



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy.

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Bipartisan Efforts to Improve Economic Opportunities for Families | Aug. 30, 2018 | OAS Episode 42

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

The success and sustainability of families is critical to the overall wellbeing of our nation states. State legislators seeking to bolster economic opportunities for families in their districts have many challenging factors to consider and a wide field of policy options to choose from. To navigate this complex policy area, some of the best available tools for lawmakers are the wealth of knowledge developed by their colleagues and the work and guidance of national experts.

The National Conference of State Legislatures annual Economic Opportunities for Families meeting is a rare opportunity when those resources converge. Since 2003, 40 states have participated in this gathering developing multifaceted policy plans to build their workforce, provide asset development options for families, and give additional support to workers to keep them on track.

Hundreds of new enactments have been developed at the meetings. The 2018 meeting took place in Denver. We have three guests on the podcast today that we interviewed at the June meeting. Patrick McCarthy, who is the president and chief executive officer of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, will talk about the organization’s latest Kids Count report and why his foundation funds these meetings.

We’ll also talk with Georgia State Representative Katie Dempsey (R) who attended the meeting and has taken ideas back to her state for implementation.

First we will talk with NCSL’s president, Illinois Senator Toi Hutchinson (D), who opened the conference. Tell us a little bit about why you are here. I understand that you gave some opening remarks to the forum tonight. What did you tell the attendees?

Toi: Economic opportunity for families is one of the driving forces of how you change a neighborhood. The crux of a neighborhood is those individual households. They’re the kids who live in your house and go to school at the neighborhood schools. They’re the people you see in

the grocery stores. They're the conversations you have when you see your neighbor at the cleaners or you see them at church on Sunday and you talk about how things are going for you.

The only way to change neighborhoods, which are the building blocks for a community, which are the building blocks for a state, which are really who we are as a country, is when you concentrate on the family. So those policies that we all care about... this is one of those conferences that lends itself so beautifully to wherever you are on the political spectrum.

If it's true that we're little laboratories of democracy, which is what we used to call states here at NCSL, then being able to network with colleagues and come up with best practices and talk to people who you may not agree with on a whole bunch of other things, I've never met a single solitary legislator that didn't show up in their districts wanting families to be as strong as they could possibly be.

We may have all different kinds of ways to get there, but I've never met anybody elected to office at the state level that wasn't acutely concerned about the needs and the opportunities we have to strengthen families economically so that we can change whole neighborhoods. It's a crux of who I am as a legislator; it's just an incredible opportunity to be at a conference like this.

Gene: So why should it be important for legislators? Are we talking about urban and rural? What's the mix here? What kinds of communities are you really wanting to improve?

Toi: See, I think that's the other thing about the dynamic of the conversations that happen in the country right now. Number 1: there aren't too many cross conversations, so urban folks aren't talking to rural folks, and vice versa. So I say in the State of Illinois, like we have 102 counties – 95 of those counties look more like each other than any of the five greater Chicago metropolitan areas, and we need people to see what those places look like and talk to folks so you can understand what a daily life thing is like there. That really is a core part of relationship building.

Here, Maryland is here, Utah is here, Alabama is here, Georgia is here – each of those states has urban centers and they all have rural centers. The fact that we are having so many siloed conversations where those conversations don't cross into the other silos I think is killing us as a nation.

And one of the things I'm really proud of as it relates to NCSL, the work that we do with our grant partners – so it's important for people to be here because it's an opportunity we can't afford to miss at a time when polarization is at its all-time high, cynicism is at its all-time high, and at any given point in time you ought to be able to sit in somebody's room someplace and find something that you can agree on.

And the one thing I think, if you talk long enough and you give yourself enough time to listen long enough, is that strong families build strong communities. And that starts with economic empowerment.

Gene: So I understand Illinois is the 40th state to participate...

Toi: I know. It's our first time!

Gene: ...in the forum. What are you hoping to take away from it when it's over?

Toi: I've been carrying paid family sick leave for a long time in Illinois, and I understand that people come to that from a whole lot of different perspectives. I still think fundamentally that you shouldn't have to choose between a sick day and whether or not you can take care of a child or a parent.

