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The Impact of Research Evidence as an Advocacy Tool in Housing Trust Fund Campaigns: Lessons Learned from Three Case Studies

Presented to and Funded by:
The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

February 2013

The Study

In early 2011 the Center for Community Change Housing Trust Fund Project in partnership with the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation embarked on an initiative to demonstrate the impact of evidence—in this case, research that connects the availability of safe adequate homes to family health, educational opportunities, and supportive environments—on the success of campaigns to advance housing trust funds. The evaluation focused on three campaigns to which the Housing Trust Fund Project is providing technical assistance during the period of early 2011 through fall 2012: Kalamazoo County, Michigan; the State of Arkansas; and Louisville, Kentucky. Though the size and the scope of the evaluation limits the ability to make broad conclusive statements, there are several important findings worth elevating to assist housing advocates and research professionals utilize research evidence more effectively as a tool for significant policy change.

The evaluation initiative would not have been possible without the cooperation and participation of affordable housing/homeless advocates partnering with the Housing Trust Fund Project: the HOMES (Housing Opportunity Make Economic Sense) coalition and the Michigan Organizing Project (Kalamazoo, Michigan); Housing

Arkansas (Arkansas); and Citizens of Louisville Organized and United Together (CLOUT) and the Louisville Affordable Housing Trust Fund board and staff (Louisville, Kentucky).

During the initiative, the Project provided direct technical assistance to the campaigns to promote the integration of research-based evidence into the communication strategies developed and employed by campaigns to promote investment in affordable housing. This work included identifying examples of research evidence, providing summaries of the research, and developing suggestions for talking points to connect the research to the campaigns. The Project also provided support to each campaign that included assistance on the development of a communications strategy, of values-based message frames through public opinion research, and a curriculum to train supporters to use the message frames.

To conduct the evaluation, the Housing Trust Fund Project contracted with Innovation Network, a firm specializing in advocacy evaluation. The evaluation included document review, interviews with key leaders from the housing trust fund coalitions and local opinion leaders, surveys of coalition members and allies, and media tracking and analysis.

The Housing Trust Fund Project of the Center for Community Change operates as a clearinghouse of information on housing trust funds throughout the country and provides technical assistance to organizations and agencies working to create and implement these funds. The Center for Community Change is a national nonprofit which helps low-income people build powerful, effective organizations through which they can change their communities and public policies for the better.

For more information, please visit our website: www.housingtrustfundproject.org

Summary of Key Findings

This research initiative was undertaken by the Housing Trust Fund Project of the Center for Community Change, with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, to demonstrate the impact of evidence—in this case, research that connects the availability of safe adequate homes to family health, educational opportunities, and supportive environments—on the success of campaigns to advance housing trust funds.

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- Kalamazoo County, Michigan;
- the State of Arkansas; and
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- (1) Local research has a greater impact than national research or research from other geographic locations.
- (2) Research evidence can be used as a tool to expand coalitions and build alliances by connecting housing to other issues with an advocacy constituency.
- (3) Advocates are more likely to effectively use research as an advocacy tool when the research is presented so that it is accessible and easy to use.

The following pages provide a brief look at how the three campaigns contribute to these findings.

The Campaigns

Each of the three campaigns participating in the evaluation were focused on securing a source of dedicated public revenue for an existing housing trust fund. The details of these campaigns strongly shaped the utilization and measurable impact of research evidence. Each campaign differed in significant ways and none of the three campaigns concluded during the evaluation period.

Kalamazoo County, Michigan: The goal of Kalamazoo campaign is to pass a property tax millage as a ballot initiative, which entailed securing a majority vote from the Kalamazoo County Commission in order to appear on the ballot. In February 2012, the Kalamazoo County Commission voted against the inclusion of the housing millage on the ballot by a vote of 9-7; nonetheless, the campaign for the millage continues.

Arkansas: The goal of the Arkansas campaign is to secure a dedicated funding source in the 2013 or 2015 General Assembly, the state legislative body consisting of 35 Senators and 70 Representatives that convenes every other year.

Louisville, Kentucky: The goal of the Metropolitan Louisville campaign is to secure an increase to an existing insurance premium tax with a majority vote from the 24-member Louisville Metropolitan Council in March 2013.

I. Local research evidence is more powerful than national research

The increased impact of local research is certainly not a surprising finding. In the Housing Trust Fund Project's work with state and local housing trust fund campaigns throughout the United States, the traction of local data and information has been compelling and obvious. In the three campaigns included in this evaluation, the availability of local research was a factor in the ability to capture the attention of elected officials, decision makers and the media.

In Louisville, the Metropolitan Housing Coalition (MHC), a key ally in the campaign, has been producing local reports on housing need and the impact on inadequate housing choice for more than a decade. In addition to an annual State of Metropolitan Housing Report, MHC has produced studies on childhood asthma, poverty and housing (*Out of Breath*), the lack of housing and childhood homelessness (*Where Do You Live?*), and student mobility and affordable housing (*Moving ON*). With a dearth of research evidence at the disposal of the Louisville campaign, advocates were both comfortable and familiar with using data as an advocacy tool. Furthermore, because MHC is a trusted resource for housing data with a long track record, both elected officials and the media had an awareness about the data that predates the evaluation initiative. In its evaluation, Innovation Network noted, *"Local research evidence produced by the Metropolitan Housing Coalition has permeated with advocates and is regularly employed. Having local data has proved helpful to the campaign, as local data is often resonant with local policymakers"*.

