



FUNDING THE NEXT GENERATION

ON BECOMING A BUDGET CHAMPION FOR CHILDREN

Getting Started Down the Road to a Sustainable Local Funding Stream

By Margaret Brodtkin

[It's a Matter of Money: Why Budgets are So Important](#)

Budgets are the tangible statement of a government's priorities. And when it comes to our children, youth and families, we don't "put our money where our mouths are." Much of what we want to provide all our children, i.e. what we know works to improve their health and well-being, costs money. The United States' spending on children lags way behind many other industrialized countries. And California is at the bottom of even our country's low standing - now ranking 41st compared to other states in the well-being of its children. (Kids Count, 2013)

You can't be an advocate for children, or a leader in a children's movement without being engaged in the struggle about where we put our resources. The first step in getting sustainable funding streams for children, youth and families is to become a budget champion – or, as I often say: a budget "warrior." Why "warrior?" – Because when it comes to money, even a tiny amount, there is always controversy. That may be why so often the field of children's service providers shies away from budget advocacy. We are nice people – we don't think of ourselves as having to play the hardball game of budget politics. Yet, if we are going to do justice to children, we must delve in, and help our colleagues, allies, and most importantly, young people and parents themselves become champions for a fairer allocation of resources.

[Laying the Groundwork with a Children's Agenda or a Children's Bill of Rights](#)

One logical place to start is to develop and articulate the community's aspirations when it comes to children. Many people around the country and around the state have gone through this process – often many times. It usually looks like this: An organization or coalition takes the lead – usually a children's advocacy organization, and guides the process of getting widespread community input about what people want for their children. This is done in a variety of ways, including focus groups, surveys, conferences, presentations to diverse groups to promote discussion, community meetings, and so on. Through a facilitated consensus-building process, about 5 – 10 goals or aspirations are decided upon. In Fresno, for instance, The Children's Movement has the following goals: Communities and families ready for children; Nurturing parents and caregivers; Children ready for school; Healthy, safe and secure youth; Engaged and connected youth; Youth prepared for life.

The agenda-building process can coalesce the community and gain official support for the goals, which as you move along becomes what you can build on. It also provides a vehicle for the beginning of a

TIP: Don't spend too long laying the groundwork. It must lead to real action, or you will lose momentum.

mobilization. But make no mistake. An Agenda or Bill of Rights is rhetoric. It must be followed by a serious re-allocation of resources, or else it remains words on a page.

Check out my website for examples of Children’s Agendas and Bills of Rights, as well as resolutions by Boards of Supervisors to support them. www.margaretbrodtkin.com/projects

Understanding Budgets

Many people are scared of budgets, and feel they are not capable of understanding them. Nonsense. Budgets are all structured and enacted pretty much the same way. There will be a revenue section and an expenditure section. Revenues are often divided into General funds, over which the City Council or Board of Supervisors have discretion and usually come from taxes, licenses, permits, fees, charges for services, and other sources; and Special funds, that are designated for specific purposes, and often come from specialized taxes, fees, and state and federal grants and revenue streams. Most of the time what you want to get funded will have to come from the General Fund. But sometimes, you may be able to fit it into a Special fund. This may take some stretching, but is often an easier prospect. For instance, a youth employment program at the airport can come from the funds designated solely for the airport. An easy thing to look at in trying to understand budgets are the changes in funding from year to year. For

TIP: Find the budget gurus (like current or retired budget staff) in your community (inside and outside government) and have them walk through the budget and related documents with you.

instance, you might learn that a program you care about is cut, while revenue or other items are up.

Don’t forget: Budgets are public documents. They must be passed by a publicly elected body (in most cases). Therefore they should be in a form you can understand. However, they are not organized by programs or age groups. So you will likely need some

help identifying where specific children’s programs are in the budget.

Most budget processes also follow a similar pattern. In the Fall, administrators (e.g. Health Department Director) develop their department budgets; in the Winter, the top executive (e.g. Mayor) develops the community-wide budget; and in the Spring the legislative body (e.g. Board of Supervisors) has public hearings and ultimately passes a budget. Often budgets are enacted without much public or media scrutiny. Many times few people attend budget hearings, and there are particularly few people who care about kids who attend. That is why your ability to have an impact is sometimes surprising.

