

## **BEING PREPARED PAYS OFF FOR ARKANSAS HIPPY PROGRAM**

In 2000, the Arkansas affiliate of Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (“HIPPY”), a 501(c)(3) charitable nonprofit headquartered in New York, hosted HIPPY’s annual conference in Little Rock, Arkansas. As 600 delegates from across the country gathered, word spread like wildfire through the conference hall that Arkansas’ Governor was about to slash funding for early childhood education programs. Situations such as this pose the question: Is it better to be lucky or good? Arkansas HIPPY, refusing to accept the narrow limits of the question, brilliantly chose “both.”

Sponsored in Arkansas as a unit of the nonprofit Arkansas Children’s Hospital, Arkansas HIPPY was “good” because for years it had been working with other nonprofits to develop relationships with legislators. For example, HIPPY had been (and remains) an active member of different children’s advocacy groups in Arkansas, such as the Kids Count Coalition and the Invest Early in Education Coalition. So while it had been advancing its mission by explaining to legislators and the general public the importance of early childhood education, it also had been earning trust with lawmakers and partners.

The collaborative nature of working with other children’s groups can be traced back to 1986, when Arkansas HIPPY joined the new U.S. network of HIPPY programs. The Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters program strives “to prevent academic underachievement of children when they enter school by increasing the degree and variety of literary experiences in the home.” HIPPY works with parents one-on-one in their homes or in parent group meetings on a regular basis (normally 30 weeks) to show parents how to provide school-readiness skills to their three, four, and five-year old children.

Like so many other early-childhood programs, HIPPY is labor intensive and requires a significant investment of money. Studies show the tremendous return on investment for early childhood development programs. Despite that evidence, in April 2000 the Governor of Arkansas proposed serious funding cuts to early childhood programs.

That’s when “lucky” kicked in. With HIPPY members from across Arkansas already in Little Rock at the conference, it was much easier for them to race across the street to the Capitol to start calling on their contacts to counter the threatened funding cuts. And with HIPPY members from across the country recognizing they soon could be suffering similar fates in their own states, they eagerly joined the cause to show their support for their Arkansas colleagues in opposing the cuts.

HIPPY members and friends, working with various Arkansas early childhood coalition members, blanketed the Legislature contacting the many friends, allies, and contacts they had cultivated over the years. And they reached out to their relationships across the state so folks back in their hometowns could contact their legislators.

If HIPPY had not had an active network in place, then their lobbying efforts might have been unsuccessful. Or if HIPPY had not already understood the issue and process, then it might have wasted valuable time to get up to speed. And if the national meeting had been in another state that year, then HIPPY would not have had an instant army capable of dashing across the street to oppose the severe budget cuts. However, HIIPPY had done its work in advance, it was prepared, and it did enjoy a stroke of good luck that aligned hard work with a golden opportunity. Accordingly, the proposed budget cut got defeated.

### Shared “Secrets” of Success

When asked to share the secrets to their success, Barbara Gilkey, Arkansas State HIPPY Director, was quick to point out: “It was not only me or HIPPY, but lots of other people involved.” Other than “seizing the moment,” Barbara professed that “we still can’t explain” how they got the funding restored, but listening closely to Barbara’s responses reveals there were several key reasons for their success, including the following:

- Pre-existing relationships with lawmakers.  
When last minute legislation gets introduced, it’s usually too late to start going around introducing yourself to lawmakers. Late in the session, legislators will be tired and patterns will have been established, with loyalties and relationships set. So arriving at their doors with no history or credibility is tough. Arkansas HIPPY had been working with legislators for years, so they knew legislators – and more importantly – the legislators knew them.
- Pre-existing relationships with external allies.  
Great wisdom exists in the old adage: ‘there is safety in numbers.’ Your odds of winning increase substantially when you have more people on your team. So build coalitions. As Barbara emphasizes, “It’s absolutely essential to identify your partners.” Then, she advises to keep everyone informed. “Make sure the partners are all on the same page with the same consistent message that is both short and to the point.” Also, don’t be afraid to reach out to invite others to partner with you. HIPPY surprised some by working with business leaders, yet they understood the need to educate a strong workforce for tomorrow.
- Enlisting help from internal network of allies.  
Arkansas State HIPPY – while housed centrally in the Arkansas Children’s Hospital – enjoys a vast array of community contacts across the state with approximately 40 local sponsors, including school districts, education cooperatives, community-based organizations, and even a housing authority. In 2000, these local sponsors had about 275 home-based educators, plus other counselors, teachers, and parents across the state. Once these internal allies learned what was happening, they were able to reach out to let their legislators know that constituents – the people who vote – were concerned and watching carefully.
- Pre-existing knowledge of the issue and the process.  
HIPPY’s earlier involvement in the legislative process meant that it understood and knew how to work the process. Instead of pulling out an intricate chart studying “How a Bill Becomes a Law,” they were able to mobilize quickly. Mind you, these were not stereotypical lobbyists used to wheeling and dealing; these were nonprofit leaders interested in serving their community to ensure that children receive basic services that would help them grow up to be responsible citizens. Anyone can do lobbying; the secret is to learn how to do it before you are in the middle of an emergency.
- On-going advocacy training.  
HIPPY does not take things for granted. Instead, it receives advocacy training from its national office, and then offers on-going advocacy training programs for its members and allies.
- Develop a culture supportive of nonprofit advocacy.  
When callers to the Arkansas Children’s Hospital are put on hold, they hear a message recording urging listeners “interested in grassroots advocacy in legislation that could affect your children, [to] please contact the government relations office” and then are given the Web site address and telephone number on the recording. So it seems the real secret of success is to recognize that advocacy should be built into a nonprofit’s cultural fabric rather than leaving it as a last minute, emergency add on. Arkansas HIPPY and the children and families they serve certainly have benefited from the “be prepared” attitude.

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