

Center for Children's Initiatives New Name, Ongoing Mission

One part direct services to parents; one part technical assistance for early childhood practitioners; and one part advocacy for systemic change. That was the recipe that created the Center for Children's Initiatives (CCI) – known until recently as Child Care, Inc. – almost 30 years ago. That CCI formula also helped to establish a model for what is now a network of more than 800 Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) agencies across the nation. From then until now, CCI's work has involved providing assistance for parents in navigating what continues to be an extraordinarily complex world of child care programs and services, and offering guidance to policymakers and private funders on ways to improve access to and the quality of early care and education.

CCI was formed through the marriage of two small, grassroots organizations, explains Nancy Kolben, who has led the agency as executive director for more than 15 years.

"One was the Preschool Association of the West Side," says Kolben. "This was at a point when a lot of women began entering the workforce. It became very clear that parents needed help on how to find care for their children. It started with dedicated advocates at a kitchen table putting together a list of

what programs were available in the community."

The other group was Day Care Forum. "It was a strong grassroots advocacy organization that came into being in response to the cuts that were being proposed to child care in the late '70's," says Kolben. "State Senator Velmanette Montgomery was one of the founding mothers."

New York City was an exciting place to be for child care advocates and providers during the 1970's and '80's. Unlike many other parts of the country, a World War II surge in workforce participation by women – and the development of child care programs to accommodate the war effort – had never been entirely reversed in New York. During the early part of the '70's, uncapped Federal Title XX funding led to a major expansion of child care programming and the City itself had found ways to support the development of new child care facilities. "There was a huge investment," says Kolben. Then, in 1976, the economic roof fell in as the City hit its fiscal crisis.

Before long, the two groups – Preschool Association and Day Care Forum -- found themselves sharing space in the basement of Bank Street College. "It was pretty close," says Kolben. "There was a lot of collaboration on



Nancy Kolben

how to support early childhood programs in the community. Officially, we merged in 1982. But we really had merged operationally well before that." Day Care Forum's Tony Ward became the first Executive Director.

CCI continued to carry forward this dual focus of its two organizational parents – supporting families in their efforts to find appropriate child care and advocating for policies and practices to improve the system – and added a third, providing high quality training and technical assistance to New York City's broad array of child care providers and programs.

For CCI, the three strategies themselves create a continuous whole, with feedback coming through services for parents and early childhood practitioners informing the agency's policy agenda.

Supporting Parents

When CCI's founders first began compiling that list of child care programs back in the 1970s, they were mapping uncharted territory. "No one else was doing this," says Kolben. "There was no sim-



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ple way for a parent to get information. At that point you certainly couldn't go online."

While more information is now available to parents via the internet and other sources, the situation today may be even more challenging for parents.

"We maintain a database of all regulated child care programs," says Kolben. "That is almost 10,000 programs and providers."

The database includes all licensed early childhood programs in the city, based in centers, homes and schools. That includes Head Start and Early Head Start, Universal Pre-Kindergartens (UPK) in both public schools and community-based centers, and privately operated centers and nursery schools as well as family child care and group family child care. Access and eligibility requirements for financial assistance – as well as days and hours of operation – vary from program to program. To create a complete child care plan, CCI's counselors often help families apply for and enroll children in several programs at once, to cover various portions of the day, sometimes at separate locations.

"Our counselors assist over 4,000 parents every year to become informed consumers of child care, knowing more about what to look for, how to find it and how to pay for it," says Kolben. That includes letting parents know how to apply for subsidy, how to use child care tax credits and dependent care assistance plans in the workplace. On any given day the parent counselors speak to families with a range of needs and resources. Any family is eligible to utilize their service and families across the income spectrum call them.

CCI also works with employers interested in helping to meet the child care needs of their employees and major unions as they add child care benefits to their bargaining and public policy agenda.

In 1987, New York State began funding a network of CRR agencies to provide services for both parents and providers across the state. CCI currently participates in a five-agency consortium in New York City. CCI's partners in the effort are the Day Care Council of New York, Child Development Support Corporation, Chinese American Planning Council and Committee for

Infant Toddler Resource Center

It is ironic – and potentially tragic – that those children most in need of high quality child care – infants and toddlers – are those least likely to receive it. One problem is the sheer shortage of infant/toddler programs; another is the lack of appropriate training for many of those who do provide such care. The New York City Infant Toddler Resource Center, one of seven state-funded centers around the state, is working to address both of these issues.

The Center for Children's Initiatives coordinates the work of the center, founded five years ago, on behalf of the City's Child Care Resource and Referral Consortium. Together, the five agencies have created a team of multi-ethnic, multi-lingual infant specialists to disseminate best practices to providers already working with children under 3, to help those who wanted to add infant-toddler services and to support policymakers in their efforts to expand options for children under 3.

"Most program directors and teachers have experience in pre-school, but nothing in terms of training in child development from zero to three," says Julia Travers, Director of Infant Toddler Services at CCI. "It is an entirely different philosophy."

CCI helps providers to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their programs. "We use the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale," says Ms Travers. "It is an internationally recognized tool. We come in as colleagues. It's confidential. We assess the room and the interactions between children and staff. We share a report and then work together on improvements. We share resources and trainings."

