

Nonprofit Agencies in Public Child Welfare: Their Role and Involvement in Policy Advocacy

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Growth in privatization has made human service nonprofit organizations increasingly important providers of public child welfare services. Policy advocacy is a key tool that these organizations can use to communicate their unique on-the-ground experience to lawmakers, potentially improving policy and strengthening services for at-risk children and families. However, little is known about the degree to which they participate in advocacy or the ways in which they are involved. This research uses large-scale survey data to investigate the percentage of nonprofit child welfare agencies participating in advocacy, as well as how they involve staff and volunteers and the types of advocacy tactics they use. Results indicate that nonprofit child welfare agencies are less likely to advocate and less likely to involve volunteers in advocacy than other types of nonprofit human service providers. However, the nonprofit child welfare agencies that are involved have high rates of participation in a variety of sophisticated tactics. As these data demonstrate that child welfare nonprofits are well-positioned to be highly involved in policy advocacy but many still refrain, suggestions are made for how to expand and strengthen their advocacy involvement.

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In the field of child welfare, two forms of advocacy have received the bulk of scholarly attention: (a) case advocacy, carried out on behalf of specific

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children and families by individual social workers and case managers, and (b) nationally based policy advocacy carried out by professional advocacy organizations. While both of these forms of advocacy have had important payoffs for at-risk children and for the field as a whole, another form of advocacy is often overlooked: policy advocacy conducted by nonprofit child welfare agencies. These organizations have a valuable perspective to share. While they have the capacity and resources to advocate not only for individuals but also for needed policies and funding for improved services, they do this with valuable on-the-ground expertise that only comes from direct experience with vulnerable children and families.

This form of advocacy has only become more important to attend to with the growth of privatization in the field of child welfare (Freundlich & Gerstenzang, 2003). In many states, public child welfare services are increasingly being provided by nonprofit organizations that contract with the government for funding. It is these organizations, then, that possess the practice-based knowledge that needs to be communicated to policymakers in order for promising programs to be expanded and policy failings to be addressed. Without this advocacy, the feedback loop from policy formulation to implementation to reform is badly compromised.

Organizations, clients, and society at large may benefit when nonprofit agencies that serve the child welfare population become involved in advocacy. First, as nonprofit child welfare agencies are strongly affected by policy shifts, policy advocacy can strengthen the organization itself by helping to provide a more stable funding and policy environment. For example, it is clearly in the best interest of agencies that run programs focusing on a particular service model (e.g., family group conferencing, home visiting) or specific population (e.g., kinship care, aging out) to try and ensure that policy and funding streams are in alignment with that program. Second, advocacy is an important service to clients. From a political representation perspective, nonprofit agencies that serve children can be seen to have an additional responsibility to advocate because their youthful clients lack any formal, legal voice and may not have any other way of having their needs communicated to the legislators that are legally bound to represent them. Lastly, when organizations share their clients' stories with policymakers and the public, they focus attention on the struggles at-risk children and families face and provide key insights on how policy can be improved to make children safer and families stronger (Hoefler, 2005).

Although knowledge on nonprofit advocacy in general is growing (Berry & Arons, 2003; Mosley, 2010), little continues to be known about the participation of child welfare nonprofits and how they might compare to other human service nonprofits. Given how important this work is for both organizational and client well-being, it is vital to know more. Do child welfare nonprofits participate in advocacy at the same, higher, or lower rates as compared to other kinds of human service nonprofits? How do they involve

staff and volunteers? What tactics do they use? What are they advocating for? This research aims to answer these questions, documenting for the first time how active nonprofit child welfare agencies are in policy advocacy and how they choose to be involved. Answers to these questions can help inform both scholars and practitioners about where the gaps are in child welfare advocacy and how more effective and extensive advocacy involvement can be facilitated.

WHO ADVOCATES ON BEHALF OF AT-RISK CHILDREN AND FAMILIES?

Nonprofit advocacy has been instrumental in shaping policy outcomes in many child welfare related fields, including childcare, early education, and children's health (De Vita et al., 2002; Raden, 2002; Rosenbaum & Sonosky, 2001). The most visible group of nonprofit advocates for children are often professional advocacy organizations, such as the Children's Defense Fund, which tend to focus on national-level issues, employ professional staff, and have sufficient resources to engage in research and public education campaigns as well as lobbying. Since the 1960s, however, scholars have noted an increasing reliance on these professional advocacy organizations and a decline in organizations that are rooted in local communities (McDonald, 1995; Skocpol & Dickert, 2001). Some scholars have argued that this has weakened advocacy on behalf of children as recent trends toward devolution has made advocacy at the state and local level increasingly important (De Vita et al., 2001; Skocpol & Dickert, 2001). This need for increased attention to local concerns is another reason why it is important for community based nonprofit agencies to advocate on behalf of vulnerable children and their families (Hoefer, 2005).

