

**Grassroots Advocacy:
Empowering Providers to Affect Policy Change for Infants and Toddlers**

Interviews with:

*Daphne Naleilehuaokaala Cole, Executive Director,
Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance
Patty Kelly, Better Baby Care Campaign State Coordinator,
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A critical part of being an effective advocate is being able to give others the tools and opportunities to become advocates themselves. As grantees of the Better Baby Care Campaign, Daphne Cole and Patty Kelly of the Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance not only work hard to be a voice for babies and toddlers in their communities and state, but they also work to inspire those around them to do the same. ZERO TO THREE had the opportunity to talk with Daphne and Patty to learn more about their grassroots advocacy strategies in Tennessee.

What prompted you to get involved in state and local policy issues for infants & toddlers?

Daphne Cole: We are an organization of family child care providers caring for children in their homes, and our focus has always been on what our providers need to best care for the children. However, as we have grown and strengthened our relationships with the State of Tennessee and other early childhood organizations, we gradually made a paradigm shift. We've evolved from focusing on meeting our providers' needs to also meeting children's needs in general, especially infants and toddlers.

On a personal level, I've become more involved in infant and toddler policy issues because I have four new grandchildren, and I wanted to be able to help my daughter understand how important it is to meet the developmental needs of each of her babies.

Patty Kelly: I also have three young children of my own and live in a military community. The number of infants in the community is quickly growing. We have hundreds of infants born here every month! While there has always been plenty of child care for preschoolers and school-aged children, infant and toddler care was left on the back burner for quite some time. But now it is really booming, and I want to be sure that we are doing what is best for the babies.

As a state grantee for the Better Baby Care campaign, how have you engaged new stakeholders in early childhood issues?

Daphne Cole: We really consider the stakeholders in Tennessee to be our partners, and we've worked to involve them in much of our work. For example, we have worked closely with the Department of Human Services and wanted the Commissioner to see the work we have been able to do with their support firsthand. She attended our Annual State Family Child Care Conference and Better Baby Care event last year, where she

was just amazed at what the caregivers have accomplished. Throughout the year, she continued to stay abreast of our work. We also work closely with our “infant-toddler champion” within the Department of Human Services. Anytime there is a conversation about Pre-K, she is right there to remind people that education doesn’t start at age four!

We’re also working to engage other community partners in infant-toddler issues. Our partnership with Chattanooga Success by Six prompted them to include an advocacy piece about infants and toddlers in a new DVD they have developed about best practices for children. Several of our providers have reached out to local hospitals to help them understand that infants and toddlers need good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences. One of our providers sent our resources to a local hospital administrator, and he was so excited about the materials that he involved other hospital staff and colleagues in learning more about infant-toddler issues.

We’ve become more vocal because we now have a broader purpose. We’ve stepped over into the global community, and we’re looking out for all our babies now.

Patty Kelly: For a long time in Tennessee, everything was geared around preschool. Now that we are focusing on infants and toddlers, our providers have opened their eyes and are excited to get new partners involved.

What new and innovative things have you been able to do in Tennessee to promote advocacy in the early childhood community? What have you learned about the advocacy process that has helped improve the lives of families with young children?

Daphne Cole: Last spring at our family child care conference, we convened our first-ever provider advocacy committee. We discussed the impact one person can have on so many people’s lives if they just speak up. That message must have really hit home, because during that meeting, the group decided to have a day at our state Legislative Plaza to meet their elected officials.

The providers were extremely excited about the idea of an Advocacy Day and they made sure it happened! Our efforts began about three months in advance of the advocacy day, with providers calling their legislators to personally tell them we would be visiting. Even though some legislators wouldn’t be in the office because it was election time, our providers didn’t give up and made appointments with the elected officials’ staff.

Since we planned to do the visits on a Friday, many providers closed their daycares and traveled to Nashville for the day. We ended up with 56 providers there that day! When they first arrived, they were apprehensive and afraid that they didn’t know what they were doing. Some of them still thought of themselves as just babysitters. But after their meetings, everyone was so empowered and excited about being an

advocate. I wish you could have been there to see all these light bulbs turning on. It took the trip to Nashville for them to make the connection that they can have an impact on local and state politics.