CCI was active in the effort to increase licensing standards for infant/toddler programs.

Until September, there were no education requirements for infant/toddler teachers other than a GED. "It was incredible," says Betty Holcomb. "With all this research showing that 80% of brain development occurs before age two, you have the least trained staff with the least resources working with infants." Now, teachers in infant/toddler programs must be working toward an associates degree in early childhood education.

"We have worked with a lot of ACS programs that are transitioning to serving many more children under three. ACS invited us to train the teachers in these programs to understand how to structure a classroom to meet the needs of these younger children," says Rhonda Carlross Smith, Associate Executive Director.

In July, the group will host its second annual Citywide Infant Toddler Conference. Last year's conference drew more than 250 practitioners.

Hispanic Children and Families.

Recently, CCI has received special funding to provide support to families transitioning from public assistance to employment. "We just got a call from a parent who said she got a promotion because she wasn't late or absent after we helped stabilize her child care," says Carolyn Henriques, who supervises the unit.

CCI accomplishes this work with a small staff of two full time counselors supplemented by other CCI staff as needed. "We're good," says Carolyn Henriques.

The constant contact keeps CCI in touch with the issues that parents face in finding appropriate care. "We get so many calls from parents with babies," says Kolben. "Those parents are facing daunting problems in terms of finding care."

CCI helped organize a Better Baby Care Campaign in the late 1990's and to press for expanded access and improved care for children under 3. That campaign played a pivotal role in the creation of a network of Infant Toddler Resource Centers across the state. (See box below). This is a key example of the agency's feedback loop between direct service, technical assistance and advocacy.

Supporting Providers

CCI provides a wide range of technical assistance and other support services for child care programs. Initiatives include helping new programs start and existing centers to expand; strengthening the business management skills of family child care providers; and enhancing the quality of early childhood programs through both na-

tional accreditation and issue specific workshops.

"We want to be a resource that supports appropriate expansion of services," says Kolben. "We do everything from helping people through a start-up process to budgeting, planning, facilities development and financing."

Over the years, CCI has developed a variety of resources to guide the field in launching new programs and making their services more responsive to family needs. including such publications as "Before You Start" and "Operating Budgets for Child Care Centers."

Early in its history CCI recognized the importance of supporting the expansion of family child care, that is, care provided in home-based settings. These individuals are a primary source of care for many families, yet tended to operate in isolation, without access to professional development and technical support. CCI began to develop networks of support, which eventually grew. Some are now publicly-funded and not only provide professional development but also help connect families to services.

CCI has been a very strong advocate for expanding the number of community based networks, assisting close to 20 organizations establish themselves and expand.

"Back in the 1990s there were about 2,000 licensed Family Child Care providers, almost none outside of the ACS subsidized system," she says. "Now, we have built up to about 5,000. This effort significantly expanded the opportunity for families to select regulated care with homes that have been inspected and where both caregivers and family members are fingerprinted and receive training."

Particularly interesting is the growth in Group Family Child Care providers, those who, with adequate space in their homes and the help of an aide, can care for up to 12 children. "The economics of the business model make more sense," says Kolben. "We now have close to 3,000 regulated Group Family Child Care Providers." These programs tend to be more stable and are an important resource to families.

CCI provides support to them in two critical ways. The first is to help them complete the rigorous regulatory

The Entrepreneurship Project

CCI's Entrepreneurship Project is a three-year program that helps Family Child Care and Group Family Child Care providers to both start-up and successfully run their businesses.

"We help them think through their program and the type of program they want to run," says Cynthia Pearson, Coordinator of Family Child Care. "We have speakers come in and talk about the business aspects of running a program. We help them develop a business plan and their marketing strategies. We give them information about taxes and tax planning. We have peer support groups where they can share ideas and information."

"Often, providers feel that all they have to do is open their door and the children will come," says CCI Executive Director Nancy Kolben. "It is not that easy." The program helps the new entrepreneurs to think through ways of attracting different types of families – those with child care subsidies and those who self-pay.

During the first year, the project helps both existing un-licensed providers and new providers just entering the field through the steps necessary to obtain a family child care license from the Department of Health.

In year two, CCI assists the newly licensed providers to fine-tune their marketing and business operations.

In year three, the project helps providers begin preparing to renew their licenses. "We work with them to make sure they are meeting their training requirements," says Pearson.

Now in its third year, the Entrepreneurship Project has worked with over 100 providers. And, it is making a difference, with 90% of program participants surviving that critical first year of operation.

process. The second is to help these small businesses survive and thrive. Without such support, CCI found many were going out of business in their first year.

"They are in a small business and they need the skills to manage that business," says Kolben. CCI's Entrepreneurship Project (See: box at upper right) has been successful in arming providers with these critical skills.

CCI also offers professional development to improve the quality and range of services. Trainings cover such topics as early literacy, health promotion and child development.

"Right now, our health care consultants are providing training to providers on how to safely administer medication including use of inhalers for children with asthma," explains Rhonda Carlross Smith, CCI's Associate Executive Director.

