.

Communication/Marketing

Challenge: Finding Asset-Building Messages that Resonate

Is there any one "universal" asset-building message that resonates with all audiences, or do you need different messages for different audiences?

All participants agreed that no one universal message for asset building resonated with all audiences. Some participants noted that there should be one consistent message, modified slightly depending on the audience. Some messages work with some audiences and not with others. For example, "gaining access to and protecting the middle class" may appeal to legislators, but many people feel a strong opposition to the term "class."

Another unacceptable term is "wealth gap." Some people do not identify with the term "wealth." Participants mentioned that terms such as "common ground" did not seem to resonate with Democrats, but "fairness" did. Republicans seemed to prefer "personal responsibility." One participant noted that a report on messaging found that leading with "economic productivity," including "fairness," and avoiding "poverty" seemed to resonate.

Other messages that work are those that tell stories and offer insight into how assets affect families.

No one universal message resonates with all audiences. Messages should lead with "economic productivity," include "fairness," and avoid "poverty."

"[**Link] the power of the asset to the family as a life-changing stepping stone.** Behavioral changes come about by telling that story. Delaware Treasurer Jack Markel kicks off every speaking engagement by telling those stories."—Ginny Marino

Here are some messages on which participants seemed to have good feedback:

"One talking point Arkansas uses—**It's not about getting by, it's about getting ahead."**—Matt Price

"'Cycle of prosperity' or cycle of wealth seems to be resonating (I have no proof it is working across the board as a positive message), but is untested."—Ben Mangan

Here are some terms that participants felt were red flags:

"[The term] "class" itself is a loaded word."—Genevieve Marino

"I don't like the "wealth" word. Not being wealthy, I can't imagine what that would be like."—Stephanie Upp

Participants suggested frequently using those messages that work:

"If you're not bored with the messaging, you're not saying it enough."—Ben Mangan

What specific messages have worked or not worked in different communities? Are there strategies that work better for reaching grassroots stakeholders such as individuals, families, community organizers, and community-based organizations?

Participants noted that terms such as "American dream" or "ownership society" do not work as well in some African American communities. Even though these terms are popular with politicians, there is a risk of alienating some people when we use such terms.

Some participants noted that messages for legislators should include research and analysis of how an asset policy, such as CSAs, benefits the entire state.

For the financial sector, messages should be framed to be about potential deposits and investments and the future value of the accounts.

For other antipoverty advocates, the messages need to connect the asset-building agenda to the continuum of moving people from poverty to prosperity.

"[The] challenge is to **find the balance between language that politicians use and the language with which the constituents associate."**—Jennifer Brooks

"Financial institutions are very interested in Children's Savings Accounts because those accounts will mean more investments to them…."—Dory Rand

Challenge: Using Supplemental Information to Support the Asset-Policy Message.

Does anybody have data on the economic benefit of asset building?

Some of the research currently available includes mortgages leveraged from IDA programs and the economic benefit of early childhood education. All participants strongly agreed that, to demonstrate asset policies, we need more research and analysis on the benefits to the overall economy.

Participants noted two programs (Pacifica Community Ventures in California and Marriott Hotel's IDA program in Chicago) in which employer-based asset building accounts for workers resulted in higher retention of employees. The American Dream Demonstration shows the positive results of asset-building policies for families with incomes up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

"[We] want to see figures that **tell businesses that if they host an asset-building account for workers, they'll be able to keep their workers.…** Use it as a job retention policy. Getting employers to do that is difficult. Maybe start with state employees."—René Bryce La-Porte

"From the state's perspective, we can't assume transformations in the way lives are lived can also result in savings in areas like juvenile justice, etc."—Doug Hall

What is the value of stories and how have they helped?

Some participants noted that people remember stories even if they do not remember the facts or figures. However, some felt that individual success stories sometimes failed to connect to the larger, systemic issues. The flip side of a success story may be a tendency to "blame the victim," who has not succeeded, as though the reason is personal failure, not bad public policy.

"Don't focus on the individual because then people think that everyone should be able to do it, and if someone can't then it's just a personal failure. Asset leaders need to do the same sort of marketing research and train reporters on asset building."—Jennifer Brooks

Some people remember stories or the people even if they don't remember facts or figures.

What about getting people you are working with to tell stories to the media?

Most participants agreed that we must have the people tell their success stories since reporters always want to talk to a "real person." **But prep all speakers on how to speak with reporters.**

Challenge: Using Effective and Efficient Communication Vehicles

How do you communicate your message in the best way? Op-ed pages, radio, working with reporters, newsletters, or the Internet? What's working? What's not?