While not every coalition has the luxury of having a key ally generating local research evidence, the Arkansas campaign illustrates another promising model. Housing Arkansas was able to partner with Children Health Watch and Arkansas Children's Hospital (Little Rock) to coordinate the release of local research evidence on child health and educational outcomes as related to housing instability. Children's Health Watch is a national leader in research on contributing factors to the well being of children. The study, part of MacArthur Foundation's *Why Housing Matters* initiative, focused research on five cities, including Little Rock, to better understand the effects of housing insecurity on families. An explicit goal of the study was to provide policy makers with research with a local/state context for informing policy. Housing Arkansas and Children's Health Watch had a series of exploratory phone conversations in early 2012, quickly identified that their goals aligned, and adopted Housing Arkansas's values-based



A REPORT ON LOUISVILLE KENTUCKY'S HOMELESS CHILDREN
AND THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING CRISIS, METROPOLITAN
HOUSING COALITION

message frames into the report language. The coordination between Housing Arkansas and the Children's Health Watch culminated in television and radio coverage of a press event announcing the study that featured Arkansas Children's Hospital (Little Rock) staff and the Chair of Housing Arkansas, and ended citing that a solution is state funding for the Arkansas Housing Trust Fund. In the lead up to the 2013 session, Housing Arkansas members were hand delivering the report to senators and representatives during legislative visits.

In the Kalamazoo campaign, there was very little local research available to the advocates. Though advocates had local data about the numbers of homeless children attending schools and the annual homeless count, the research that described the impacts of homelessness were national, or from elsewhere. In the evaluation, Kalamazoo advocates cited the lack of local data as one reason the members of the County Commission seem to dismiss citations as irrelevant. Said one advocate: *"It's like they would say, 'That's not Kalamazoo...' So national research to them made no difference. It's like a kid saying, 'That's not me.' And you can tell them, 'that's what happens to children in general,' and they say 'That's not me. I would be different than that.'"*

II. Research evidence can be a tool to build advocacy coalitions and alliances

In the campaigns in Kalamazoo and Arkansas, the advocates used research evidence and message frames as tools to build and expand support for their housing trust fund campaigns. The experience of the Housing Trust Fund Project is that a key component in successful housing trust fund campaigns is the strength and breadth or reach of a coalition. Therefore, tools that build a coalition should merit significant attention. Research evidence that connects housing to other issues such as a health, education, transportation, homelessness, the well-being of veterans, and aging has great potential to serve as a bridge to unite housing advocates with constituents engaged with related issues often impacted directly by the lack of affordable housing. Bringing in new and unexpected voices to a coalition or as an ally in a campaign can influence the decision making of an elected official or decision maker. Furthermore, many issues have an existing, organized advocacy constituency that can potentially engage in and broaden the campaign.

In both the values-based messages the HOMES coalition developed and with the research evidence it highlighted, they emphasized the importance of a home for children, with a focus on educational outcomes. Whereas for some the members of the Kalamazoo County Commission, this emphasis did not seem to have an impact, HOMES was able to garner important support from advocates for child and education in the months leading up to the February 2012 County Commission vote. In December 2011, HOMES leaders met with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison for

Kalamazoo County Board of Commissioners should allow vote on homeless program (viewpoint) at: http://www.mlive.com/opinion/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2012/02/kalamazoo_county_commission_sh.html

.... Homelessness is too great a problem for too many children in the county for us not to attempt to address it in some systematic way in the relatively near term. We are aware that a strong coalition of advocates with whom we are sympathetic has proposed a specific ballot initiative. While we do not advocate any specific initiative, we appreciate the county commission's working with this coalition and others in the community to finalize and approve a ballot initiative as quickly as possible that will help address the needs of our homeless children....

Signed by School Superintendents throughout Kalamazoo County, Michigan

the Kalamazoo Public Schools, a key leader among advocates for homeless students, with examples of research evidence connecting housing and educational outcomes. In January 2012, HOMES got a huge boost of support when the superintendents of the eleven school districts in Kalamazoo County teamed up to write an Op-Ed in favor of the Local Housing Assistance Fund.

Similar to the HOMES coalition, Housing Arkansas utilization of values-based message frames emphasizing the importance of a home for children opened doors for deeper relationships and alliances with advocates for children. Certainly, Housing Arkansas' relationship with Children's Health Watch was strengthened by the clear issue alignment. In addition to the coordination around the release of the study, staff from Arkansas Children's Hospital (Little Rock) and Housing Arkansas have had strategic conversations on other ways to leverage the voice of the medical community to make the case for housing. Housing Arkansas's messaging also captured the attention of Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, an experienced and influential organization in the state legislature, with a leader from Arkansas Advocates joining the Housing Arkansas steering committee directing the housing trust fund campaign.