The best way to understand budgets is simply to go to the budget meetings. You will quickly get the hang of it – who has an impact, who doesn’t; who is sympathetic with your issues, who isn’t. Pretty soon you will start to question where decision are coming from – and you will start going back in time

TIP: Become an advocate for an accessible and understandable budget format and public briefings. You can change the budget process while you’re being a champion for kids. Think like this – if you don’t understand it, you’re not alone. It is the people’s government – it’s your government’s job to make sure the taxpayers know where their money is going.

in the process – When did a Department head recommend a specific program? Why did the mayor include an item in her budget? You will learn just how many places there are forums where budget-related issues are addressed.

[Learn where the money is for kids – as compared to everything else.](#)

It will not be obvious where the money is for kids. But you will be able to figure some things out. Generally speaking, children’s programs and services at the county level are embedded in health and social services departments. At the city level, they are often in Recreation and Parks, libraries, and community development. Public safety has both county and city funding streams. Make friends with folks inside government who work for kids. Many have a stake in seeing their programs more adequately funded, and will help you understand what you are looking at.

BIG TIP: Get help. Have an elected introduce legislation requiring your official finance staff to document spending on children for you. It’s a modest political move for a politician, and the professionals will do a better job than you. When developing a resolution requiring finance staff to identify where funds for kids are, include identifying what is local vs. state and national; what is prevention and early intervention vs. what is rehabilitation; and what local officials have discretion over. (SF’s resolution is on the Funding the Next Generation web page.)

Documenting where the money is for kids can be kept pretty simple, or become very complicated. I have seen groups spend years trying to understand this at a level of detail that does not lead to action, and just consumes time. Get as much information as you need to be credible, and to help you make your case. One very important piece of information is the relative amount a community spends on prevention vs. late intervention (like incarceration).

[Building a Children’s Budget Coalition](#)

Being an effective budget champion is best done in coalition with others. Often the first “ring” of a children’s budget coalition are children’s service providers. But as you build the coalition, it is important to not be limited by the “usual suspects.” Let’s not forget the best example of this – the alliance between agri-business and advocates for low income children and families to support Food Stamps and school

lunches. It is also important to remember that in advocacy, there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. The Chamber of Commerce may be a friend one minute on youth training – and not the next on a “soda” tax. You may want to recruit some “name” people as allies – to give your cause visibility and clout.

Build the Coalition on the work you did with the Children’s Agenda or Bill of Rights. However, once you start talking about real money, turf issues come into play. Plug away at it. Try to get everyone to rally around common values and the desire to see more money for kids over time. One of my best memories is hearing a colleague who worked on child abuse prevention saying that until she joined the Children’s Budget Coalition she didn’t understand that she also needed to have a stake in the funding for children’s books for the public libraries. Sometimes it takes work and training and reassurance that what they are doing is legal in order to get colleagues who work in the children’s field to engage in something that feels very unfamiliar. Try to avoid

losing people because one person or organization seems to be in charge, and seems to be self-serving. Have the coalition commit to transparency and shared decision-making, and mutual agreements about leadership. Sometimes there is an obvious leader – sometimes not. The leading organization or person must be a highly trusted, as well as skilled and energetic person, whose goal is to empower the group.

[Becoming a regular: Showing up is half the battle \(actually more than half\)](#)

After a while in the budget arena, you will start to understand just how many forums there are where decisions are made and input is possible. I remember the first time I went to the Social Services Commission, which oversaw our social services department. No one from the public had EVER attended a meeting when the budget was discussed – long before it was submitted to the Mayor, who then months later submitted it to the Board of Supervisors. After that, we learned to weigh in on the budget instructions the Mayor gave the Department heads before they even started preparing their budgets.

[A good place to delve into the budget process: Preventing budget cuts](#)

This is where many people’s involvement in the budget process begins (and unfortunately often ends). If you have never organized to prevent a program or opportunity for kids from being cut from your local budget, it’s a great warm-up for more far-reaching efforts. First of all, a lot of people are pretty motivated to do something – they once had a service they will no longer have. The clients of a program are the natural spokespeople, and they can be very powerful, and can come out in numbers. It is a good time to start looking for and training new grassroots leadership. It is often easy to interest the media in a story – there is an obvious photo or video feed (of the popular after school program that is being cut) and great anecdotes about the benefits of the program. Making the case has all the important elements: a moral imperative, outcome statistics, personal stories, proven need, powerful messengers.

