



A Guide to County Children's Services Levy Campaign Development and Implementation

Prepared by PCSAO

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Developing Details and a Timetable for a Children Services Levy:

I. IDENTIFY AND DOCUMENT THE NEED

1. **Ask yourself why your agency needs this levy.** A response of, "we just need more money," is insufficient. Put the need in terms of positive outcomes for children, families, and the community.
2. **Analyze and determine the agency's budget expenditures and receipts for the next five years.** We know this seems an impossible task because there are so many variables, but do your best. Plot these out on a spreadsheet and show the surplus or deficit each of the five years.
3. **Look back five years at various trends that drive your agency's need for more funding.** Sometimes, what is aggravating us most at a certain time, is not what is actually causing our financial problems. Identify the number of children who came into care because their families were dependent on substances; acute or chronic mental illness; health needs of children and Parents; homelessness; unsafe housing; unruly and delinquent youth; the ages of children coming into care; how long each age stays in foster care, etc.
4. **Examine the children in your custody on any given day.** What types of placements are they in; what was their adjudication and what is the reason they are in placement; how long have they been in placement; what do the placements cost for each child; what do you need to have to return each child safely to his/her birth home; what do you need for each child to have another safe, permanent home if they cannot return to their birth home; etc.?
5. **Define what services will be lost to children and families if this levy does not pass.** How will these cuts increase the vulnerability of children; contracts with community providers; schools; etc.? Again, do this positively.

As you compile this information, you may choose to use all of it, some of it, or none of it. However, it will give you access to information you may not have had before in front of you for consideration.

II. DISCUSS THE LEVY WITH THE BOARD (IF APPLICABLE) AND THE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Use the information you have compiled to convince the Board and the County Commissioners that you need this levy. Presentations should be made in a strategic manner. We are asking the county commissioners to place a tax issue before the voters of the county. Commissioners have been branded as "tax and spend" officials for doing this at times when they had to run for re-election. Give them clear and convincing data which they can use to counteract such attacks should this occur to them.

An Aside: Do not limit these discussions to levy time. Maintain monthly face to face contact with commissioners at a minimum. Create value for the work that the children services agency does. Otherwise, the only two times that you will come before the county commissioners is when you are in financial trouble or there has been a child tragedy, neither of which is good, but are particularly bad if you have no relationship with them.



III. OBTAIN PROSECUTOR'S OPINION REGARDING LEVY PROCEDURES

Meet with your county prosecutor and request that s/he issue a formal opinion regarding ballot language (including renewal and replacement levies), campaign accounting filing deadlines, timelines for county commissioners' resolutions, and any other procedures that need to be statutorily complied with. This will supply you with a road map from your legal advisor and eliminate any disappointments and negative interpretations, which may occur down the line.

IV. RESEARCH BOARD OF ELECTION RESULTS OF PAST LEVY ISSUES

1. **Meet with the County Board of Elections and secure precinct-by-precinct results of MR/DD, Mental Health, and other human services levies for the past five years (or the most recent of each).**
2. **Ask the Board of Elections to provide you an estimate of how many people will vote in the election in which your issue will run.**
3. **Develop your own ballot language for the issue and negotiate its contents with the County Board of Elections.** If the language differs from the statutory language (this happens all the time), the Board must submit the proposed language to the Secretary of State for final approval. You may want to contact several other PCSA's to get examples of their ballot language.
4. **Using the information gathered in Item IV-1 begin to identify where you might target the brunt of your campaign efforts.** Divide the precincts into thirds: those that almost always support levies; those where the vote is usually very close on levy issues; and those that traditionally vote down levy issues. You only have so much time. Develop campaign plans to target the precincts where issues are almost always passed and those where the vote is generally close. Think about who can be recruited in those areas to help you; how will you get your message out, etc.