Unfortunately, research on human service nonprofit involvement in advocacy has tended to study them as a single group, and research on specific subfields is rare. Thus, very little is known about the advocacy involvement of nonprofit child welfare agencies specifically. However, recent studies have shown participation rates for human service nonprofits in general to be between 28% (Berry & Arons, 2003) and 57% (Mosley, 2010). Research has also shown that having greater financial resources, professional leadership, government funding, and use of information technology are all positively associated with advocacy involvement for human service nonprofits (Child & Grønberg, 2007; Donaldson, 2007; Mosley, 2010). This baseline information about nonprofit human service providers generally can help serve as a benchmark to assess the involvement of nonprofit child welfare agencies specifically.

To date, only one study has attempted to identify the number and scope of nonprofit agencies advocating on behalf of children although, advocacy

on behalf of the child welfare population specifically was not addressed. Using Internal Revenue Service (IRS) data, De Vita et al. (2001) identified approximately 45,000 nonprofit organizations in the US that focused on children's issues or services and found that only one percent of those engaged in lobbying. Those who did report lobbying expenses tended to be larger, with average revenues of \$29 million. Additionally, health and education focused nonprofit agencies were more likely than human service nonprofits to engage in lobbying. Unfortunately, IRS data only provides information on lobbying, which is just one of many advocacy tactics that are used by nonprofit advocates. Research has shown that human service nonprofits primarily engage in other advocacy activities, such as public education campaigns, providing public testimony, and working in coalitions, all of which are not reported to the IRS (Mosley, 2009). This highlights the need for additional research that captures the wide range of possible activities nonprofit child advocates may be involved in.

Even within the literature on child advocacy, it is notable that child welfare advocacy has received little specific attention. Issues of concern to public child welfare advocates, including the challenges facing kinship care families (Danzy, 1996), youth transitioning out of foster care (Collins & Clay, 2009) and the impact of abuse allegations on foster families (Carbino, 1991) have received less attention than advocacy on behalf of children in general. Furthermore, the literature on public child welfare advocacy has tended to focus on case advocacy (Dalrymple, 2003; Grover, 2004; Newman, Dannenfelser, & Pendleton, 2005) versus policy advocacy even though child welfare policy advocacy has been shown to be effective. For example, Ward (1995) demonstrated the importance of child welfare advocates in her study of the unsealing of adoption records and the transition to more equitable policies for adoptions of aboriginal children in Canada. As previously mentioned, further lacking is research on the role that nonprofit child welfare agencies specifically may have had in affecting policy change within the field. To the knowledge of these authors, no studies have yet examined the advocacy efforts of this important group of players in child welfare service delivery. Thus, despite the apparent consensus within the field that reform is needed (Brooks & Webster, 1999; Maluccio, 2000; Schorr, 2000) and evidence suggesting public child welfare workers view the child welfare system as ineffective (Zell, 2006), little is known about the extent of nonprofit child welfare agencies' advocacy efforts.

Staff Involvement in Child Welfare Advocacy

Although information about advocacy at the organizational level is lacking, a few studies have looked at the potential advocacy role of child welfare workers (Andrews, 1998; Herbert & Mould, 1992). In their survey of frontline public child welfare workers, Herbert & Mould (1992) found that these workers

perceive organizational barriers to advocacy and that workers advocate less than they would like to. More than two-thirds of the workers they surveyed thought that there were few or no procedures for informing management about service gaps or for influencing departmental policies. Most of these workers did report, however, that their supervisors engaged in advocacy. Because frontline child welfare workers see the pressing challenges facing children and families everyday, it is critical that they, as well as upper-level management, have opportunities to participate in and inform the advocacy carried out by the larger organization. Furthermore, Andrews (1998) found that the policy advocacy potential of child and family service workers is underdeveloped. Although that study does not distinguish between child welfare workers and other child and family service workers, it does suggest that workers serving children and families could be encouraged to participate in more advocacy activities. Finally, Litzenfelner and Petr (1997, p. 398) point out that child welfare workers' "dual mandate" of protecting the child and preserving the family make it difficult for these workers to advocate on behalf of children. This is concerning as workers who interact most closely with at-risk children and families may have the most insight regarding complex policy challenges.

Taken together, these studies suggest that child welfare nonprofits may not sufficiently engage their staff in advocacy activities. Yet, because no studies have compared child welfare workers to workers in other types of human service nonprofits, it is unclear whether this is an issue within child welfare specifically, a problem with youth-serving nonprofits, or if it is endemic to all human service nonprofits. By comparing staff involvement in child welfare nonprofits to other human service nonprofits, the current study addresses this knowledge gap. Another knowledge gap concerns the involvement of volunteers in advocacy, as we are not aware of any previous studies documenting the extent volunteers are engaged in child welfare policy advocacy. To address this, volunteers are also included in our analysis.