Healthy eating is another ongoing focus, with a new effort to address obesity in young children. Cynthia Pearson, a CCI trainer, uses vials filled with sugar or salt to drive home the amounts of these ingredients in fast foods, sodas, low-fat chocolate milk and even juices. The visual images have an impact. "It leads to changes in behaviors," says

Pearson. "One program began introducing more water instead of juice and more fresh fruits instead of processed foods."

In 2002, CCI launched Quality New York, a major new initiative aimed at improving the quality of center-based programs. The effort, created in partnership with the Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies and Bank Street College, helped programs develop a plan for quality improvement and seek national accreditation. QNY provides programs with a series of structured supports, including peer learning, workshops, professional development programs and an individual Quality Advisor.

"It is a rigorous process," says Judy Ennes, Director of Special Projects. "But it is one that is very valuable. It is a self-study system that helps people look at where they are and where they need to be."

"It enhances a program's sense of professionalism," says Michelle Washington. "Very often our teachers are looked at as glorified babysitters. But, if they achieve accreditation, they feel that they are at the top of their profession. They can articulate what they do and why they do it."

Quality New York has worked with over 200 early childhood programs and over 100 have been awarded national accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Until recently, grant funding allowed services to be provided at no cost to programs. Going forward, CCI will offer the QNY package of supports on a fee-for-service basis for programs seeking NAEYC accreditation.

"A lot of this work will also be connected to the effort to create Quality Stars, a statewide system of improvement that is being field tested in 13 communities," says Kolben. That system will award stars to child care programs, based on quality assessments – effectively creating a consumer's guide for families. CCI has partnered with the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families to help coordinate part of the QUALITYStarsNY field test in New York City. Under the new system, accreditation would be the automatic equivalent of reaching the top star.

Promoting Systemic Change

Armed with daily input on the real life challenges facing both parents and providers, CCI plays a major advocacy role in shaping public policy on early care and learning both in New York City and Albany. CCI's perspective is particularly important given the extraordinarily fragmented nature of funding, diversity of service providers and the lack of policy coordination among city and state agencies.

"There isn't a locus of primary responsibility," says Kolben. "Head Start funding is federal to local; child care funding is state to counties; pre-k funding is state to local school districts. You have the City Health Department doing regulations and inspections; you have OCFS, ACS and DOE laying out program requirements. There are programs with DOH licenses that don't have any interactions at all with those other funding agencies."

CCI attempts to step back and view this tangled web as a single system – then unravel the knots which block creation of comprehensive, high quality programming for children and families.



CCI provides a broad range of training and workshops for early childhood programs and their staff.

Its "2008 CCI Primer: Key Facts about Early Care and Education in New York City" offers an overview of the early childhood landscape and key issues confronting parents, providers and policy makers.

The agency has been particularly active in looking at the interrelationships of programmatic funding streams in New York City where providers are often forced to weave ACS contracts, UPK funding, Head Start, vouchers and private pay options into a single extended day of care and early childhood education.

CCI's "What It Costs" series of studies have created generic model budgets for half-day, full-day and extended-day early childhood programs with explicit assumptions about staffing structures, salary expenses and other costs necessary to meet regulatory and service quality guidelines. These budget models have provided a reality-based framework through which to assess the adequacy – or more often the inadequacy – of government proposals for reimbursement and contractual structures in various early childhood programs.

"Government needs to look at what it wants to buy and what it actually costs," says Kolben.

CCI does much of its advocacy work through partnerships and collaborations. "That is the way a small organization can make things happen," says Kolben.

The Early Childhood Strategy Group (ECSG), which CCI convened in 1998 to think about and help guide UPK implementation in New York

City, demonstrates CCI's ability to impact policy.

"We saw it as an incredible opportunity to reframe the discussion," says Kolben. "It wasn't about UPK as a separate program, it was about an investment in early childhood education. We convened a group of people we had worked with over the years and met every two weeks for about six years." ECSG helped bridge the divide between the Department of Education's public schools and community-based early childhood providers.

The outcome, says Betty Holcomb, CCI's Director of Public Policy, was an extremely successful rollout of UPK in New York City with community-based programs playing a significant role. "By the second year, there were 18,000 children enrolled statewide, with 14,000 of them here in New York City," says Holcomb. "That was a direct result of the work of ECSG and CCI." Today, there are more than 100,000 children enrolled in Pre K statewide, with nearly 56,000 in New York City.

CCI continues to work in collaborations with other groups. "We are a co-convenor of the Winning Beginning New York," says Kolben. This coalition, over 60 members strong, is the voice for early care and learning at the state level working to expand investments and improve quality of services from the prenatal months through third grade. That coalition works closely with national funders such as Pre-K Now and the Birth to Five Policy Alliance.

Early in its history, CCI was a leader in helping to found the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies and its Executive Director Nancy Kolben served as the second national President of the organization.

New Name, Old Mission

It is this record of accomplishment and a similar agenda for the future that prompted CCI to rename itself as the Center for Children's Initiatives.

"It better captures the scope of our work and our focus: taking action on behalf of young children and families," says Kolben.