Participants reported positive results with public radio. In California a public radio station came to an asset-policy briefing, began a series of programs on the continuum of moving from poverty to prosperity, and included asset building in the continuum. Later Public Radio International noticed a demand, and the California stories were broadcast nationally. In Illinois, Chicago public radio WBEZ's *Chicago Matters* show covered "Money Matters" and shared stories about asset building, access to mainstream financial services, and IDA programs.

As a result of grassroots research in Illinois, IABG found that many constituents responded more to radio than to brochures.

"One thing that resonated was strengthening community. [**The] preferred communication was meetings and verbal communication. Brochures had limited value."**—Gina Guillemette

What about op-eds or other newspaper articles?

Op-eds were popular with some of the participants for a number of reasons. Op-eds fuel the conversation, especially among legislators.

In some markets, reporters are always looking for additional news to cover, provided that the messages are quick and concise. Participants mentioned that maintaining an acquaintance with reporters was helpful. Reporters read their e-mail, so to put them on your newsletter distribution list is to give them stories to run.

"With some reporters, they'll call back if you've talked to them in the past and they need something. Get on their radar."—Dory Rand

"It is surprising how much reporters read their e-mail. Having a connection helps.… If you are writing on something that is poignant and information they don't have already, getting in is not that difficult."—René Bryce La-Porte

"Once you have one success, reporters feel like you're less risky."—Ben Mangan

What about press conferences?

Participants noted that press conferences required a lot of time but were not always effective. If the topic is hot, such as payday lending, or features children, such as the student-run high school bank branch, press conferences can draw media attention.

"Press conferences are not effective in California. It's hard to get the press to come, even when the very popular mayor is involved."—Ben Mangan

"We succeeded with coverage of the CFED Scorecard with legislative leaders; it was a slow news time. Getting them out there is the thing. Once they're out, they've got to cover it. Press releases also won't do it; they can ignore them."—Michael Rowett

If the topic is hot, like payday lending, or features children, press conferences can draw media attention.

What works for events with legislators?

Two participants noted that we must frame the event and educate legislators. Find a way to balance the legislator's message with the key theme of the event.

"With busy schedules, [legislators] might welcome having some tips on what to cover in their comments. You have to know whom you're inviting to your event…. They'll say what they think is right sometimes, whether it is right or not…."—Michael Rowett

Are there other types of channels to get messages out?

Idea from Delaware!

Working with the advertising section of the newspaper in Delaware has been very effective for the Delaware coalition. Advertising and marketing executives at the newspaper wanted to charge nonprofit entities for advertising space. The nonprofit entities suggested that the paper should look at covering issues such as personal finance instead of corporate news stories in its Business Monday section. Personal finance articles got the attention and advertising from financial institutions. Changing the focus of this section to personal finance also allowed the nonprofit entities to get their concerns such as CSAs and IDA programs covered in articles.

Do you feel positive about the effectiveness of the website for the coalition as a communication vehicle?

All participants agreed that having a website is useful as a communication vehicle, provided that it is updated regularly. The website is a great repository of research, publications, and event information and allows the interested to read more, become a supporter, and sign up for events. Keeping the site current does require time and attention.

Some participants use RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds as a way to stay current on what's going on around the nation on asset policy. RSS is a syndication format that allows consumers and journalists to have news constantly fed to specific websites instead of searching for it.

Harry Pestine advised all to have a link on their sites to Profitwise, the community affairs publication from the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago.

Linking to other state coalitions' websites can build the network of coalitions as well.

State and national asset policy websites:

www.community-wealth.org - Wealth building strategies for America's communities.

www.assetbuilding.org - The New America Foundation

www.nga.org - National Governors' Association

www.arassetpolicy.org - Arkansas Assets Coalition

www.povertylaw.org/advocacy/community-investment - Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

www.assetpolicy-ca.org - Asset Policy Initiative of California

www.illinoisassetbuilding.org - Illinois Asset Building Group

www.CFED.org - Corporation for Enterprise Development

www.chicagofed.org - Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago

www.frbsf.org - Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco

www.ywca.org/site/pp.asp?c=djISI6PIKpG&b=284783- YWCA Delaware

www.moneysbestfriend.com/ - Pennsylvania Office of Financial Education

www.hacbed.org - Hawaii Alliance for Community-Based Economic Development

www.ctkidslink.org - Connecticut Voices for Children

Coalition Management

Challenge: Getting—and Keeping—Key Stakeholders to the table as Part of a Statewide Asset-Policy Initiative

Do you need a coalition to advance a policy agenda? Who are the key stakeholders needed to be at the table?

The participants agreed that whether a coalition was required depended on the policy agenda and the goals. Some coalitions seek diversity in the types of organizations or sectors that members represent; this is the case in Illinois. Another participant noted that legislators needed to know that the policies you are advocating come from the grassroots.

