The State of Youth and Technology in Children's Advocacy

A Survey of Children's Advocacy Organizations Across the Nation
Conducted by The Children's Partnership

Survey Conducted by Jenelle Bossett and Rebecca Shwalb
Analysis Written by April KirkHart and Rebecca Shwalb

Children's Advocacy in the 21st Century

Organizations committed to children's advocacy strive not only to meet children's basic needs with direct services but also aim to prepare children and their families with the necessary tools and skills to self-advocate for broader changes in the policies governing their lives. However, children's advocacy in the 21st century is undergoing a significant transformation. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and the applications they power have become increasingly important tools to achieve the goals of children's advocates and the constituencies they serve, generally low-income and underserved children and their families.

Children's Services and Programs Delivered Increasingly Through ICT

More and more children's services and programs are accessible through the use of ICT. Some examples include: electronic enrollment in public health programs, pediatric specialty care in rural areas through telemedicine, online tutoring, software for learning calculus, and after-school programs that train children in advanced media skills, which prepare them for the modern-day workforce and provide opportunities for civic participation. The importance of ICT not only in delivering these programs and services, but also in children's lives in general will continue to elevate in the future as technology continues to evolve.

A Survey of National Children's Advocacy Organization Members

The Children's Partnership is a national nonprofit children's advocacy and policy organization that focuses on ensuring all children have access to the resources they need to thrive. Toward this goal, TCP surveyed the Web sites of 55 children's organizations across the country to determine how they are using technology to achieve their missions and to explore the landscape of activity around youth and technology in children's advocacy. All organizations researched in this survey are members of Voices for America's Children, a national nonprofit organization that coordinates a nationwide network of state and local child advocacy organizations in the United States. These organizations provide direct services, conduct research, provide public education, coordinate statewide collaborations, and/or engage in advocacy as a means to help children. The results of this survey are provided below.

Summary of the Survey

This survey documents that 100% of the organizations in the survey use some form of ICT to support their missions. All 55 organizations have their own Web sites, through which they use a variety of ICT tools. The most common use of ICT is disseminating publications, policy papers, and reports (85%); followed by providing e-alerts, email lists, and/or electronic newsletters (76%). A majority also offer current news and events (65%), and a sizeable number offer users contact information for, or allow them to directly contact, their legislators (29%). Most of the Web sites surveyed employ a combination of these options to provide information and allow site users to get involved in their advocacy. Voices for Virginia's Children, for instance, offers publications grouped by subject area; news and events; and a legislative action center that helps users find their legislators and provides tips for legislative advocacy. The site also allows users to share their own stories of being affected by public policies concerning children. Not all organizations use as many ICT tools, but most employ at least a few. In addition to providing information and resources for users, nearly two-thirds of the organizations utilize online payment systems to solicit donations from site visitors (65%).

While all of the surveyed organizations are online and maintain Web sites, very few have a specific programmatic focus on youth and technology. Of the 55 organizations surveyed, only 14 (or 25%) mention the issue of access to technology in any context. Among those that do address technology or technology literacy for youth, 11 (or 79%) are concerned with technology as it relates to children's education.

For instance, Philadelphia Citizens for Children and Youth offers checklists of items that elementary, middle, and high schools should provide, such as "Students have regular access to computer labs with Internet access." The Mississippi Forum on Children & Families sponsors a program that lends computers to low-income families in order to get parents more involved in school programs and to reinforce skills children learn in school.

Often in conjunction with discussions of education, some organizations highlight technology as an issue of workforce preparedness. Connecticut Voices for Children, for example, has a policy brief advocating a coordinated statewide approach to technology professional development. Rhode Island Kids Count's report *Are They Really Ready to Work?* cites the importance of information technology skills for high school graduates. Two organizations discuss the Internet as an issue of health and safety: The Wyoming Children's Alliance Web site recommends online resources

to teach parents and children about Internet safety, and Children Now (in California) warns parents of the effects interactive online advertising may have on children. One organization, Michigan's Children, advocates using technology to encourage civic participation. Michigan's Children partners with the Youth Policy Action Center in using Web-based advocacy to engage young people in changing policies that affect their lives.

