

Loud and Clear: Advocates Raising Their Voices for Babies & Toddlers

In celebration of the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network's one-year anniversary, this article features the advocacy stories of our very own members. Each advocacy story is unique and offers all of us inspiration to be the strong voice that babies and toddlers need us to be.

This first year of the Policy Network has been quite exciting, particularly because significant numbers of infant-toddler professionals are participating in the public policy process for the first time. With 5,000 members, the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network is shouting loud and clear that we are a voice for babies! So keep reading, and discover how your fellow Policy Network members have recognized the important role we all can play in improving public policies for infants, toddlers and their families.

D. Russell Lyman, Massachusetts – Becoming a Voice for Babies

After a long career as a clinical psychologist providing treatment, then designing and implementing programs for seriously emotionally disturbed children, Russ Lyman became a Leadership Development Initiative Fellow at ZERO TO THREE. Prior to, and during, the Fellowship application process, Russ began to think, "why aren't we finding these children earlier?" His thoughts were further amplified by his experience as the parent of a son in need of early intervention services. His son might not have been identified if his mother had not been an early intervention nurse. Neither their pediatrician nor child care setting had seen a problem.

During his fellowship, Russ decided to leave his position as Vice President of a developmental and mental health agency to devote his career to becoming a voice for babies. Russ is on the road to becoming an advocate for improved systems of care for our youngest and most vulnerable children.

As part of his fellowship experience at ZERO TO THREE, Russ received training in communications, strategic frame analysis, and public speaking. He also gained valuable advocacy skills, learned about current legislation, and became familiar with key facts about infant-toddler policy issues. He visited Capitol Hill twice to meet with his district's Senators and Representative. He has come to understand how to frame his message in a way that appeals to the values and beliefs of listeners. Hence his message has changed from "Early identification and infant mental health are problems – Do something about it!" to "Babies and young children deserve the best possible chances for growing up healthy, happy and productive. We have a special opportunity to help by ensuring that every infant and young child is screened early and periodically for developmental and social-emotional concerns."

Most importantly, Russ learned that relationships – on Capitol Hill, at the State House, and in the community -- are everything. By attending committees and advisory boards on infant and early childhood mental health, he has made valuable contacts with knowledgeable and like-minded colleagues. They have helped him gain visibility and connections, enabling him to advocate at the Massachusetts State House, Rate Setting Commission, Governor's Commission on Children's Mental Health, and most recently at "Young Minds Matter," a statewide summit on early childhood mental health. Russ also learned that field experience and data are powerful.

Disseminating information through articles and presentations (especially national ones, such as ZERO TO THREE's National Training Institute or the Annual Research Conference in Children's Mental Health) have also been effective and exhilarating ways to get his message out.

Becoming a ZERO TO THREE Fellow led to a transformation in Russ's professional life. The Fellowship's Leadership Development Initiative gave him the support and strength to become a Voice for Babies. ZERO TO THREE helped him develop confidence that he can be a leader for change. As Russ has said, "I plan to be a ZERO TO THREE Fellow and a Voice for Babies for life."

Anne Milder, California – Becoming a Voice for Homeless Children Aged 0 to 5

As a first-year Master of Social Work (MSW) student at the University of Southern California, Anne did not expect a school requirement to turn her into an advocate. But it did. She enrolled in the MSW program to become a practitioner working with infants, toddlers, and their parents. The MSW program required all first-year students to select a specific homeless population in Los Angeles or Orange County and conduct policy analysis and advocacy in support of that population. At first the requirement seemed unrelated to her goals, until she discovered that homeless children ages 0 to 5 are the most commonly overlooked group among the homeless. Anne had found her area of focus.

Anne was the only student in a class of 250 that chose to focus on the 0-5 age range, and her research soon uncovered the reality that few policymakers were focusing on very young homeless children either. At the time she began her analysis, a number of Los Angeles County's programs for very young children had not specifically addressed issues related to homeless children ages birth to five. In addition, she began to realize that the legal definition of homelessness determines who is counted, who is eligible for services, and how monies are distributed. Anne found that the legal definition of homelessness varies widely across different federal laws and is currently the subject of political debate. She connected with advocates for homeless children and youth, who provided her with information that helped clarify the issues. Anne discovered that what is at issue is not so much the number of federal definitions, but the limitation of one particular definition that is widely used – the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homelessness. According to the HUD website, "[g]enerally speaking, homeless individuals and families are those who are sleeping in places not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, and abandoned buildings, or those who are sleeping in an emergency shelter as a primary nighttime residence."