V. OBTAIN LEVY INFORMATION FROM THE COUNTY AUDITOR

1. **Determine your agency's specific financial needs.** You should have this information after you have completed your five-year projections.
2. **Meet with your county auditor to determine what millage is necessary to meet your agency's needs.** *Note here:* While you should only ask for the millage which will meet your projections, experience has shown that it makes little difference to the voting public whether they are voting on an eight-tenths mil levy or a one-mil levy. If a situation like this should occur for you, go for the one mil. There will likely be contingencies you could not foresee arise in the five to ten years that the levy will generate funds and the additional two-tenths mil will be used. As stated earlier, if a voter is inclined to support your levy, s/he will do so regardless of two tenths mill difference.
3. **Do your best to gain the County Auditor's support of your levy issue.**

VI. OBTAIN THE RESOLUTION FROM THE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Make certain that the County Commissioners resolution accurately reflects what you agreed to in terms of millage amount; whether it is a new, renewal, or replacement levy; the duration the levy will be in effect; the date the levy will begin to generate funds for your use; the date the election will be held, etc. This may sound ridiculous; but there have been instances in which each of these variables has been inaccurately recorded in a resolution. Human error and misunderstanding can lead to long-term problems for you. Take a moment to check.



VII. ISSUE DEVELOPMENT

There are four basic matters you will need to address for a successful children services levy. While these questions may seem elementary, they are not. Take time to analyze each question and use it to build the campaign for passage of your levy.

A. Consider the Issue

- **What is the specific action or decision you desire?** Obviously, you want voter approval of your levy.
- **What is the preferred outcome of the campaign?** Again, you want voter approval, but you also want increased public understanding of what the children services agency does and does not do to increase the safety of children; the stability of families; and strengthening the community as a result of these efforts.
- **What will you consider as victory?** What you need is 50% of the popular vote + one to pass a levy. Many people run successful levies and have been completely disappointed because they only got 55% of the vote. A 55% to 45% return in a candidate race for public office is a near landslide.
- Likewise, many people spend time in areas (precincts), which will never support a tax issue and neglect the areas that usually support tax issues. When they lose their issue by a narrow margin, they wonder why. Always solidify your supportive base first. Then go after the marginal areas next. If you have time, then go into the areas that seldom support tax issues. Remember, you only have so much time and energy. Have a plan based on the research you did in section IV of this paper and stick to it.

B. Identify the Target

Identify the people or group(s) of people who have both the authority and resources to implement the desired action or decision.

Develop a stakeholder's map of individuals or groups that can and will contribute to the passage of your levy. Think in terms of civic leaders, churches, corporate leaders, the media, elected officials, union leaders, foster and adoptive parents, etc. Think in terms of names not organizations! Also, think in terms of those who can help you raise money for your levy campaign (corporate and civic leaders); those who can have access to groups of voters (churches, unions); and those who can do both, then create a stakeholder map:

1. Write down these names on a sheet of paper.
2. Determine whether you can pick up the phone and call each of these people.
3. If you cannot, strategize how you can develop a relationship with the person and create value within him/her to support your issue.
4. Identify exactly what you want from the individual.
5. Implement your strategies. Maintain the results of your contacts on your stakeholders map. This map will not be static and should change regularly. Track your efforts weekly. This will also help you to see how your campaign is succeeding. Remember, you need 50% + one to pass your levy, not everyone.

C. Determine the Message

This is a one-sentence statement that represents the core of your argument. The message is the one thing that you want firmly planted in the mind(s) of your target. All strategic communication should contain this message. Decide what your message will be and include it on and in everything you do during and after the campaign. Within this document are the highlights of the PCSAO focus group research. **The public told us that it values safe children, stable families, and strong communities.** We have chosen to weave these values into all we do at the Association.



The purpose of the message is to pass your levy, not public education. Public education is what you should be doing at all other times, not during a levy campaign. Your public education message should eventually cover all aspects of your agency. That is too broad a message for a levy. Remember, your levy message must be simple.

