



Session 3C: What Are Other States Doing?

Moderator: Heather McCulloch, Consultant to APIC

Panelists:

- Bob Agres, Executive Director, Hawaii Alliance for Community Based Economic Development & Waiwai Asset Policy Initiative of Hawaii
- Shelia Maith, Managing Director, Policy and Leadership Development at Fannie Mae Foundation
- Dory Rand, Supervising Attorney, Sargent Shriver Center on Poverty Law & Illinois Asset Building Group

SUMMARY OF TOP THREE ISSUES THAT EMERGED:

Asset policy initiatives in different states have much to gain from sharing information about:

- Engaging legislators, business, and community leaders
- Messaging
- Policy ideas and strategies
- Engaging the community

CHALLENGES:

- Developing targeted messages that resonate with different audiences
- Engaging community residents in a meaningful way

OPPORTUNITIES:

- Use administrative, not legislative, channels to create policy/program changes

NEXT STEPS:

- Bring local government into the discussion
- Develop short-, medium- and long-term policy strategies

DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

The discussion that took place in the session entitled, “What Are Other States Doing? Statewide Asset Policy Initiatives,” centered around **three main topics: the origin, the specific policy goals, and the advocacy strategies of other statewide asset building movements across the nation.**

Panelist Bob Agres contributed insights he gained from his experience building a statewide movement in Hawaii. Panelist Dory Rand shared the perspective of an advocate who had succeed in pushing for asset policy changes in Illinois and is moving forward with an ambitious policy agenda. Panelist Sheila Maith contributed insight from her experience working with legislators in Washington as well as her thoughts behind why organizations like Fannie Mae have begun to focus on state, rather than federal, policy change.



The Origin of Statewide Movements on Asset Building

Two central influential forces in the creation statewide asset building movements seemed to surface in many of the states that the group discussed. The first was the presence of a thought leader that brought the concept of asset building to the fore in each state. In Hawaii, for example, it was the academic Michael Sherraden's visit to the state that seemed to crystallize the existing efforts to address local poverty on a grassroots level into a movement to transform policy around asset building. In Illinois, a local foundation president brought people together for one year to examine asset building policy. In Pennsylvania, the State's Banking Secretary led progress in the state's asset preservation work, adding eight new staff members to enforce existing predatory lending laws.

Available funding, either for a particular government policy or for the creation of a policy advocacy program, emerged as the second force that seemed to most influence the direction of current statewide movements. Sheila Maith explained that the fiscal crisis on the federal level made the state-level approach to policy change seem more opportune, and considering the potential for state-level change to influence federal change the Fannie Mae Foundation could see the long-term value of such policy work. Bob Agres pointed out that their particular organization's funding stream, which came from service contracts for the provision of financial education and organizational capacity building (check with Bob), rather than from grants for policy development, freed their organization to tackle policy issues from a new angle. He also mentioned that the work around tax-credits for Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) had failed miserably because of the lack of resources for promotion. Dory Rand explained that her organization was able to use available funding to reach out to different communities and build bridges between different interest groups.

Asset Policy Goals

The discussion also included the specific asset policy goals of other state movements.

Illinois: In Illinois, asset policy advocacy was focused on eliminating asset limits for government assistance program eligibility and creating retirement savings accounts.

Hawaii: In Hawaii, asset policy advocacy had centered to some degree on the creation of a state Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and expanding tax credits for IDAs.

Both Hawaii and Illinois are working to create a more expansive asset policy agenda for 2006.

Session participant, Alison Tom-Meer (check spelling) asked for some discussion of existing policy work around employer-based asset building. Sheila Maith pointed to the Metropolitan Housing Commission's work to build a constituency for future policy



advocacy related to employer assisted housing. Dory Rand mentioned a program called Employer Family Care.

Strategies for Policy Change

The Session discussion then turned to concrete strategies for changing policy. Some of the strategies suggested are summarized below.

Goal Setting: Sheila Maith suggested that setting short-term, medium and long-term goals can help to build a coalition's momentum before it attempts to drive major policy changes.

Administrative Policy Change: Dory Rand emphasized the importance of working for administrative policy changes in addition to legislative policy changes. For example, training DHS supervisors on asset building in Illinois bolstered the efforts to eliminate asset limits, which eventually occurred in Illinois as an administrative rather than legislative change.

Working with Banks: Bob Agres pointed to the power financial institutions have to influence legislators. Some confusion emerged among session participants on the limitations banks faced when funding IDAs because of self-dealing laws.

Working with the Governor's Office: In Illinois, the Governor's office has played an important role in highlighting the role of asset building in the fight against poverty, through appointing an asset building task force, and through a state poverty summit.

Include local, not just state, legislators: Frank Parra emphasized the importance of linking with local governments, because many times local governments are charged with the task of implementing new state policies.

Messages for Legislators: The group discussed a variety of messages that they had found to work when speaking with legislators.

- Explain how your policy change will positively affect the lives of children
- Make the issue easy to understand
- Point to success of similar programs in other states
- Include legislators in draft review process
- Suggest no-cost, low-cost solutions
- When reaching out to a bi-partisan audience, stick closely to topics that emphasize shared values.

Create different strategies for different legislators: Bob Agres suggested that approaching a legislator directly works best with those legislators who are typically "on the same page," with your organization. On the other hand, reaching out to particular legislator's



constituency to build grassroots support may be necessary *before* contacting those legislators who are not typically “on the same page” as your organization.

Expand outreach beyond legislators: As was demonstrated by asset building movements in Hawaii, Illinois and Pennsylvania, an influential thought leader can have a powerful effect on policy change or policy enforcement.