Initially, the HUD definition sounded perfectly reasonable to Anne. What she learned, however, is that it excludes many homeless subgroups and disproportionately excludes families and children. Unlike the education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act, the HUD definition excludes those who are living with relatives or friends (often called "doubled-up"), those who are "couch surfing" (moving from one relative's or friend's home to another), and those living in motels or hotels because they lack other options. Therefore, the HUD definition excludes a number of families who choose not to live on the streets.

Anne's research into these issues is now resulting in advocacy action. She started advocating in Los Angeles County for homeless children ages 0-5 to be included as a separate category in the

next homeless count. In doing so, Los Angeles County will better be able to track the number of young homeless children and provide developmentally appropriate services to them. Anne is also advocating that a broader definition of homelessness be used in the next count, substituting the McKinney-Vento definition for the HUD definition. She has been invited to write about her work in essays which will be published in Bruce S. Jansson's upcoming social advocacy text, *Becoming an Effective Policy Advocate*. She hopes that the essays will influence other social work students' research and professional lives, underscoring the need for advocacy.

What began as a school requirement is now leading Anne in exciting new directions. Working to improve the lives of young children and their families can take many forms, and Anne now knows that her work on behalf of children 0 to 5 means being a policy advocate as well.

Wynne Busman, Virginia – Becoming a Voice for Infant-Toddler Child Care

Wynne has worked in family child care since 1979, first as a child care provider and later as a child care specialist and provider mentor. She currently serves as the Associate Director of Infant/Toddler Family Day Care (ITFDC), a Virginia-based nonprofit organization founded in 1983 that brings families together with their network of experienced and professionally trained child care providers. The organization's nurturing program provides care and early childhood development to children beginning at six weeks of age and beyond.

Not long ago, a member of the ITFDC board of directors encouraged the staff to learn more about advocacy. Wynne is concerned about children in sub-standard child care, families unable to access adequate child care subsidies, and the lack of a consistent system of child care, and she wanted to explore avenues for how to address these issues. At the suggestion of her board member, Wynne became involved in the state's child advocacy organization, Voices for Virginia's Children. She thought she might be able to address some of these critical infant-toddler issues through advocacy, so she signed up to participate in the Policy Pre-Institute at ZERO TO THREE's National Training Institute in November 2005 to learn more about advocacy and public policy for infants and toddlers.

Wynne was excited about visiting with her members of Congress as part of ZERO TO THREE's Policy Pre-Institute training. But along with excitement came nervousness about taking on this new challenge. Wynne's nerves got the better of her, and she came very close to leaving the training during the first break. She decided to push herself beyond her comfort level though and give it a chance. After arriving on Capitol Hill, she promptly got lost. She did not let that stop her – after Wynne found her way, she had successful meetings with legislative staff in both Senator's offices and in her Congressman's office. At each visit, she felt more comfortable in her role as an advocate. The experience was so positive that Wynne later attended a Capitol Briefing on "Economic Benefits of the Nation of Quality Pre-Kindergarten" in May 2006 and met her Congressman's aide again. She was gratified that the aide remembered her and their discussion of infant-toddler issues.

This year, Wynne was responsible for inviting political leaders to the annual Infant/Toddler Family Day Care Provider Appreciation Day to help bring critical attention to the need for professionally educated child care providers. As a result of attending the Provider Appreciation Day, Virginia Delegate Ken Plum invited Wynne to participate with him in a Reston Comcast

Cable video program discussing early childhood care and education. Wynne once again pushed herself beyond her comfort zone in order to bring valuable information about child care to the Northern Virginia community.