When we got back home, I received several phone calls from providers who had come with us to Nashville. They are now talking about infant-toddler advocacy amongst themselves, making calls about issues, sending emails to their legislators, and attending town hall meetings. We were so pleased with the result.

Patty Kelly: We also did a lot of advocacy work in Clarksville when an issue came up that was going to have a big impact on family child care in that community. I found out about it only five days before a formal hearing was to take place, so we took action quickly. We gathered every single provider – over 100 locally – and we sent mass emails to find out what was going on. And it worked. We found out that the local commissioner thought that family child care providers were not inspected or monitored enough. Our providers are inspected at least six times per year, so we attended the hearing prepared to provide testimony. With some of our partners, we presented 5 speakers on behalf of this issue and plenty of resources for the commissioners and mayors to take home. I got calls that weekend from some commissioners wanting to discuss things as they read through our materials. Because of our testimony and materials, the issue was clarified for the commissioners. I also decided to invite my commissioner to my home to experience my daycare firsthand. It was definitely an eye-opener for him. Until then, he never truly understood family child care.

What do you think are some of the next steps for Tennessee and your organization in expanding the infant-toddler field?

Daphne Cole: We don't want to hurry to our next step, because we want to build on what we have and really empower our providers to feel comfortable being an advocate. It has many layers to it, but I think making our providers and membership strong is a critical first piece. It's a life changing moment for a lot of us to become advocates – we're not just focusing on those lives we touch every day, but on *all* babies.

But long-term, our next step is to get parents more involved and have the families go through the whole process that the providers have gone through. I think that's part of the link that has been missing. Yes, there are lobbyists speaking on behalf of infant and toddlers and we have advocacy groups, but when we can get the providers and parents involved at the grassroots level, we can make a huge impact. We want our providers and parents to pay attention at election time and find out who is going to be the best person that can speak for their children. Providers, parents and grandparents need to understand that they can be involved in this process, and that their life experiences are important and valuable. I think for that to happen, parents and providers need to know how the public policy process works, and they need to feel

like there is someone there to support them. In the end, we are a global village, and we need to support our families as a community.

Daphne Naleilehuaokaala Cole is the Executive Director of Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance (TFCCA) and Program Director for TFCCA's Family Child Care Peer Mentoring Program Project T.O.P.S.T.A.R. (Tennessee's Outstanding Providers Supported through Available Resources). Before becoming a family child care provider in 1980, Daphne worked in sewing factories for five years. She is a licensed family child care provider and is accredited by the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC). During her more than 18 years as a provider, Daphne was a founding member of a local family child care support group and the Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance (TFCCA). She is the former president of the Middle Tennessee Daycare Association, and currently serves as the Regional Delegate on NAFCC's Executive Committee, and the Family Child Care Co-Representative on the Tennessee Association for the Education of Young Children (TAEYC) board. Daphne is a native Hawaiian and has been a Tennessee resident for more than thirty-three years. She and her husband have three daughters, two sons-in-law and five grandchildren. Daphne has served the children of Tennessee for more than twenty-seven years, and she feels honored to work closely with Tennessee's highly trained family child care professionals.

Patty Ashley Kelly is the Better Baby Care State Coordinator for the Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance (TFCCA). Patty has worked in family child care for over twenty four years, and owns and operates Patty's 24Hr. Family Child Care in Clarksville, TN. She is accredited by the National Association of Family Child Care (NAFCC) and has obtained a Child Development Associate degree and an Associate degree in Early Childhood Education. She will graduate in May 2007 with a Bachelor's degree in Business Management from Bethel College. Patty is the treasurer for the TFCCA, a mentor for Project T.O.P.S.T.A.R., founder and president of the Clarksville Area Family Child Care Providers Association, and founder and member of The F.O.C.U.S. Family Child Care Support Group. Patty has lived in the Clarksville, TN/Ft. Campbell, KY community for 21 years. Her experiences as a military spouse give her special insight into the needs of infants and toddlers in the military community. She and her husband have six children, including three who are adopted. It is because of her children that Patty works in the child care field.

This interview was conducted by Yolanda Norton, ZERO TO THREE. The article was written by Yolanda Norton and Elizabeth DiLauro, Field Coordinator, ZERO TO THREE Policy Center, and published on April 30, 2007.