It is best if your message can be put into a simple visualization. An example could be a “1, 2, 3 message”: (1)-the number of intake referrals has gone up a ___% in the last 3 years; (2)-the amount of state or federal support has decreased ___% in the last 3 years; and (3)- the agency wants to continue to provide quality services to children at risk. You can add to this visualization by showing an arrow slanting up for (1); an arrow slanting down for (2); and an arrow going horizontal for (3). This simple is a visual message that people can visualize and understand. This type of message can be used whether you are going for a first levy, a renewal, or a replacement. The main message received is you want to **continue** to do a good job. The message is simple and positive.

D. Develop Strategic Tactics

These are the specific methods you will employ to convey your message most persuasively. Early decisions must be made as to whether you plan to run a media campaign or grassroots campaign. Media campaigns are very costly, but reach a large number of people easily. Grassroots campaigns are much cheaper, but must have a significant number of volunteers to be effective. Grassroots campaigns approximate the success of door-to-door political campaigns. People like to have access to those who are the beneficiaries of the campaign so they can ask questions and get answers. Service clubs such as the Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions are readily accessible to you. You can reach a large number of community people and answer their questions over lunch. Additionally, in many areas, the media covers these meetings so you also get the benefit of media coverage at the same time. One cannot question a television, newspaper, or radio as easily. Whatever your decision, you should adjust your stakeholders map, mentioned above, accordingly.

VIII. UTILIZE CITIZEN GROUP AND VOLUNTEER COMMITTEES, APPOINT CAMPAIGN CHAIR AND TREASURER

- 1. Use your stakeholder map to identify 10 to 15 prominent people who represent your county’s business, civic and religious communities.** Meet with each of these people individually to share the need for the levy; what you have done with the money you currently have; and what you will do with the money you will receive if the levy passes. Ask these individuals to formally endorse your campaign; assist with your fund raising efforts; recruit ten other business colleagues; or endorse the levy during their congregational sermons. Know exactly what you want from each of these individuals before you meet with them.
- 2. Use your stakeholder map to identify one prominent individual to serve as your campaign chair and another to serve as your treasurer.** These people should be well grounded in the community and have impeccable reputations.
- 3. Recruit a volunteer committee: These will be your workers.** They should be trained and knowledgeable about the issues. They can be used for public speaking; opening doors to individuals you have identified on your stakeholders map, but with whom you have no current relationship; door to door information sharing; delivering a message to a group with whom you have no relationship; “pounding signs”, etc. **These individuals should be recruited from every critical geographic area of the county.**
- 4. Make sure your own staff is on board and everyone is registered to vote.** If your staff is unionized, meet with your union staff president and the negotiator for the union. Passage of the levy means jobs and ultimately dues for the union. It is in its best interests to assist you during the campaign. There have been unions who have printed agency levy brochures, free of charge, as long as the brochure contains the name of the union and the agency officers. If you can negotiate this sort of arrangement, the union logo will be helpful in your attracting other union votes during the campaign.



5. **Be sure your campaign is citizen driven and staff supported.** It is most important that your Citizen Committee actually runs the levy campaign. Agency staff needs to play a supporting role because they have the information and expertise the committee needs. The Citizen Committee must be visible in the community and a perceived as running the campaign. The public easily can differentiate who is running the campaign. If it is perceived that staff is running the levy, it is easy to also perceive the purpose is for staff benefits and salary. When the public sees citizens running the levy, they see other citizens recognizing the agency's needs.
6. **Develop a Fact Sheet.** One of the very first things you need to do is develop a Fact Sheet. This one to two page document should capture all of the information that volunteers, staff and other stakeholders will use for the entire campaign. Everything you and the volunteers will need for the campaign will be on the Fact Sheet. The Fact Sheet should contain information like your annual report. List (not define) the basic services of the agency: cite the agency budget, how many staff you employ; the number of children you serve, etc. Include any trends that show increased need from the levy, how much money the levy will produce, etc. Remember you are writing this Fact Sheet for people who don't know and don't need to know all of the details of Children Services. Too much information on the Fact Sheet can lead to too much information on all of your levy materials. **The fact sheet does not go to anyone outside the campaign.** The information here is different from what you may share with the media or other outside groups.
7. **Create a Speakers Bureau.** It is important to use citizens as much as possible for the levy campaign speaker's bureau. When staff speaks at service clubs such Rotary, Kiwanis, etc., they also can be perceived as motivated by personal gain. When a member of Rotary speaks to their peers about the Children Services message, people listen. A staff person should accompany the volunteer to be available to answer difficult questions. Since the message is simple and scripted for the volunteer, they should have no problem representing the agency and the levy message.