Wynne is now very involved in working to expand the role of the Infant/Toddler advocacy committee and participates in community-based groups on diversity and child care licensing. She is active in Voices for Virginia's Children, and works with other Northern Virginia child care experts to lead an advocacy effort to increase funding for the child care subsidy program across the state of Virginia. Recently, 1900 children in Fairfax County were at risk of losing early care and education services because of changes to federal policy and the way child care subsidy funding is allocated in Virginia. Wynne emailed 350 families in their child care system and asked them to contact their local supervisors to express their concern about child care for low-income families. The collective group of advocates, called "Team Subsidies," spoke on behalf of children at the September 11, 2006 Fairfax County Board of Supervisors meeting. In response, the Board of Supervisors directed county staff not to disenroll any children from subsidy programs until they could discuss report findings at a subsequent meeting.

This has been a very exciting year for Wynne. She never saw herself in the role of an active advocate, but "the opportunity given to me by ZERO TO THREE last November was truly a turning point in my life." Wynne plans to continue her advocacy efforts during the upcoming Virginia General Assembly session to support a long overdue budget amendment to increase funding for the child care subsidy program across the state. She realizes how important it is for each of us to speak up and be heard about the issues that are meaningful to us. In particular, children cannot speak for themselves – it is up to us to speak on their behalf and let each of their voices be heard, and she intends to continue to be "A Voice for Babies."

Linda Elento, Hawaii – Becoming a Voice for Early Intervention & Children with Disabilities

Linda Elento is a strong voice when it comes to young children with disabilities. The mother of a son with Down's Syndrome, Linda is taking her role as a voice for babies seriously by advocating for legislation to expand early intervention services for children with developmental disabilities in Hawaii. She contacted those who are familiar with the public policy process in Hawaii and became active in proposing legislation, writing resolutions, and providing testimony at both the Hawaii state legislature and the Hawaii Board of Education. During the most recent legislative session, Linda worked with state lawmakers to introduce legislation that would allow children with developmental disabilities to receive early intervention services for two extra years, rather than automatically shifting them into a special education preschool they might not be ready for at the mandatory age of three. Although the bill did not pass, the subject matter was included in the Early Childhood Taskforce Act.

Now, Linda is preparing for the next legislative session and new opportunities to educate policymakers about the services and supports needed by young children with disabilities and developmental delays. She developed a set of advocacy strategies for herself, including reviewing existing laws and regulations, becoming familiar with the interests of legislators on key committees, introducing herself to her members of Congress and their staff, developing relationships with policy staff in the Governor's office, keeping abreast of relevant issues in the

media, and meeting with state agency staff. Linda recognizes that she needs to be in this for the long haul, and with her son in mind, she will continue working to pass legislation on behalf of infants and toddlers with disabilities in Hawaii.

Laleisha Peterson and Bahar Hashemi, Washington, DC & Boston, MA – Student Doctors Raising Their Voices for Babies

Medical schools across the country are teaching their students about the importance of brain development in the early years of life and its impact on later success. For two students at George Washington University Medical Center, the true impact of early brain development became apparent when they began doctor-patient interactions with parents and their infants and toddlers. As medical students, they realized how much their work with very young children impacts this critical period of development. Laleisha and Bahar were determined to make a positive difference in the lives of families with infants and toddlers, and so they decided to advocate for the best interests of their very young pediatric patients, a patient population which relies on others to look out for them.

These two future physicians saw a role for themselves in advocacy and contacted Docs For Tots to find out how they could cultivate their skills as advocates for very young children. Their determination led them to become founding members of Student Docs for Tots (SDFT), with the vision to empower medical students with the skills and knowledge necessary to become doctors who advocate for children.

About 50 George Washington University Medical Center students are now involved with SDFT. The student group brings successful advocates from the community to speak to medical students, organizes events to help local organizations, and works to link medical students to other advocacy groups. Whether students are interested in impacting policy, volunteering, or starting their own community projects, the goal of SDFT is to provide them with the tools and resources necessary to impact the lives of the patients with whom they interact. In addition, by giving students a venue to work together as advocates, this opens the door for them to become more socially conscious as they continue throughout their medical careers.

Laleisha and Bahar are now pursuing Master's degrees in Public Health (one at George Washington University and the other at Harvard University), but their legacy lives on. SDFT is motivating medical students to advocate for young children on one campus, and there is hope that the program will grow to include other medical schools across the country. With efforts like this, perhaps there will be a new wave of medical students working outside the boundaries of the clinical walls to be a voice for babies and toddlers.

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