In other cases, individual groups take on an issue because a coalition would be either unmanageable or too resource-intensive. The participants agreed that the creation, structure, and management of coalitions were state-specific, depending on the political climate, legislative interest, and grassroots support.

For example, some organizations have people in the governor's office championing an idea and putting resources behind it.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to state asset policy work.

Participants stated that coalitions were largely advocates and that there was a lack of service providers. Although convincing new members to be stakeholders is sometimes cumbersome, we must encourage new stakeholders at the table. One participant noted that there was no accountability for members to make progress and maintain the momentum of a successful first meeting or report.

Some participants noted that coalition members sometimes stayed focused on existing programs, such as IDAs, and interest diminished when the coalition moved on to other or broader asset-building goals.

"In Pennsylvania, getting people to the table is relatively easy because it's the state and it's easier to pull together a coalition…. The Cleveland Fed and the PAOFE website have been very helpful to get people together."—René Bryce La-Porte

Pennsylvania and California were two of the state groups with websites at the time of the meeting.

APIC manages a statewide initiative and formulates policy based on an IDA program. APIC has been successful in creating a strong task force but has had difficulty recruiting new people into leadership to broaden outreach.

"How do we 'sell' what we're doing and make it work?"

The participants noted that removing the specific focus from areas such as IDAs has helped broaden the agenda. Using reports that frame asset building and show how policies and programs fit within the asset-building frame also increases awareness, understanding, and interest in broad asset building and coalitions. In Delaware the asset-building frame started with the broader discussion beyond IDAs to look at the state's current efforts and what new policies would be meaningful to workers. Another participant noted that when the movement was steered toward asset building, people who were not necessarily typical allies came on board.

For state-asset coalition leaders who work in a distinct nonprofit organization, separating the nonprofit organization from the group or coalition working on the broad asset-building agenda is helpful. A coalition under a different name, with a different logo and branding, and a different website helps keep the conversation separate. One example is the separate website and logo of APIC and EARN, a nonprofit organization in California. Stephanie Upp suggested breaking the connection between APIC and EARN and the possibility of taking IDAs off the table to talk about something bigger.

In one state, groups of IDA providers, business leaders, and other members began with "what are we doing already," then moved to "what would make a difference to, say, a poultry worker, etc." In order to get an agenda together, they broke into subgroups where each group worked on an item on the agenda.

The challenge is how to steer policies that help support low-income families toward asset building.

"The state-asset policy work is integral to community work, but there are people who can come on board who believe in asset building but are not bleeding-heart liberals."—Doug Hall

Look outside typical coalition members.

Challenge: Keeping Key People Engaged (and the Momentum Going) over Time

How do you develop a clear, focused policy agenda with diverse interests at the table?

Pennsylvania has an Office of Financial Education with a clear, focused agenda contained in a report from the governor. In other cases, participants noted that reports were produced but not often used. In California and Illinois, suggestions on the policy agenda have come from the community or grassroots level. In California the community makes suggestions or adjusts suggestions and becomes the community voice to the steering committee. The California participants noted that this new approach needed to be evaluated for timeliness and effectiveness.

How do you deal with numerous, conflicting agendas and with tension among stakeholders?

In Illinois the coalition did community-based focus groups to determine the one big priority area. At each legislative session the coalition creates a policy roster to follow bills that support IABG's seven asset-building priorities. Arkansas has limited its focus to three major issues.

California has key goals in place: legislative policy and changing public opinion.

However, communication challenges make changing public opinion difficult. California noted that the first step was to have a conversation to clarify the differences between services and assets. Because a broad-based coalition has not been successful there, the suggestion is to move toward fewer decisions.

Coalitions must find the balance between pure consensus-based decision making versus effectiveness and saving time.

Pennsylvania suggested that the key to a successful coalition was independent funding.

Many participants noted that bringing in legislators was a delicate component of building constituency. Although having legislators and policymakers at the table can advance your policy agenda, some legislators are not as effective as others. Sometimes the most interested legislators are not necessarily in leadership roles or may not be reelected.