IX. CULTIVATE YOUR MEDIA

Meet with the editor, editorial board, and/or human services reporter of your local paper(s). Hopefully, you have an established relationship with your media prior to your levy campaign. If not, you may be at a deficit, but not an insurmountable one. Share the information you have developed with those people. Be available to answer their questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Pitch three or four stories that they can cover during the actual levy campaign. One should involve a family who lost their children and with the help of community services regained custody. Another should deal with an emancipated foster child who has done well (A Rising Up and Moving On award recipient) or a foster parent who has fostered many children over the years. The last should deal with an adoptive family. See if the media would be willing to run features on these three families during the last month of the campaign. Remember, this is free advertising for your agency prior to or during your levy campaign. They may or may not mention your agency is also involved in a levy campaign.

When your levy passes, provide unsolicited information on a regular basis to the media to show what you have done with the funds, which the community has voted for you. Maintain a very public presence so the public knows what you do and why you do it. This makes levy renewal much easier when you have to run again.

X. GET THE WORD OUT: THE CAMPAIGN OFFICIALLY BEGINS ON LABOR DAY

1. **During this period appear at all of the service clubs; granges; township trustees meetings; and other venues which take place in your county.** Keep your presentations simple; weave your message into everything you say; and be available to answer all possible questions. This coverage is free exposure. People get to see you and who you are. It offers a chance to build additional credibility in the community. If you use a speakers' bureau, make sure that an agency person accompanies the speaker to answer any technical questions which might be asked. If a question is asked that you cannot answer tell the group you will find out and provide the answer to the club leader the next day. Then do it.



2. **Take your Message Door to Door.** Use trained volunteers who can answer questions. Again, if asked a question they do not have an answer for, get the resident's home phone, get the answer, and call them back that evening or the next day. This responsiveness builds enormous credibility with people.
3. **Develop Brochures.** Distribute brochures door to door; through churches, elementary schools, and advertising bags; in church bulletins; grocery stores with each order of groceries bagged; etc.
4. **Institute a Ten-Name Campaign.** Have every staff member and volunteer talk to ten family members or friends who will vote yes on your issue. Keep track of these individuals and mail the post card the weekend before Election Day reminding them to vote for your issue.
5. **Make sure all printed communication contain your issue number and ballot language.** Encourage people to take the brochure into the voting booth with them so they can recognize your issue and vote for it.
6. **Develop a Signature List-** Developing a signature list is one simple way to get many people involved in the campaign; gain a commitment from many citizens; develop a list of names for a later newspaper ad; and raise some money for the campaign. Put the name and logo or levy theme of the levy at the top of a 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper with a simple message: "those signing below support the Children Services levy (Issue X) and agree to have their name placed in an ad for the levy." Also ask for a small donation (one to five dollars) to cover the cost of the ad. This signature list can be distributed to staff, foster parents, and any other levy volunteers. The money collected can be turned over to the levy campaign treasurer.
7. **Consider all Media Opportunities.** In addition to newspaper, T.V., and radio, don't forget cable T.V. They can provide some free advertisement as well as very inexpensive paid ads. Rather than hundreds of yard signs, try some 4-foot by 4-foot signs strategically located around the county. With a simple message like: Vote for Issue X- Children Services Levy.

