



Facilitating Researcher-Policymaker Partnerships for Child Abuse Prevention

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A key objective of the Research-to-Policy Collaboration is to facilitate working relationships and partnerships between these two communities. We have found that working closely with the “right” legislative offices (e.g., those charged with policy development) at the “right” time (e.g., when a policy goal is on the agenda), as well as beginning with existing legislative goals, are particularly critical strategies. We also find that, like any relationship, trusting partnerships evolve over time. When legislative staff ask someone to do something incredible, like testify at a hearing or comment on a bill, it’s because they already have demonstrated credibility before those opportunities spring up. We like to tell this story to illustrate how partnerships can mature over time.

In 2018, we recognized that the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) was up for reauthorization. We knew that conversations with policymakers could reveal their goals for amending the law. We worked with child maltreatment scientists within Penn State’s Capstone Center for Healthy Children to respond to policymakers’ interests in improving policies that could prevent child abuse.

We started by strategically reaching out to the members of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions committee in the Senate, chaired by Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and the Education and Labor committee in the House of Representatives, chaired by Rep Bobby Scott (D-VA), who were charged with the reauthorization. Importantly, we had existing relationships in these offices from which to build upon for the current effort on CAPTA, tracing back to 2016 when we worked with them on juvenile justice and crime prevention. Given that the Senate was controlled by the GOP and the House was controlled by Democrats, it was particularly critical to ensure bipartisan representation in the perspectives of lawmakers that guided this work.

We explained our goal of providing the committee with support for understanding the scientific evidence around their reauthorization goals for CAPTA. The chairs of both committees were interested in meeting. We connected with Senator Alexander’s office first. They inquired about evidence standards for sexual abuse prevention programs and mandated reporting standards. In meeting with Rep Scott’s office second, we learned that their committee’s priority was understanding costs versus benefits of prevention efforts and where increased funding for prevention would make the most impact. We also worked with Ranking Member offices, including Sen. Patty Murray’s staff who asked about evidence standards for prevention programs, as well as Rep. Virginia Foxx’s staff who asked about Plans of Safe Care (which screens newborns for substance use exposure).

By starting with listening to the needs and priorities of the committees, we had a good sense of their unique goals—allowing us to help child maltreatment researchers tailor their responses to

the committee's specific questions. This approach lent itself to a budding partnership, where the policymakers saw both the RPC as a broker, and Penn State's Capstone Center for Health Children as credible and trustworthy which allowed for further opportunities for engagement.

In addition to responding with personalized resources, summaries, and follow-up meetings with each office, we also worked with researchers to produce a [policy brief](#) compiling, summarizing, and translating evidence related to the committee's questions around prevention. We then organized and hosted [briefings](#) for both the House and the Senate, tailored to the issues each was most passionate about. Drs. Noll and Font from Penn State both spoke at these briefings which were attended by many Congressional leaders in child welfare policy.

The following year, when the House introduced their version of the bill, they invited researchers from Penn State to testify in front of the U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor's subcommittee on Civil Rights and Human Services. Center researchers collaboratively crafted the written testimony that was entered into the Congressional record and Dr. Jackson delivered [verbal testimony](#). CAPTA passed in the House in May 2019 with a historic appropriation increase when Congress added in \$60M to the \$25M in state grants funds. The bill prioritized increased services for child maltreatment prevention, supported by cost-benefit evidence communicated by researchers.

After the hearing, the Senate Committee asked Penn State researchers to provide an educational policy analysis of their proposed legislation and comment on the related research evidence. Although, funding was granted towards CAPTA, its reauthorization was not voted on in the Senate.

This story illustrates how in-depth partnership with key congressional staff over time can have important tangible effects. Our team works hard to understand the political context and current policy priorities of Congress, translating that to researchers and helping them shape and communicate their research in a way that will resonate with policymakers. As such, we act as an intermediary or "honest broker", building trust and credibility with both researchers and policymakers so they may develop working relationships through continued engagement.