TACTICS USED IN CHILD WELFARE ADVOCACY

The literature on the types of tactics nonprofit human service providers engage in most frequently is nascent. Initial research on this topic has shown that, partially due to high rates of professionalization and government funding, human service nonprofits are more likely to participate in "*insider*" *advocacy tactics*—tactics that require interacting with policymakers directly—than they are to participate in "*indirect*" *advocacy tactics* that focus on raising public awareness, such as writing letters to the editor or participating in public demonstrations (Mosley, 2009).

We are not aware of any studies that have looked specifically at the tactics used by nonprofit child welfare agencies, but the literature on child

advocacy organizations in general suggests they may follow much the same pattern (De Vita et al., 2002; Gormley & Cymrot, 2006; Raden, 2002). In their study of tactics used by professional child advocacy organizations, Gormley & Cymrot (2006) found that larger organizations were more likely than smaller organizations to provide legislative testimony and to demonstrate a greater commitment to public policy research. Commitment to research significantly declined, however, when nonprofit organizations made up a greater percentage of interest groups within the state. Receiving a greater percentage of funding from private foundations and government agencies, as opposed to membership dues and individual gifts, was also associated with producing more policy research reports. This research suggests that the types of tactics child advocates participate in depend on various factors including organizational size, funding, and the political environment.

The case study by De Vita et al. (2002) of advocacy efforts to improve compensation of childcare workers in three states also suggests that the types of tactics used depends on a variety of organizational characteristics. Although the authors did not focus on human service nonprofits specifically, they observed that the advocacy campaigns in each state involved a variety of individuals and organizations and that both insider and public awareness strategies were used to gain political support for increasing the wages of child care workers. Interestingly, formal coalitions were not formed in any of the three states although groups often worked together informally. Building on this 2002 study, De Vita et al. (2004) subsequently found that human service nonprofits serving children and families in those three states focus their advocacy efforts more on budget and regulatory reforms than do other types of organizations that advocate on behalf of children but do not primarily provide services. The human service nonprofits in that sample tended to use direct lobbying to exert pressure on legislators and policymakers, and they also tended to participate in large human service coalitions. Because the authors did not distinguish between human service subfields in their sample, however, there is no way of discerning how child welfare nonprofits' advocacy involvement might compare to that of youth serving nonprofits. It also suggests the need for additional data on what kinds of issues different types of human service nonprofits advocate for and which tactics are most commonly used by both youth serving nonprofits and child welfare nonprofits specifically.

Overall, more research is needed to examine the extent and type of policy advocacy engaged in by nonprofit child welfare agencies. To help shed light on this topic, four research questions are addressed here: First, at what rate do nonprofit child welfare agencies participate in policy advocacy and how do they involve their staff and volunteers in that activity? Second, for those that are involved, what kinds of advocacy tactics do they participate in most frequently? Third, is their advocacy primarily focused on issues of client well-being, or on issues that relate more to organizational concerns? Fourth,

for all questions, how does their advocacy participation compare with that of human service nonprofits that focus on other populations? In the conclusion, findings relevant to these questions are used to make recommendations specific to the child welfare nonprofit sector about how advocacy efforts can be strengthened and expanded.

DATA, SAMPLE, AND METHODOLOGY

The research questions were addressed using data from the Los Angeles Survey of Nonprofit Human Service Organizations. Fielded in 2002, this representative survey provides a comprehensive view of the activities and functioning of the full range of human service nonprofits in Los Angeles (Mosley, Katz, Hasenfeld, & Anheier, 2003).

Survey Protocol and Sample Selection

The survey sample was drawn from a carefully constructed database of the universe of 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations that are located in Los Angeles County and that offer services to promote individual, social, and psychological well being.¹ Following the definitions used in previous work, organizations that focus primarily on provision of medical or educational services were not included (Salamon, 1995). A stratified random sample was used, with stratification done by size (as approximated by organizational revenue) and location in the county (determined by zip code). The survey took approximately 1 hour to complete and was conducted by telephone by trained professional interviewers with the executive director of each organization (or their proxy). A total of 641 organizations were interviewed, excluding organizations that were found to be ineligible.² The final response rate for this survey can be calculated in two ways due to a large number of organizations that we were unable to contact (e.g., after 30 attempts there was still no answer or active answering machine at their listed phone number). A conservative approach categorizes those organizations as “nonresponses” rather than as defunct organizations. This results in a response rate of 53%, still good for a survey of this type. A more liberal approach cites those organizations as defunct and notes that only 9.5% of organizations reached actively refused to participate. If one considers refusals only, the response rate is very high at 90.5%.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGY AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF VARIABLES