XI. POST CAMPAIGN ACTIVITIES

1. **Clean up your materials immediately after the campaign or put thank you stickers on your signs and remove one week after the election.**
2. **Maintain your visibility in the media.** Show children and families who were assisted by the levy. Keep your agency in front of the community on an ongoing basis.
3. **Thank the voters with one last newspaper ad.** Celebrate the victory and recognize all who contributed. Have a Levy Committee recognition party or get together where you recognize the Levy Chair(s) and other key volunteers with a small token of appreciation. Volunteers who are recognized will come back again to help the agency.
4. **Within thirty days, conduct an Post-election analysis to determine where you did well and where you did not.** Use this information to begin planning for your next levy.
5. **Follow up with the Campaign Treasurer to be certain that all post election forms are filed with the local Board of Elections.** Also check to see what is done with any leftover funds.



PCSAO Focus Group Research: The Key to a Successful Campaign

Presentation, presentation, presentation is absolutely vital to convey our message. Doing the right thing in the wrong way wastes precious time and energy. First of all, dump the jargon, acronyms, and other clichés that professions tend to use. Use of these causes the public to shut down and not hear what is being said. If the information is not heard, it will not be evaluated. No value will be created. Second, keep your campaign simple. Stay on message. What follows is what the focus group research told us the public values. Obviously, if you attempted to include everything mentioned below in your campaign, the public would be overwhelmed. Again, keep the presentation simple! However, you should be ready to provide the information below if you are asked the question. When you are asked one of these questions, you should also present the information in the format prescribed e.g. percentages, etc. More than forty focus groups have been held and all have consistently stated these are the things they value and use to evaluate the public children services agency's performance.

General Information about Child Abuse and Neglect

1. The public believes that the job of the child protection agency is to protect children from abuse and neglect when the child's family is unwilling or unable to do so. The public believes that this is the mission of the child protection agency. All communication should refer to increasing the safety of children who are at risk of abuse and neglect.
2. The telephone number to be called to report child abuse and neglect should be included on or in all communications to the public.
3. The public should be told that all reports of suspected child abuse and neglect are thoroughly investigated
4. The public should be told the stages of a case (see case log). If the agency does not find evidence of abuse or neglect, the case is closed. If evidence is found, services are provided when possible and appropriate. If the family refuses services, the agency can turn to the juvenile court for help to increase the safety of the children.
5. The public believes that children should be kept in their own homes as long as they can be kept there safely. Communications should include information that the agency makes reasonable (not extraordinary) efforts to keep children in their own homes. The safety of the child is the measure as to whether this can be done or not.
6. The services provided to families should be described.
7. The public should be told that the police and district attorney determine whether a parent should be charged with a crime as a result of child abuse or neglect. This information should include the fact that social workers make a recommendation concerning the removal of a child from his/her home. However, the judge makes the final determination.
8. It is important to communicate that casework services are provided until the safety of the child improves. Then the case is closed.



Information about Foster Care and Adoption

1. It is clear that what matters most to the public is a safe and stable environment for children. Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that all foster parents are thoroughly investigated before they become foster parents.
2. The percentage of children who live in only one foster home and are not transferred to other foster homes is important to the public. The public wants stability for these children when they cannot stay with their parents. If your percentages are not good, do not use them.
3. The public should be told the percentage of children who can be safely reunited with their parents after the Child Safety Network has provided the necessary services to increase safety. The public wants to know that children are in safe and stable situations, and their first choice is with their parents. This information gives them a sense that the system is “working.” If your percentages are not good, do not use them.
4. The public is not particularly interested in the number of foster homes that might be needed to care for children who cannot safely remain with their parents. However, they are interested in the number of children needing foster homes.
5. The public wants to know that children who are eligible for adoption are actually being adopted. If your percentages are not good, do not use them.

General Information about Children Services Agencies

1. The public believes that the most important measure or proof of staff competence is the number of hours of in-service training they have received while on the job.
2. The percentage of agency staff with Masters in Social Work degrees and licenses is important and should be used if that percentage is high. If your percentages are not good, do not use them.
3. The public places little value on bachelor degrees (“too general”) or years of experience (“can’t get rid of anyone in civil service”).
4. Caseload ratios per worker are important to the public; however, there is risk to using these numbers. If the ratio per worker is unreasonable high, the public feels the agency cannot be doing a good job increasing the safety of children.
5. The annual agency budget figure should be included in all communication campaigns, but not overly emphasized. Additionally, the intergovernmental breakdown of funding (local, state, or federal) is unimportant to the public because the public feels it is all their money anyway.

