Business Roundtables, Coalitions, and Commissions

The stronger the economy, the more difficult it becomes to attract and retain the best employees. An employer who can offer the added benefit of child care and other family-friendly policies has a better chance of keeping valued employees. Regardless of the strength of the economy, when working parents have child care problems, their employers have problems too. If employees' child care arrangements fall apart due to school vacations, ill children, or child care provider turnover, employees can be absent, late to work, or distracted when they arrive. This costs employers real dollars in lost time and productivity. For all these reasons, businesses have a vital interest in the child care arrangements of their employees.

Yet it can be difficult and costly to develop family-friendly policies and programs. As a result, businesses are coming together to find solutions on a community-, city-, or statewide basis. Employers are taking action by forming roundtables, coalitions, or commissions. Government is also convening groups of business executives, such as U.S. Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin's Working Group on Child Care, and New Hampshire Governor Jeanne Shaheen's Business Commission on Child Care.
The following examples show how business roundtables, coalitions, and commissions vary in the strategies that they employ to increase the supply of high-quality child care.

- **Texas Employer Coalition Initiatives.** The Texas Work and Family Clearinghouse, a government entity, created an initiative that brings employers together to focus on child care issues among their employees and in their communities. The initiative currently operates in seven cities; it began with regional conferences in each site designed to pool resources, share information, and establish a local plan of action for the employer coalition. Each local coalition received an initial planning grant from the state to encourage this process, and communities applied for additional grants after they had defined their agendas. The Clearinghouse also supports three additional employer coalitions that existed prior to the initiative and that serve as role models for the new coalitions. (Contact Carol McDaniel at (512) 936-3226 for more information.)

- **Florida's Child Care Executive Partnership (CCEP).** An executive board of business CEOs, members of the child care community, and state government administrators oversee Florida's $6 million effort to increase child care subsidy funding by matching, dollar-for-dollar, employer contributions. In 1998, thirty-five businesses contributed in one of two ways. An employer may subsidize its own employees, which automatically moves the employee off the child care subsidy waiting list, or the employer may make a charitable donation to a purchasing pool that funds child care subsidies for families in the community. In addition to providing funding, the CCEP board has become a new messenger in the campaign to raise awareness of child care issues. The board is active in reviewing existing policies and making recommendations on how to improve child care licensing, coordinate child care and pre-kindergarten programs, and encourage family-friendly workplaces. (Contact Susan Muenchow at (850) 681-7002 for more information.)

- **Employer's Child Care Alliance**. The Employer's Child Care Alliance began in Lee County, Alabama, when a group of employers attended a symposium on family-friendly benefits. After meeting several times, the group found that there were enough shared child care concerns to warrant joining forces to meet the needs of working families in the area. In 1995, members invited other area employers from both the public and private sectors to join the alliance and participate in a county-wide employee child care needs survey. Based on this survey, the Alliance developed an action plan and hired its first director to implement the plan. Alliance members provide the majority of the funding for programs, such as child care centers and school-age child care options. (Contact Gail Piggott at (334) 749-8400 for more information.)

- **Colorado Business Commission on Child Care Financing.** In 1995, the Governor of Colorado appointed members to the Business Commission in order to look at child care issues from a business perspective and to propose ideas for financing affordable, accessible, high-quality child care in Colorado. The bipartisan Commission included members from the private sector, such as private universities, banks, labor, unions, airlines, and other businesses. After reviewing successful models from other states and communities, the Commission came up with a series of recommendations for improving child care financing in Colorado. As a result of the Commission's work, the state established child care tax credits for families and employers, as well as a voluntary tax checkoff that allows Colorado taxpayers to donate up to $5 of their state tax refunds to a statewide child care quality improvement fund. (Contact Sam Williams at (303) 892-3873 for more information.)

Tips for Success

***Employers must lead*.** Successful employer coalitions depend on employers taking the leadership role. This leadership allows the agenda to reflect the priorities of the members and encourages other businesses to participate.

***Design an appropriate structure for the partnership*.** In order to ensure smooth operations, roundtables, coalitions, and commissions need a well-articulated structure. This structure must reflect the needs of the partners while respecting their diversity. Effective governance structures define the various roles that partners will play and ensure that all partners understand and accept these roles. Many partnerships create written plans that include the roles and responsibilities of each partner, or use written contracts or memoranda of understanding to define roles. The process of defining partner roles and responsibilities usually occurs after the partnership creates a shared mission and articulates its goals.

***Involve CEOs and other business champions early in the process*.** The people who make decisions in the boardroom must be at the table from the beginning of the partnership. Early involvement is critical in order to ensure that goals and strategies reflect the best thinking of all involved and that all participants feel that they truly have a stake in the partnership.