TIP: Being a budget champion is a year-round process. As soon as one budget is passed, the following year’s budget is being created. And sometimes weighing in really early can have the greatest impact.

Often the challenge of preventing budget cuts is learning about them soon enough to actually do something effective. This is where allies inside government come in handy – they can give you the 411 on the down-low. It is also why it is important to stay glued to the budget process year-round. As soon as you get a whiff of something bad happening, start making noise, and most of the time it works to go public at that moment. It’s easier to make cuts behind closed doors – public exposure of the plan can often be your best tactic.

[Your first pro-active budget campaign](#)

Now you are ready to get something NEW added to your local budget. Your children’s budget coalition must pick its first issue or issues. This is good practice. Using the following criteria, go through a deliberation process. (You can use the “Worksheet for picking a budget issue” to help guide your discussions – on my website.)

Here are some criteria for selecting a budget issue:

- Improves lives
- Feels important to the general public
- Unifies your coalition – builds their sense of power
- Rallies a critical mass of supporters
- Big enough to matter, small enough to win
- Creates visible and easily understood results.
- Engages young people and parents
- Can be enacted by clearly identified decision-makers to whom you have direct access
- Has a cost-benefit or pocket-book impact
- Has a potential funding source (ideal, but not necessary)
- Builds your organizational capacity – leadership, momentum for next campaign.

TIP: Think of budget advocacy as a series of campaigns. Sometimes you win; sometimes you lose. When you lose, analyze what happened, and be prepared for the next time around.
NEVER GIVE UP!

Using the criteria above will not necessarily result in the top priority of coalition members – that will come later when you have created the political capital and momentum from your earlier efforts. What to advocate for is a practical decision – a cross between something that reflects your values and needs and political realities.

Start by knowing exactly what it is you want and exactly what it will cost – put a budget number on the proposal. After all, this is about being a budget champion. And know who and how many children, youth or families your proposal will serve. Put this information into a compelling fact sheet, that includes a specific description of the proposal, the need that will be met, and the potential benefits to both the participants AND the community. Include, if you can, a cost-benefit analysis.

Next step is getting out the word about what you want in the budget. Here you can use all means possible. The media is a powerful tool, and social media creates new opportunities (especially in rural and large geographic areas) to share information, rally supporters, and communicate with decision-makers. Talk to reporters and editorial boards; hold press events; learn to talk in sound-bites and tell personal stories. Posters, brochures, petitions, community meetings, house parties, guerilla theatre – all create a steady and unrelenting drumbeat.

Take your proposal to the decision-makers. Notice that this step did not come first. Lots of people make that mistake – deciding just to ask their ally in county government to make something happen. Why put your allies in that position and why give them so much power? Why not build the momentum and community demand first? Then, when they say yes, there are so many more political points for them. In fact, with all the visibility and momentum you

TIP: It's always about money, but it's never about money. It's about what the money is for. ALWAYS lead with what the community will get as a result of money spent.

are creating, they may come to you and offer to help. At this step, parents can be messengers. This could also entail some fun direct action like a children's march around your city hall or county government building. Of course it will entail many meetings and hearings.

An important part of any campaign is to track what happens and communicate that as widely as possible. This is the best way to hold elected officials accountable. Who helped? Who voted for which way? Once elected officials learn that that's what you will do, and that decision-making is no longer a private affair, they will be much more likely to support what you want. And here, gratitude is as powerful as public exposure of a failure to support. A great example: San Francisco advocates took a full page ad out in the west coast edition of the New York Times thanking the Mayor for investing in child care. The following year he more than doubled that investment!

[It's time for a comprehensive Children's Budget](#)

You are now ready to create a Children's Budget for your community – if you choose to adopt this strategy.

The early San Francisco Children's Budget is a great example of a Children's Budget with ALL of the following elements:

TIP: Numbers Count! It's simple: the more the better - the more people who attend a hearing, the more letters that get written, the more people who speak with their elected official, the more endorsers, etc. And kids count – they are powerful advocates on their own behalf, and babies create a powerful visual impact at an event promoting a budget request, a reminder of what it's all about.