To capture the advocacy involvement of child welfare focused nonprofits

specifically, the sample was split into three groups: child welfare nonprofits, youth serving nonprofits, and other human service nonprofits. *Child welfare nonprofits* are those respondents for which at least one of their three largest programs is directly aimed at children and families either involved in or specifically at-risk of being involved in the public child welfare system. *Youth serving nonprofits* are those nonprofits for which one of their three largest programs is aimed at children and youth in general but not at the child welfare population specifically. *Other human service nonprofits* are all of the other respondents to the survey not included in the previous two categories. In each analysis the characteristics and activities of child welfare nonprofits are specifically compared to that of the other two organizational categories in order to learn how they may differ. Looking at youth service providers allows us to compare nonprofit child welfare agencies with a population of organizations that are also advocating on behalf of youth, but which do not have such a specific policy focus. Comparing them with all other human service providers provides a picture of how child welfare nonprofits compare with the larger population of human service providers—with whom their activities are typically classified. This comparison provides an important yardstick for evaluating their advocacy involvement.

As little is known about the advocacy involvement of child welfare nonprofits, both descriptive and inferential statistics are used to shed light on the research questions. First, descriptive statistics on a variety of advocacy-related organizational characteristics are presented for each of the three groups in order to provide an overall picture of their strengths and weaknesses regarding advocacy. Second, average rates of advocacy involvement are presented, along with the percentage of organizations that involve volunteers in advocacy and the average percent of staff time spent on advocacy. These figures are presented for each of the three groups of organizations and compared. Third, a logistic regression analysis is presented in order to investigate whether child welfare nonprofits are more or less likely than other types of human service nonprofits to participate in advocacy, all other characteristics being held constant. Fourth, average rates of involvement in twelve different advocacy tactics are calculated, again comparing by type of organization. Finally, advocacy focus is explored by looking at the percentage of organizations that report advocating primarily for regulatory, administrative, or funding issues, as opposed to client well-being.

Following is a list of all variables used in this research and how they were operationalized. *Involvement in advocacy* is measured by a “yes” response when asked if they were “actively involved in advocating or promoting certain policy issues, or the interests of a certain group or groups” over the past year. *Involvement of volunteers* is measured as a “yes” answer when asked if volunteers were involved in advocacy over the past year. *Staff time spent on advocacy* is what percentage of staff time, overall, was reportedly devoted to policy advocacy over the past year.³ *Size* was opera-

tionalized as amount of expenditures. *Professionalization of leadership* was operationalized as having an executive director with a masters or professional degree or higher. *Degree of nonadvocacy collaboration* was measured by a 0–9 scale composed of the sum of three items, each coded 0 for never, 1 for occasionally, 2 for often, and 3 for very often. The items are whether they collaborate: (a) to obtain funding, (b) to develop programs or services, or (c) to coordinate services for clients. *Use of e-mail* indicates a “yes” response to the question, “Does your organization use e-mail?” *Percentage of government funding* is the percentage of total revenue that government dollars make up in an organization’s budget. *Professionalization of staff* is the percentage of staff holding a college or professional degree. *Degree of formalization* was measured by a 0–5 scale that was constructed using exploratory factor analysis.⁴ This scale consists of five items, each coded 1 for yes, and 0 for no: (a) having formal job descriptions for each paid staff position, (b) having formal performance evaluations for each paid staff, (c) having formally evaluated any programs or services over the previous three years, (d) having developed a strategic plan, and (e) keeping statistical records on programs and services. Finally, *age* is operationalized as the amount of years elapsed since the organization started operating or providing services.

All analyses reported here were done using weighted data to account for the stratification of the sample. Due to problems with item nonresponse (ranging from 1% to 16%) five independent variables were imputed using the multiple imputation by chained equations or ICE procedure, in conjunction with the Stata statistical package (Royston, 2005). These variables were the items making up the formalization and collaboration scales, size, percent of government funding, and use of e-mail. Data were not imputed for any dependent variables.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on five organizational characteristics known to be related to advocacy involvement for human service nonprofits generally: larger size, professionalization of leadership, higher degree of collaboration, use of e-mail, and increased percentage of government funding. It also includes three control variables: formalization, age, and professionalization of staff. These are the eight independent variables used in the logistic regression analysis. An initial comparison of differences between organizational groups also helps to shed light on particular advantages or disadvantages child welfare nonprofits may be facing when it comes to advocacy participation. For each variable, *t*-tests and *z*-scores are used to reveal where child welfare nonprofits are significantly different than all other human service nonprofits (including other youth serving nonprofits).