I am one of those working mothers who is in the sandwich. I just got out of the stage of school-age children; my youngest kid just graduated from high school and I have no idea how to process that yet. But I do know that I am charged with caring for aging parents and aging grandparents at the same time. I'm in my earning potential years and you would think that oh wow, congratulations, you're about to be an empty nester. But I'm really not because I have to take care of my parents and my grandparents.

And it's difficult. If I have to take off work or if I have to figure out a way to get my mother or grandmother to a doctor's appointment when I can't claim them on my benefits, they're people in my family that I love and I cannot imagine me being the able-bodied adult where the torch is being passed, I'm looking to hear as many different kinds of perspectives as they relate to how you can support working parents.

Wherever you come from politically on whether you should have the baby, whether you should not have the baby, whether the state has any role in that – all of those conversations lead into what happens when you have the baby, and that's one of the things where I say, as someone who is a very strong supporter of reproductive rights, that's not just about if I don't want to have the baby. That's also if I do.

And where I hope to find common ground is on people who agree when I do want to have the baby. And what does it look like to be a full participant in the economic stream raising children with the supports that I need when I know that people are living longer, which means my responsibilities are going to endure past my children into my parents? If I could just sit at a table with someone and put the hard parts of those conversations aside and just related on that level...

Like, do you take care of your mom? What was it like when your grandfather got cancer? What was it like when you were trying to keep them out of a nursing home or maybe wanted to give them the dignity to die at home? What was it like when you really couldn't take a day off because you were out of sick days that day? What was it like? Can we have that talk?

And then maybe if we have that talk, the vitriol will be slightly lessened. And all I really need is an opening to talk to someone who I may not agree with at all, so that they can hear me and I can hear them. That may sound incredibly naïve, but 1) I don't hide from the fact that I lead with my heart, and 2) I think most people would agree that you have certain lived experiences and I have certain lived experiences, and we ought to be able to be in the same room and talk about them.

Gene: You mentioned some legislation that you've been a part of before. Have you done other things for family economic opportunities in Illinois?

Toi: Economic opportunities for families is not a siloed conversation. Everything relates to everything else. So in Illinois, we have a very strong childcare program that was based upon a CCAP program, which is a federal/state program. It was actually created by Newt Gingrich in the Contract for America in I think it was '94 or so. And it said: if you go to work or you go to school, that we would help you with childcare, because we're trying to tell people to better themselves.

So I'm a really big proponent of when folks do what it is we tell them to do, that we should be there for them so that at some point they don't need to take assistance like that. So early childhood education and childcare when you know that that bachelor's degree is just within reach, or that nursing license is just within reach, or you have figured out this is what I want to be and I know I'm going to be able to lift my whole family if I can get this, but your choice is trying to decide where or how you're going to cobble together childcare, which unfortunately in this country full-freight childcare for two children is equivalent to a college education at this point.

Families cannot get ahead when they're hampered by policies like that. And childcare and early childhood learning is one of those sweet spots I think that never used to be partisan. So I am committed to working at the earliest stages, to doing everything we can to help folks get their college degrees, and to not be saddled with ridiculous amounts of debt afterwards so you're starting behind the eight ball before you even... How do you buy that first house or get married or even try to have a baby when you're saddled with that much debt out the door?

So I'm interested in how people think about that and what people have to say about that. And yes, you can talk about that from a Midwestern point of view, you can talk about it from the eastern seaboard; you can say: What are the southern states doing? That's the magic really of NCSL and our grant-making partnerships that we have across the country in all of these areas. It is an opportunity to do what my grandmother said all the time: you have two ears and one mouth so you can listen more than you talk.

Gene: Right. And the bipartisan nature of NCSL helps to make these things more achievable?

Toi: Yes, and I do say it opens the door for people to understand different perspectives. And again, this does not mean that when it comes down to actually voting on individual policies, and I'm asking anybody to come off their political priorities or what they believe in their principles. You can expand the debate without demonizing who you're talking to, and I really think that the tone of our discourse today is the thing that is probably more heartbreaking than anything else because we miss so many opportunities.