Information about the Juvenile Court

The public should be told:

1. That the final decision to remove a child from the home is made by the court, not the social worker.
2. The court demands proof of abuse and neglect prior to removing children from the home. Many focus group participants expressed concern that children were removed from their homes based on “hearsay” or misrepresentation of a situation.



3. That when parents are unwilling or unable to change the pattern of abuse or neglect, the court can decide to remove the child from the home. There are several important parts to this statement. First, the public wants to know that children are safe. However, they also want to know that families have the opportunity to solve their problems with help. When a decision is made to remove a child, it is based on proof.
4. The judge listens to all sides and legal counsel represents all sides.
5. In general, the vast majority of the public did not know the role of the court in these decisions. That role must be clearly communicated in all public information campaigns.

Using Numbers

In general, the public does not trust statistics. When they are used, they should be used as comparative percentages within a context. If you use statistics put them into terms that the public can use to evaluate the agency's performance. Speak to values and big ideas. Use your statistics to show movement toward the attainment of those values and big ideas. Believe it or not, agency staff and boards can share the same misconceptions as the general public. Careful work and education must be provided to assure staff has the opportunity to understand the mission of the agency. Training, support, and other interventions must be applied when needed.

The Media

The media has enormous potential to influence your ability to gain increased permission and authorization from the community and elected officials to accomplish the agency's major goals and desired outcomes. Conversely, the media has the same potential to influence the withholding of this permission and authorization. Controversy sells and success stories often do not. Our goal is not to be friends with the media, but to have a friendly and trusting relationship with a well-informed media.

If the public children services agency does not have a relationship with the media, the suggestions below cannot be accomplished in a levy campaign. The time is too short. However, the process can be begun. When the levy campaign is completed, continue to work on these activities so that during the next levy campaign, you will have a more informed and hopefully supportive media.

Activities

1. Develop a written news media policy for your agency. This policy should clearly articulate that the agency is a public agency and for it to be successful in achieving its mission, must have public support. Positive media relations is one means to gain the public support
2. Secure media training for the staff that you have identified to be in contact with the media. A reporter is a trained professional in the field of media. For the most part, agency staff members are amateurs. They need to understand how the media works and what it is looking for so that they can respond effectively. Impart to staff the philosophy that the media is vital to building legitimacy and support from the agency's authorizing environment.
3. Establish ongoing, personal contact with reporters and editors. Meet with them regularly. Send them informative materials regularly. It is not important that they print everything sent to them. However, this effort will provide educational materials which will benefit the agency in the long run. Consider having the reporter spend a day or more with an agency social worker. Assuming that appropriate releases and guarantees of confidentiality are in hand, this exercise can be very valuable in familiarizing the media with what the Agency does and its complexity. Be a reliable source of information that the media can count on.



4. Learn how reporters do their jobs. Spend a day or part of one with a reporter. This time not only provides you with an education of what they do, but also indicates that you are serious about improving media relations.
5. Create a 24 hour media hotline to answer reporters' questions and publish its availability to the media.
6. Give the reporter a table of organization for the agency.
7. Give the reporter the process a case goes through from the time a report of suspected abuse or neglect is made to the agency to the point where a child is adopted so he (or she) can see the involvement of the district attorney, court, mental health services, substance abuse services, and others in a case. Illustrate the Children's Safety Net.
8. Give the reporter the appropriate laws, which clearly explain what information you can share and what you cannot share. This will become useful in times of crisis. Do it in times when there is no crisis.
9. Constantly collect data concerning the characteristics of the children and families of your community. Be honest on what needs the agency and the Children's Safety Net can meet, are meeting, or are not meeting.