TABLE 1 Descriptive Statistics and Differences in Means and Proportions

Variable	Child welfare nonprofits (<i>N</i> = 43)	Other youth-serving nonprofits (<i>N</i> = 172)	Other human service nonprofits (<i>N</i> = 426)
Size (millions)			
<i>M</i>	5.7*	3.3	2.7
Median	1.5	0.7	0.4
Professionalized leadership	$t = -3.08, p = 0.002$ Yes = 63%*	47%	44%
Degree of nonadvocacy collaboration (9-point scale)			
<i>M</i>	3.6	3.7	3.2
Median	4	3	3
Use of e-mail	$t = -0.72, p = 0.473$ Yes = 94%	90%	83%
Percentage of government funding	$z = -1.51, p = 0.130$ Of the 72% that receive it: 78% of budget*	Of the 65% that receive it: 55% of budget	Of the 58% that receive it: 50% of budget
Percentage of professionalized staff	$t = -4.41, p = 0.000$		
<i>M</i>	54%*	44%	38%
Median	60%	43%	33%
Level of formalization (5-point scale)			
<i>M</i>	4.3*	3.9	3.6
Median	5	4	4
Age (years)	$t = -2.49, p = 0.013$		
<i>M</i>	28	31	30
Median	18	23	24
	$t = 0.56, p = 0.575$		

Note. *denotes that child welfare nonprofits are significantly different from all other human service nonprofits on this variable, $p < .05$.

First, the average child welfare nonprofit is seen to be significantly larger than the average human service nonprofit overall, with \$5.7 million in expenditures on average versus \$2.7 million. Having a larger size should be an advantage for child welfare nonprofits when it comes to having adequate resources available to participate in advocacy. It should be pointed out, however, that for all groups mean size is much larger than median size, revealing many small organizations in the sample. To account for this skewed distribution, the size variable was transformed with a natural log for regression analyses.

Child welfare nonprofits are also more likely to have a professional leader, an additional advantage when it comes to advocacy involvement. Only 44% of other human service nonprofits and 47% of other youth serving nonprofits have a leader with a masters or professional degree or higher, but 63% of child welfare nonprofits do. The three are not significantly different when it comes to degree of nonadvocacy collaboration, however, with all three scoring in the 3–4 range on a 9-point scale. Child welfare nonprofits do appear to have slightly higher rates of e-mail use (94% of them use it while 90% of other youth serving nonprofits do and 83% of other human service nonprofits), but this difference is not significant. Child welfare nonprofits are also significantly more dependent on government funding, another strength when it comes to advocacy involvement. Approximately 72% of child welfare nonprofits have government funding; for those that do have this funding, the funds comprise 78% of their budget on average. This figure is significantly higher than either other youth serving nonprofits (65% receive it, with an average of 55%) or other human service nonprofits (58% receive it, with an average of 50%).

In regard to the control variables, first, child welfare nonprofits are seen to have a higher percentage of professional staff, with 54% holding a college or professional degree on average, versus 44% for other youth serving nonprofits and 38% for other human service nonprofits. Second, child welfare nonprofits are also slightly more formalized, with a mean of 4.3 on the 5-point formalization scale, versus 3.9 for other youth serving nonprofits and 3.6 for other human service nonprofits. Age did not differ significantly for the three groups, with an average age of approximately 30 years.

Advocacy Participation

The first research question concerns the degree to which child welfare nonprofits are involved in policy advocacy and how that may or may not differ from other human service nonprofits. As a first step in answering this question, the average rates of participation in advocacy were calculated for each of the three groups. Table 2 presents these findings, comparing first the percentage of organizations involved in advocacy, and then, for those that are involved, the average percent of staff time devoted to it and the percent

TABLE 2 Degree of Involvement in Policy Advocacy

Variable	Child welfare nonprofits (<i>N</i> = 43)	Other youth serving nonprofits (<i>N</i> = 172)	All other human service nonprofits (<i>N</i> = 426)
Organizations involved in advocacy (%)	53.5	57.0	56.8
Staff time spent on advocacy (average %)	6.7	6.1	6.9
Involving volunteers in advocacy (%)	25.6	26.8	34.5

of organizations involving volunteers in advocacy. In all three areas, the findings demonstrate child welfare nonprofits are less involved in advocacy than other kinds of human service nonprofits. First, while more than half of all child welfare nonprofits were involved in advocacy (54%), this percentage is lower than other human service nonprofits that provide services to children and youth, as well as other human service nonprofits in general (57% for both groups). For those organizations that were involved in advocacy, a comparison of averages demonstrates that child welfare nonprofits also are less likely to involve volunteers in advocacy (26%, compared to 35% for other human service nonprofits). In regards to amount of staff time devoted to advocacy, child welfare nonprofits had a similar percentage to other human service nonprofits (both approximately 7%) and youth serving nonprofits were a little lower, at approximately 6%.