I didn't get elected to not help and I didn't get elected to have somebody walk up to me and me tell them: there's nothing I can do for you; do it yourself. That's not why I'm here. So even when it's hard, even when it's uncomfortable, I'm willing to learn. Like I'm the incoming President; I'm a very strong Democrat; I've been a Democrat all my life. I believe wholeheartedly in working people and supporting families and trying to figure out how to be the voice for the folks that don't have one.

Now the next president that's coming in is Speaker Robin Vos from Wisconsin. Ideologically speaking, we couldn't be farther apart. But the one thing we agree on is the EITC; it's the Earned Income Tax Credit. And he spent a fair amount of time trying to figure out how better to make

that work in Wisconsin for working families. I respect that. It's an area for which I think both of us can sit there and have a really interesting conversation, 1) about Midwestern states because we border each other, and 2) just about how Democrats and Republicans can talk about the Earned Income Tax Credit from a standpoint of something that helps working families, like helps people keep more of their dollars.

But I also recognize fundamentally, I can't act as though half the country doesn't exist. And I cannot act as though I can do any of this alone.

Gene: We've been speaking with Illinois State Senator Toi Hutchinson, who is also the NCSL President Elect. Senator Hutchinson, thank you for sharing your thoughts with us on "Our American States."

Toi: Thank you so much.

MUSIC

Gene: We are with Representative Katie Dempsey who comes from the great State of Georgia. Katie, welcome to the program.

Katie: Oh thank you.

Gene: So we want to get your viewpoint. I understand that you've been to this Economic Opportunities for Families meeting before. What have you taken away from previous meetings and what are you hoping to take away from this meeting?

Katie: Well, I have found it to be such a great opportunity to visit with others and hear what's happening in other states, so to learn and to see some sort of out-of-the-box opportunities to think big, to think long too as well, because often it's so easy to deal with a problem that is immediate.

Especially as a legislator, I think there are needs that just come to us constantly that are hard to manage at times, especially in the realm of families, which I think are the foundation of all of our states and all of our nation. It is the people, not the land, I would say, that truly matters. So I have just found relationship building and listening skills and great opportunity to learn from others at this meeting.

Gene: So what does economic opportunities for families mean for you? How would you describe it?

Katie: I was involved in this too a couple of years ago when the conference had a different name, and as we went through different names and figured out that this might be what it truly is, I think it's so important to realize that if you are not economically hopeful, there may not be a future. And that involves not only parents who might be the employed individual in the economy, but also those children.

So to look at those opportunities that begin from birth all the way to the end of your life and to sort of factor in what the family can do, and the evolutionary process of that – how important

education is, how important networks are, how important knowing who to ask and how to ask and when to ask and to reach out to become the very best you can be.

I really think that most legislators serve with such a heart to help, to find a way, and that means to help the individuals that we try to care for and to help our state through the people that have chosen to live there.

Gene: So what kinds of communities are you hoping to help with your presence at these meetings and when you go back to the legislature?

Katie: So I do a lot of work with many of our challenged communities, with DFCS (Division of Family and Children Services in Georgia), with foster care, with our veteran services, with the disability community and others that want to work, that want to have a chance, but often don't really know how to find it, and want a second chance when perhaps they've lost the opportunity to be with a child when that child has been put in a foster system; parents that need to find the pathway. I deal a lot with behavioral health as well as addiction and the challenges that we all face through that, and the breakup of families because of many of those issues.

So I hope to hear what some of our other states are doing and go back. I've got a project in mind that we might work on, but it may evolve into another one by tomorrow. We'll see.

Gene: We just spoke with Senator Hutchinson from Illinois, so you've got people from political spectrums that are different, geographic differences. How does that work at a conference like this?

Katie: Well, you know, I think family economic opportunity is not a political issue in all honesty. It is an elected challenge, I would say. I don't want to call it a burden because that's really not fair to the topic, but it is a challenge to try to figure out the best ways to create those pathways. And it is not, I would say, particularly unique to any state. While each state may be different, I feel that it is profoundly important across all aisles and across all levels of socioeconomic development and policy.