While only 14 of the 55 organizations (25%) discuss technology or technology literacy as a children's issue, even fewer provide technology indicators on their Web sites. It should be noted that nearly two-thirds of the organizations provide links to the Kids Count Web site, which offers state-specific data including two technology items, but only 3 organizations (5%) discuss technology indicators on their own sites. Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, for one, uses US Census data to demonstrate the rural-urban divide in children's Internet access in that state. Missouri's Partnership for Children reports on an annual local survey that looks, among other things, at the rate of computer use by children. The third organization, Connecticut Voices for Children, includes a presentation on its Web site that reviews several studies of children and technology covering various indicators.

Where Does Children's Advocacy Go From Here?

The Children's Partnership is committed to ensuring all children have access to the resources they need to live healthy and productive lives, and in the 21st Century, ICT is a tool woven into the fabric of our way of life. Children, and the organizations that represent them, who do not have access to these tools or the training to maximize their benefits will continue to be at a disadvantage in the United States.

Our survey shows that very few of the organizations included recognize technology and technology literacy as a program focus or incorporate it as a potential solution to children's issues. Equally troubling is the fact that many children's organizations are unaware of or are not taking full advantage of the broad array of technological innovations that can serve as methods for better conducting their advocacy work. As a result, most are missing out on powerful applications for achieving the goals of their children's advocacy agendas.

Now is the time for the children's advocacy community to come together to learn about the creative ways ICT can help us do this important work and how it can be directly applied to achieve better outcomes for children. This is not about taking on a new issue. Rather, we must look at how ICT can better facilitate the work children's advocates are already doing. The Children's Partnership welcomes the opportunity to work with other leaders for children to help them identify where ICT can be a catalyst in their missions and to develop a more cohesive youth and digital opportunities agenda for the world of children's advocacy.

Results From the Survey

How are children's advocacy organizations using ICT to fulfill their missions?
- 100% of the organizations in this survey use ICT, through their own Web sites, to fulfill their organization's mission.
- 47 of the 55 organizations use their Web sites to disseminate data, policy papers, reports, etc. (85%).
- 42 allow readers of their Web sites to sign up for email alerts, email lists, and/or electronic newsletters (76%).
- 36 of the 55 organizations provide current events and news on their Web sites (65%).
- 35 of the 55 organizations use their Web sites to solicit online donations (64%).
- 16 of the 55 organizations allow readers to identify their legislators and access their contact information online by entering their zip code or other geographic information (29%).
- 4 of the 55 organizations provide their site visitors with email updates on state/ local legislation (7%).
- 2 organizations allow readers to submit and share their stories online (4%).
- 1 organization, Connecticut Voices for Children has a video library on its Web site that showcases events held by the organization, including a series of lectures and discussions on problems facing the state (2%).

Is technology as a children's issue a priority for the children's advocacy community?
- Out of the 55 organizations in this survey, 14 include work on youth and technology (27%).

How are children's advocacy organizations working on youth and technology?
- Of the 14 organizations that work on youth and technology, 11 focus this work on education (79%).
- Of the 14 organizations that work on youth and technology, 4 work in the area of economic opportunity/workforce preparedness (29%).
- Of the 14 organizations that work on youth and technology, 1 works in the area of civic/community participation (7%).
- Of the 14 organizations that work on youth and technology, 2 work in the area of health/safety (14%).
- Of the 14 organizations that work on youth and technology, 4 focus on more than one of the areas above (29%).

How are children's advocacy organizations measuring progress for children?
- Out of the 55 organizations, 36 include one or more indicators related to children and technology access (65%). [Note: In all cases, the sites provide links to the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count Web site, where the indicators are actually found.]
- Out of the 36 organizations that include one or more indicators related to children and access to technology, 35 specifically use the two Kids Count indicators regarding children's access to a computer in the home and access to the Internet at home (97%).
- Out of the 36 organizations that include one or more indicator related to children and access to technology, 4 use indicators other than those from Kids Count (11%).