These lower rates of advocacy participation are surprising as the descriptive statistics presented above indicate that child welfare nonprofits are, on average, larger, more likely to have a professional leader and more dependent on government funding—all characteristics that have been previously shown to be associated with advocacy involvement. In order to compare advocacy involvement while holding these organizational characteristics constant, a logistic regression model is presented in Table 3. In this regression, the organizational characteristics described in Table 1 are held constant and a dummy variable indicating that an organization has been classified as being either in the field of child welfare or in services to youth in general is included. If the dummy variable is significant, it will indicate a field level effect on policy advocacy participation, specifically, that child welfare nonprofits are either more or less likely to participate in advocacy when compared to human service nonprofits overall.

Findings from this analysis, displayed in Table 3, demonstrate that child welfare nonprofits are indeed less likely than human service nonprofits serving other populations to participate in advocacy. Holding all other organizational characteristics constant, the odds that a child welfare nonprofit would participate in advocacy was approximately 58 times lower than human

TABLE 3 Odds Ratios and Effect Parameters for Logistic Regression Comparing the Likelihood of Participation in Policy Advocacy: Child Welfare Nonprofits, Youth Serving Nonprofits, and All Other Human Service Nonprofits ($N = 641$; $p < .0001$)

Independent variables	Odds ratio	Linearized SE	<i>p</i>
<i>Child welfare nonprofit*</i>	.423	.160	.02
Youth-serving nonprofit	.685	.156	.10
Size*	1.29	.087	.00
Professionalization of leadership*	1.71	.349	.01
Degree of nonadvocacy collaboration*	1.35	.069	.00
Use of e-mail*	2.39	.787	.01
Percentage of government funding*	1.01	.003	.00
Professionalization of staff	.995	.003	.09
Level of formalization	.942	.081	.49
Age	.997	.004	.40

Note. *denotes $p < .05$.

service nonprofits overall. In another regard, nonprofits that focus on services for youth but not specifically on the child welfare population were not significantly different from other human service nonprofits when it comes to advocacy.

Tactics

The second research question concerns the child welfare nonprofits that are involved in advocacy. For those that are involved, how do they choose to participate? Specifically, what kind of tactics are they most likely to participate in and how does this compare to other human service fields? Table 4 presents average rates of participation in 12 different advocacy tactics. This table shows that child welfare nonprofits are comparatively more likely to participate in insider tactics such as meeting with public officials or their staff, participating in the development or revision of regulations related to public policy, or paying dues to an association that lobbied on their behalf. It is also notable that every nonprofit child welfare agency in this sample that was involved in advocacy was also involved in advocacy coalition work. This finding indicates a higher propensity to this kind of involvement than the other two groups of organizations. Overall, these results indicate that the child welfare nonprofits that are involved in advocacy are doing a comparatively good job of presenting their agenda to important policymakers and working with others to do so.

Interestingly, given their lower rates of advocacy involvement, child welfare nonprofits also had comparatively high rates of public awareness oriented tactics, such as issuing policy reports and buying advertising time. That said, when compared with other types of human service nonprofits,

TABLE 4 Percentage of Organizations Participating in Advocacy Tactics

Tactic	Percentage of organizations responding "yes"		
	Child welfare nonprofits <i>N</i> = 23	Other youth-serving nonprofits <i>N</i> = 98	Other human services nonprofits <i>N</i> = 242
Participates in coalitions with other organizations for the purpose of influencing public policy	100%	82%	84%
Meets with public officials or their staff (either elected or appointed)	95	90	89
Participates in development or revision of regulations related to public policy	83	58	61
Pays dues to an association or belongs to a coalition that advocated or lobbied on its behalf	82	49	55
Provides public education on policy issues	48	51	61
Provides testimony on public policy issues	48	39	48
Participates in government commissions or committees	45	50	56
Writes editorials or letters to the editor of newspapers or magazines	36	35	46
Issues policy reports	30	15	23
Buys advertising space in some type of commercial media for advocacy	17	9	13
Conducts demonstrations or boycotts	9	8	15
Lobbies for specific legislation	0	3	4

both child welfare nonprofits and other youth serving nonprofits seemed to have slightly lower rates of providing public education, writing letters to the editor, and conducting demonstrations and boycotts. Overall, child welfare nonprofits are seen to have mixed involvement in public awareness oriented advocacy, with high rates of participation in some public awareness tactics but not others.