Much of the work that I do, every bill that I have actually drafted myself, is nonpartisan. I'm a Republican, but it has a Democrat signer on it, and it is such a unique thing to get to do that; but to really focus on something that is good for all, particularly in my state, in Georgia, to focus for all of Georgia. I can come to this conference I think with that hope and ambition of how we help each other do that.

Gene: So can you give us an example of the previous meetings you've been to, something that you've taken back that has been implemented or taken advantage of?

Katie: Yeah, the most recent project was about long-acting, reversible contraception as a component in helping to delay parenting until you are ready to be a parent. And Georgia has made this available. Not everybody knows how to find it or how to get to that, but that is a part of the process I think, and a part of the educational process at an appropriate time to make sure that females are aware of some ability to not become a mother before they're ready to be a mother. There are federal and state funds available and we have tried to access most of that that we can, as well as work with the private sector.

On my way to the capitol, I passed by the Mercedes Benz Stadium; it's where the Super Bowl is going to be pretty soon, so a pretty high traffic area; it's also just where a lot of things go on – the soccer games are going on there and there's basketball nearby. But I have noticed recently a billboard that catches my eye as I wait for the light to change every day it feels like when I'm in Atlanta. It has this great... I don't know if I can sort of paint the picture of it visually – but it has this great, big billboard picture of a child in a highchair, and they have chocolate it looks like splashed all over their face, and they're holding up letters and the letters say "not ready."

So they're holding up the T and the R on the ready and there's chocolate oozing off of those letters, and there's chocolate splashed all over the billboard. And it is an advertisement brought forward from a nonprofit, but with some private investment there, to realize a great high visual of if you're not ready to take care of a child that can get a little messy, even messier than chocolate at times, there are things you should do. And it's actually an advertisement for condoms. But it is truly important to realize that if you're not ready to be a parent, you need to wait.

And I think that parenting before you are ready is one of the biggest hindrances to being able to be economically viable to care for yourself, to be independent, and to not only take care of yourself, but of those that you love.

Gene: So what haven't I asked you about on this subject that you feel other legislators from across the country should know about?

Katie: Well, I just think it's so important to embrace the fact that education and early education and preparation are so important to achieving a pathway to success, and many people have not seen that. They've not had that opportunity themselves in their own home, in their own family. So to find the ways for each of us to open new doors that perhaps our citizens didn't even realize were there for them and to make it enticing, inviting and comfortable to push yourself beyond your limits.

Gene: Thank you for being on our program.

Katie: Thank you.

MUSIC

Gene: So we're talking now with Patrick McCarthy who is the President and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Patrick, you've been involved with this meeting for several years here. You've got various political and geographical representation here. Why is it important to have multiple lenses looking at this issue?

Patrick: Well, when you think about a family, their needs are multidimensional; there are lots of things that are going on in the family. And that's why it's particularly important to have legislators engaged.

It's interesting – there are all sorts of different experts, folks who are experts about jobs or experts about childcare, experts about education. Legislators are kind of the fulcrum point, all of

these different ideas and expertise that all sorts of different folks have come down to legislators having to make tough choices when making policy decisions.

So it's particularly important that legislators have an opportunity to see families in all of their complexity, to see families not just as units that are raising children, although of course they are that; to see families as where workers come from; to see the impact of housing, the impact of crime, the impact of income, education – all these different things come together in a family's life and in many ways come together in the day-to-day life of a legislator who has to integrate all this and make good decisions.

Gene: And how does this meeting align with the purposes and the goals of the foundation?

Patrick: Well, the foundation is the country's largest foundation focused exclusively on building a brighter future for children. That's our job, trying to figure out: How do you create a brighter future for children? And we know that children do well when their families do well. So this particular conference focused on family opportunities is directly related to the foundation's mission of building a brighter future for kids.

If families are well-positioned, have decent income, are able to provide for their kids, have secure attachment to work so they're role models for their kids, we know those children are going to do better. So that's why we think this is such an important conference.

Gene: Give us your perspective on how children are faring in the United States right now. What's your perception of how things are going?

Patrick: As it happens, we published the 2018 Kids Count Report. Kids Count is a report that comes out once a year; that's kind of a report card on children. We look at every state, we rank order states, seeing how kids are doing. And there were some really interesting trends that we saw in the latest Kids Count Report. It's based on 2016 data; that's the latest data available. But we compared it to data from 2010, so we saw some trends.