Challenge: Managing Different Points of View Regarding Policy Priorities and Specific Policies and Tackling Tension

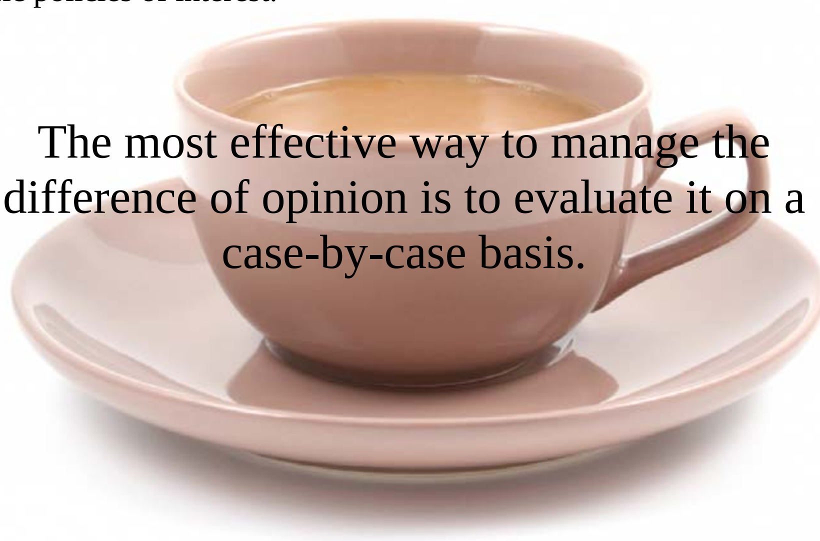
Do you need a consensus at all times?

A participant from Pennsylvania noted that having the governor on board and using all internal funds helped in building consensus. Other participants noted that consensus building had not worked in their states. All participants agreed that consensus was needed on the bigger vision—the broad asset-building agenda—but on a specific issue the need for consensus depended on the issue and the group or coalition supporting it.

All participants spoke of the challenge of having different points of view regarding policy priorities and specific policies. Many participants agreed that the most effective way to manage differences of opinion was to evaluate them on a case-by-case basis**.** Participants from Illinois said that the coalition did not endorse bills but rather only educated member organizations and noted whether the bill or policy supported or did not support IABG's priorities. Each member organization is allowed to choose whether to endorse and advocate specific policies of interest.

Doug Hall of Connecticut could relate to the "case-by-case" idea because of his own experience in an organization that has been around for ten years. Hall said: "If you have a bunch of folks who want to work together on one thing, bring them together and do the best job you can. Spend some time thinking of who you wish was there but wasn't. **But like a sports team coach—look around, see who you have, and do the best you can."** Hall believes that smaller ad hoc groups, often funder-driven, can take away from the cohesiveness of efforts of larger groups.

In Illinois and California the coalitions have steering or coordinating committees, which take the recommendations of the members or subcommittees and then make the decisions. In Illinois the committees and the staff make suggestions and bring them to the coordinating committee.



The most effective way to manage the difference of opinion is to evaluate it on a case-by-case basis.

First Meeting Leads to the Formation of the Learning Circle

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Challenge: Finding a Venue that Allows for Open, Candid Conversation About Problems and Hears Creative Solutions

What did you find most useful about the meeting? What did you find least useful?

Most of the participants found meeting as a small group with a focus on a limited number of topics a welcome break from typical conferences. Participants found the "idea sharing" among the group, the frank conversations with knowledgeable people, and the openness of all parties among the most useful aspects of the meeting. **"**Talking openly and frankly with other people who are struggling with the same issues was useful," one participant said.

Learning from other state leaders about challenges and strategies through open and candid discussion

Participants had varied responses about what was least helpful, including a lack of focus on state-driven initiatives, the discussion being geared toward nonprofit entities, and needing more time to share tools and strategies. A couple of participants noted that the marketing and communication section was not as helpful as the others. (See Appendix F for the evaluation form and Appendix G for the summary of participants' responses to each question.).

"Each state has different circumstances, so some marketing experiences or suggestions are not necessarily applicable," one participant said.

Who decided who would be invited to this meeting?

The attendees invited were those highlighted in Heather McCulloch's July 2005 report and two CFED Scorecard partners (Connecticut and Arkansas).

Is anyone interested in meeting again as a group? How should we move forward?

All participants expressed interest in meeting again, and in January 2007 APIC hosted the second Learning Circle meeting in San Francisco. Participants included representatives from the original eight states and Texas and Washington. APIC generously gave participants Local Asset Poverty Index data for each state represented. The data consist of numbers of households in asset poverty at the county level.

The participants will meet again for the third Learning Circle in September 2007. Michigan will host this meeting. Participants agreed that in order to move forward as a group of asset-policy leaders, securing funding for future meetings was imperative.

Appendices

Available in enclosed CD-ROM:

A. Participant List
B. Preliminary Questions for Participants
C. Facilitator Questions
D. Meeting Agenda
E. IABG Grassroots Report
F. Meeting Evaluation Form
G. Meeting Evaluation Results
H. Continuum of Asset-Building Opportunities
I. Learning Circle PowerPoint Presentation
J. Timeline of Meeting Tasks

Notes