Advocacy Focus

Opponents of nonprofit advocacy sometimes argue that this advocacy is primarily self-interested and worry that organizations may be advocating primarily for additional government grants and contracts rather than for policies focused on client well-being. This is especially true for organizations that are highly dependent on government funding and primarily involved with insider tactics—both characteristics true for child welfare nonprofits. It is important to ask, then, what percentage of advocating child welfare nonprofits focus on client well being issues as opposed to organizationally

TABLE 5 Primary Issues of Concern in Advocacy Work

Advocating for (%)	Child welfare nonprofits	Other youth serving nonprofits	Other human services nonprofits
Regulatory, administrative, or funding issues	4%	12%	15%
Client well-being	65	57	47
Both	30	31	38

focused issues? Do child welfare nonprofits differ in this regard from other youth serving nonprofits and human service nonprofits in general?

To investigate these issues, those organizations that were involved in advocacy were asked to briefly describe the “policy issues or groups” the organization advocated for. The question was open-ended and the answers were coded into three groups: (a) regulatory, administrative, or funding issues impacting their area of service, including their own organization, (b) client well-being, without mention of issues that may also benefit the organization, and (c) both regulatory/funding issues and client well-being.⁵

For example, responses that mentioned specific funding streams or workforce regulations were coded as “regulatory/administrative.” Responses that mentioned issues impacting specific client issues, such as access to services, were coded as “client well-being.” Responses that contained elements of both were coded into a third group.

The findings are presented in Table 5 and suggest that, if anything, child welfare nonprofits are more focused on advocacy as a means of promoting the well-being of their clients than are other types of human service fields. Fully 65% of child welfare nonprofits spoke about their advocacy in terms of client concerns, while only 57% of nonprofits that served other youth populations focused on this and only 47% of other human service nonprofits. Only 4% of child welfare nonprofits focused on regulatory, administrative, or funding issues, while 12% and 15% of the youth serving and other human service nonprofits did.

CONCLUSION

These findings provide a first-ever picture of the policy advocacy involvement of nonprofit child welfare agencies and suggest that they possess both strengths and weaknesses when it comes to participation in advocacy. These data show that child welfare nonprofits have many characteristics that are favorable to advocacy involvement: larger size, professionalized leaders, and high levels of government funding. It is troubling, then, that they are actually less likely to participate in policy advocacy than nonprofits that serve other

populations. Given that other types of youth serving nonprofits do not show these lower rates of advocacy involvement, we must ask what it is that is holding back nonprofit child welfare agencies specifically. This is particularly important given the potential payoff advocacy could have for both organizations and clients in terms of improved service delivery and more stable funding streams. With the growth in privatization and devolution, nonprofit child welfare agencies are increasingly important partners in public service delivery (Salamon, 1995; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Part of that partnership is a responsibility to communicate on-the-ground conditions to policymakers, but it appears that many nonprofit child welfare agencies are not fulfilling that role.

Furthermore, for those that are involved, child welfare nonprofits were seen to be less likely to involve volunteers in advocacy than other types of human service nonprofits. This choice is one that may limit the extent of their involvement, particularly as staff in child welfare agencies are often overburdened with direct service work. It is encouraging that their use of staff is at least equivalent to other human service fields, although there is still room for improvement. Less than 7% of staff time overall was spent on advocacy involvement. Given that previous research has found that child welfare workers would like to dedicate more time to policy advocacy, increasing staff time spent on advocacy activities would likely benefit the organization and workers alike (Herbert & Mould, 1992). As staff have the most direct on-the-ground experience it is vital that that expertise is harnessed. They may be best positioned to communicate the stories of the vulnerable children and families they work with to policymakers with the ability to effect change.

However, nonprofit child welfare agencies that do engage in advocacy have a very positive profile when it comes to their involvement in different advocacy tactics. They appear to have extensive involvement in a wide range of tactics with a particular emphasis on insider tactics that have the potential to change policy directly. Participating organizations seem to have secured an important seat at the table, with high rates of involvement in tactics that require access at the highest levels, such as participating directly in the creation or revision of policy and meeting with public officials or their staff. A sign of the depth of their advocacy involvement is that their emphasis on insider tactics has not led them to neglect involvement in public awareness tactics. They also have high rates of participation in tactics like issuing policy reports and buying advertising time, though they could do better at providing public education, a tactic that one would expect would be a strength for organizations with a public service mission.

It is also encouraging that child welfare nonprofits seem to be clear about what it is that they are advocating for. Nonprofit child welfare agencies are overwhelmingly focusing on issues of client well-being and not just on issues related to organizational functioning. Because this is not always

true for other types of human service nonprofits, this is likely to increase their legitimacy in the eyes of policymakers and contributes to advocacy effectiveness.