We saw overall modest improvements, some upward trends in many aspects of child wellbeing that are important. We also saw, however, a lot of disparities, troubling disparities when we looked at white children compared to African-American children and Latino children, Native American children.

There were some particular highlights. We know that in 2010 we were just coming out of the recession, so it's not surprising that in 2016 a number of the economic indicators look better than they did in 2010: 1.6 million fewer children in poverty, which is tremendously important. More parents are employed, another critical variable. Fewer families are spending a disproportionate share of their income just trying to pay for their housing. So all of that is very positive.

But it's important to point out that while there has been improvement, one in five American children still lives in poverty. One in five. And we know that 13% of all kids in the U.S. live in a neighborhood that is high-poverty. So even though they themselves are not poor, they're living in a neighborhood of concentrated poverty. That's nearly 10 million American children living in

areas of high poverty. We saw some improvement in the numbers of kids who had healthcare insurance coverage, so that obviously is a positive.

Something that we think has been a long-term trend and we continue to see progress on is a reduction in teen births. Starting back in 1990 all the way to the present day, it's been a fairly steady decline and there was actually a significant decline even from 2010 to 2016. It's continued to come down even since 2010. In 2010 there were 34 teen births per thousand teenage girls. In 2016 there were 20 teen births per thousand teenage girls. That's a significant drop just in six years. Having said that, the U.S. still has a high teen birth rate compared to other countries.

Another piece of data that is encouraging is our national graduation high school rate is higher than it's ever been, nearly 85% of all high school students graduating on time. So that of course is very, very important.

On some of the other education measures, there was a slight improvement in the percentage of 4th graders who are reading proficiently, but it's still a very low number. We still have a big problem in grade-level reading. We still have a very big problem in math. We measured at 8th grade, whether 8th graders are proficient in math, and that number hasn't budged much and it's a really bad number. I believe it's 67% are not proficient in math by 8th grade.

Another data point that we have seen kind of stagnate, there hasn't been much movement, is 3- and 4-year-olds who are enrolled in some kind of preschool, which we know is really important to be ready to learn in kindergarten. Those are some of the highlights of how kids are doing.

Gene: And some of these successes or things where you'd like to see more improvement, how is the relationship with the legislators that you're having with this meeting and other meetings – are you accomplishing what you want to accomplish? Do you think some of the success has come from these conversations that you've had?

Patrick: Well, again, we know that the choices that state policymakers, state lawmakers make, those choices really have an impact on kids. We know that states that have invested heavily in early childhood and preschool are seeing better numbers in kindergarten readiness, to at least have them starting on the right path when they enter education.

We know that states that have invested in earned income tax credits, state-level earned income tax credits, are seeing really good outcomes in terms of both work participation rates, more folks working, but also the outcomes for kids in their states. We know that that's critical.

We know that states that are looking at what it takes for a family to both have parents working and also being able to parent their children, so thinking about things like childcare and flexible leave policies so that you can take care of your kids, we know that that's an important piece.

This particular meeting, the family opportunity agenda meeting, we've seen a very high number of positive legislative proposals that have come out of conversations that actually started in this meeting, in one of the meetings over the last 15 years. So this has been one of the best investments that we've ever made.

Gene: Any other advice or information that you'd like to pass along to state legislators and legislative staff across the country?

Patrick: I think the most important thing to keep in mind is we've invested a lot in research and in data and in evidence, and out of all the noise that comes through, it would be to really encourage legislators, of course relying on their staff as well, but to dig deep on what really drives good outcomes for kids. We know a lot more about brain science and how the brain develops, not only in early childhood, which we've known about for a long time, but adolescence.

It would be terrifically useful for legislators to become familiar with the adolescent brain research and start to understand what we have to do to ensure that young brains get off to a healthy start and that we take advantage of adolescence, which is a time of rapid development, to invest in their positive growth.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this episode of "Our American States." More information about this subject is available on NCSL's website, www.ncsl.org and use the search term: family opportunity project. This is Gene Rose. Thanks for listening.