Elementary school teacher, Katherine O'Bryan, talks about the impact of homelessness on her first-grade students during a candlelight vigil to support funding the Kalamazoo Local Housing Assistance Fund.

III. Research evidence needs to be accessible and easy to use

As important as many of the findings are in research evidence that connects the availability of safe adequate homes to family health, educational opportunities, and supportive environments, the style and format with which the evidence is presented can create barriers that limit their use by advocates. Often, research is written and explained for an audience of peers: fellow medical researchers and academia. That style can be challenging to read and distill for lay people. Considering that many coalitions have limited resources to identify research appropriate and timely to a campaign, presenting research in a manner that is easier to understand will likely increase the ability of a campaign to incorporate the research.

The role that the Housing Trust Fund Project played for the participating campaigns to identify, analyze and summarize research evidence factored greatly in the ability of the campaigns to incorporate the evidence. In its evaluation of the Kalamazoo campaign, Innovation Network noted: *The research evidence summaries and values-based messaging technical assistance were provided to HOMES—they were not capacities embedded within the campaign. These assets proved valuable in the HOMES campaign.*

In most of the instances where the Housing Trust Fund Project provided the campaigns with examples of research evidence, a plain language summary and suggested talking points that aligned with the values based frames of the campaign were also developed. Assuming that a goal of research evidence is to influence better and more equitable housing policy, more consideration needs to be given to making future studies and reports *user-friendly* to advocates, using plain language to summarize the main findings. In addition, building communication skills that connect this evidence to proven values-based message frames that work for promoting affordable housing appears to enhance the impact. Innovation Network observed: *There was consensus across the campaigns that values-based messages were essential to opening the door with decision makers. A number of interviewees spoke to the ability of values-based messages to find common ground with individuals who were otherwise part of the opposition or undecided. . . Without the messages, the research was unable to sway audiences.*

A model for producing advocate-friendly research evidence is Children's Health Watch. Prior to its collaboration with Housing Arkansas, Children's Health Watch had already



A Safe, Stable Place to Call Home Supports Young Children's Health in Arkansas

Children's HealthWatch Policy Action Brief
July 30, 2012

Children's HealthWatch researchers analyzed survey data collected from caregivers in Arkansas between 2005 and 2011. In the sample of 5,000 families with children under age four, Children's HealthWatch found that about 51% of families were housing insecure. Housing insecurity is associated with fair or poor health, and greater risk of developmental delays in children in Arkansas. For example, Children's HealthWatch found that children in households who moved frequently are 34% more likely to be underweight as compared with children in stably housed families.

established itself as a leader making its research accessible to advocates and easy to use in policy advocacy. Once Housing Arkansas and Children's Health Watch established their mutual self interest—for Housing Arkansas securing dedicated revenue for the state Housing Trust Fund, for Children's Health Watch using the research to promote public policy that would increase the access to healthy affordable housing for low income children—the staff at Children's Health Watch embraced the opportunity to make the report as effective as possible to the campaign. Children's Health Watch not only infused the Housing Arkansas message frames into the report, but incorporated a message frame into the report title: *A Safe, Stable Place to Call Home Supports Young Children's Health in Arkansas in 2012.*

Conclusions

Developing a deeper understanding of how to increase the effectiveness of affordable housing/homeless advocacy is a key question for all organizations engaged in advancing public policy to ensure everyone can live in a secure affordable home. This study enabled the Housing Trust Fund Project to engage our partners in the field and conduct an *on the ground* assessment of what works and how with regard to integrating research into communication strategies as part of a campaign. The Project was able to identify some key elements in how to effectively employ research findings as part of an advocacy campaign.

While advocates were able to use research findings as part of their campaign strategies and discovered its effectiveness in the media and with elected officials, there were conditions that appear to impact its use.

These include: the extent to which the evidence could be connected to the specific jurisdiction in question and the need for refined talking points to translate the details of the research into quickly accessible points. The opportunity for research evidence to build and expand coalitions was both exciting and driven with potential. This finding, alone, creates an avenue for bringing advocates together across issues to build more power to advance needed progressive public policy.

The Housing Trust Fund Project believes that bringing affordable housing/homeless advocates together to explore productive avenues for working across issues could be a valuable next step in this process. The Project would suggest focusing on our partners that have experience with communication strategies, employing research evidence, and engaging in campaigns. The Project also believes that supporting public opinion research (focus groups and polling) on attitudes regarding why housing matters in selected states could provide profound evidence for additional avenues to strengthen affordable housing/homeless advocacy.



CLOUT leader Christopher Kolb makes the case for the Louisville Affordable Housing Trust Fund on WAVE 3 News In a television interview. Chris effectively utilized a values based message frame to articulate the urgency of dedicating revenue to the Affordable Housing Trust Fund. The impact of values based framing on shaping affordable housing public policy is increasingly evident and prime for further exploration.

The Housing Trust Fund Project of the Center for Community Change appreciates the leadership and support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. We deeply thank our partners for their participation: the HOMES coalition, Michigan Organizing Project, Housing Arkansas, CLOUT and the Louisville Affordable Housing Trust Fund board and staff. Finally, we want to thank the Innovation Network for their constructive evaluation and analysis.