As this is a first step in understanding the advocacy involvement of nonprofit child welfare agencies, there are a number of limitations to this research and a strong need for additional work in this area. Although Los Angeles has a large number of child welfare nonprofits, the number is still small enough that statistical power was not sufficient to conduct more extensive regression analyses specifically for that group. For example, we were not able to conduct analyses that would reveal what organizational features contribute to participation in one set of tactics over another. It is also unknown how representative this Los Angeles sample may be of other cities. Surveying a representative national sample of child welfare nonprofits would resolve these problems and be an important contribution to the knowledge base. Our findings primarily suggest further research is needed to understand why, given their favorable characteristics for advocacy, greater numbers of child welfare nonprofits do not engage in policy advocacy. If lack of resources is not an issue, then what other challenges are these organizations facing that are preventing them from participating in advocacy? This is especially important as it appears that once child welfare nonprofits are involved, they do a good job of becoming involved in a sophisticated array of advocacy tactics and clearly focus on issues of client well-being.

These findings have a number of implications for social work practice and policy. The recent growth of devolution and privatization in the United States has made nonprofits vital partners in delivering child welfare services, creating a mixed system of care that is often publicly funded but privately delivered. Increasingly, nonprofits and public agencies work together to deliver government-funded child welfare services. This trend has great potential in regards to fostering services that can be tailored to specific populations and local needs, but if the agencies on the ground are not communicating those needs to government, they may go unnoticed at the policy level. For this reason privatization and devolution make it more important than ever that nonprofits participate in policy advocacy—to serve as a vital feedback loop reporting on what really works in improving children's lives. It appears that in the case of child welfare nonprofits this is not happening to the extent that it could. Another important implication of these findings relates to the advocacy role of the many social workers working in the field of child welfare. Based on this sample, it appears that social workers employed in nonprofit child welfare agencies may not always have the opportunity to participate in advocacy. Given the historical emphasis placed on advocacy practice in social work and previous research pointing to the desire of child welfare workers to do more advocacy (Herbert & Mould, 1992), this is a major shortfall.

For all of these reasons, as well as the fact that child welfare nonprofits serve some of our most vulnerable citizens, it is vital that we find ways to encourage their increased participation in policy advocacy. These findings point to a number of practical recommendations. First, the high number of child welfare nonprofits involved in coalition work is an important strength for the field. If each of those coalitions worked to bring a few additional agencies that are not currently advocating into their group, it could vastly widen the scope of participating organizations, strengthening the coalition and helping to train new advocates. Second, it could be that child welfare nonprofits are staying away from policy advocacy because they do not want to take staff away from their important direct service work. In this case, another area in which child welfare nonprofits could improve is in the use of volunteers for advocacy. Given that their rate of involvement for volunteers is lower than other types of human service nonprofits, this is clearly a practice that deserves an additional look. Furthermore, if allocating more staff time to advocacy is not feasible for an organization, then managers should at least work to improve communication between direct service staff and upper-level management to ensure clients' issues and needs are being accurately represented in their advocacy efforts.

Another possibility for why more nonprofit child welfare agencies do not engage in advocacy could be that many simply do not realize their advocacy potential or do not understand the laws and regulations governing nonprofit advocacy. Research has shown that many nonprofits mistakenly think that it is forbidden for them to lobby and that this may have a chilling effect on advocacy involvement overall (Bass, Arons, Guinane, & Carter, 2007; Berry & Arons, 2003). Outreach should be done to make sure that nonprofit child welfare agencies know that they are permitted to advocate and that they are aware of the potential benefits. These findings indicate that once involved, child welfare nonprofits have impressive access to policymakers and have the resources and expertise to participate in a wide variety of advocacy tactics. If more of the field would join the ranks of those already participating, nonprofit child welfare agencies have the potential to make fundamental improvements in public child welfare policy and services, positively affecting the lives of not only their own clients, but at-risk children and families everywhere.

NOTES

1. The database was built by merging databases maintained by the Internal Revenue Service, the California Secretary of State, and California Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development, as well as two smaller databases maintained by local human service referral agencies—Infoline LA and The Rainbow Directory—in order to capture smaller or more informal organizations that may not be included in the government databases.

2. Organizations were found to be ineligible if they were: (a) located outside of Los Angeles County, (b) not a 501(c)(3) or equivalent, (c) a program of a larger organization rather than an independent entity, (d) a private foundation, (e) a religious congregation, or (f) not a human service organization.
3. Due to the presence of outliers, this item was capped at 20% and the very few organizations (8% of the sample) responding with rates higher than that were coded at 20%.
4. Principal factor analysis with iterations was used with a varimax rotation. All five items were entered into the analysis. A single dominant factor emerged that explained 78% of the variance after rotation and had an eigen value of 2.06. All items loaded more highly onto this factor than any other, at .8, .8, .4, .4, and .4, respectively. All five items also have similar relationships to dependent variables of interest, as evidenced by the strength and direction of the relationships in sample regressions. Chronbach's alpha was .74.
5. In many cases, the responses were not very revealing. For example, the response "foster care" could easily be interpreted to mean either improved administrative functioning, or for improvements in services for clients. In such cases, responses were coded as advocating for "both."

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