- Needs of children – You can use existing reports, data from your city or county, information on waiting lists – there is much data out there and no need for original research. This can be as simple as a page of bullet points to a comprehensive report.
- Cost-benefits of children's services – There is a great deal of information about the dollars that can be saved through prevention. Use it. Add a few pieces about the specific costs of your Juvenile Hall and emergency room, and you have data that is customized for you community.
- Policy directions recommended – Know what policies and values your specific ideas reflect, and state them (community-based care, prevention, focus on family, etc.) They become a community roadmap for years to come.
- Specific and comprehensive set of budget proposals – This is the core of your document – NOT the data or analysis of the city budget. This is the hard part – the part that requires months of community input and negotiations. What EXACTLY do you want - what programs and opportunities. They can be categorized many ways – our categories were: A Supportive Neighborhood; A Stable Home; A Healthy Life; A Future. A common mistake is lack of specificity. Elected officials need to know what you are asking for.
- Analysis of current expenditures and gaps – This is where you rely on the help of the experts, as described earlier. If you must do the math yourself, keep it simple. Note big picture trends – most importantly, the amount spent on intervention vs. prevention. These are the most powerful facts.
- Report card on previous budget commitments – This too can be simple, but it is a great accountability strategy, keeps everyone knowing that you are paying attention.
- Potential sources of funding – This is one of the most powerful things I have ever done, but it is not for the faint of heart. It will win you points with the media and policy-makers

(maybe), but it also comes with costs. Example: Use potential cost savings in the Fire Department for career training for youth. (You can see the political risks involved.)

- Names of numerous community endorsers – a key element.

Note: The San Francisco Children’s Budget was only 57 pages, and it was nothing fancy – copied in the office. It was the unique content and the accompanying organizing that made it powerful.

With a compelling Children’s Budget in hand, you are ready to use all of the strategies and tactics described in this document. This can become the basis of your campaign for an ongoing dedicated revenue stream.

[Something good WILL happen.](#)

If you do even some of the things describe above, SOMETHING WILL HAPPEN. It may not at first be what you hoped for or even expected. That is why persistence is one of the major virtues of creating social change, along with flexibility. It may start with something as modest as an agreement to set up a task force. But even that will be something to build on, something to learn from. Sometimes there will be an unintended but beneficial consequence like a change in the budget process, making it more accessible for years to come and for all community members representing many community needs. Sometimes your efforts will result in finding money from unexpected sources, or being the basis of a successful state or federal grant. The results can always be the grist for a report card on decision-makers, or the next election. Or your growing coalition being more determined than ever. It was actually frustration with our final Children’s Budget’s lack of success which led to the motivation to campaign for the Children’s Fund, which now guarantees \$50 million a year for kids. Be assured: something WILL happen to put you on your way toward creating a local sustainable funding stream for children, youth and families.

[The San Francisco Budget Story](#)

The strategies and tactics described above are dramatically illustrated in San Francisco’s budget story. I encourage you to read it. It makes these ideas come to life, and it ends with the important lessons learned from the San Francisco experience:

- Children’s advocates can play budget hardball better than anyone.
- Kids are their own best sales pitch.
- The media is a great microphone – some say “it doesn’t happen unless it’s in the media.”
- Advertising and budget advocacy have similarities.
- Drama and conflict get attention, and sometimes that’s what you need.
- Proposing ways to re-allocate funds can carry a high price, but have a big payoff.

TIP: On playing hardball.

Speaking truth to power is an important part of being a budget champion. It must be done in a way that is culturally appropriate for your community – whether it is done with a bull horn or on tip-toes. Hold on to your integrity. Don’t back down. And then.... Know when to compromise – a delicate balance that your coalition will decide together.

- Meetings with politicians may – or may not – be helpful.
- Reports don't create change – using political muscle does.
- Inside the system allies are important to find.
- Legislators are often more responsive than the executive branch of government.
- Budget advocacy is a year-round process.
- Be “that group that will never go away.”

IMPORTANT TO NOTE: The ideas in this document are just that – ideas for you to consider. Pick and choose what makes sense in your community – every community culture is different and every coalition or network has its own capacity, motivation and analysis of what will work.

THIS IS AN ART, NOT A SCIENCE.

A FINAL THOUGHT: Being a budget champion for children requires many skills, but important skills are those of an organizer. There are many resources available about organizing. One of my favorites is “Organizing for Social Change: Midwest Academy Manual for Activists.” Check www.midwestacademy.com

The most relevant (and also wonderful) book for purposes of organizing for a local dedicated funding stream is “Sidewalk Strategies: A Practical Guide for Candidates, Causes, and Communities” by Larry Tramutola. www.sidewalkstrategies.com