



## **PARENTS KNOW BEST:**

HOW FAMILY-LED DATA COLLECTION AND ADVOCACY  
LEAD TO INCREASES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD FUNDING  
IN ALAMEDA COUNTY

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## OVERVIEW

This case story presents lessons learned from a family-led coalition that used data collection and advocacy to increase county-level funding for early childcare programs in Alameda County, California.

Part of a larger project entitled the Early Childhood Health Equity Landscape Project (ECHE), this case story is one of three that highlights bright spots in multi-sector early childhood health equity initiatives around the country with the common themes of meeting the diverse needs of families and community providers; and committing to lift the voice of and center families and caregivers (individually and collectively). Key learnings highlighted in this case story include the importance of:

- > Promoting family and community leadership
- > Learning from past advocacy efforts
- > Using data to better understand family engagement in early childhood programs
- > Fostering inclusive training for family, friend, and neighbor caregivers
- > Educating families in data collection, analysis, and reporting
- > Empowering families to lead development of tools and resources

Information in this case story is drawn from interviews with two of the local community leaders in Alameda County who are working to advance early childhood health equity programs through data collection and reporting and the connection of those data to advocacy.

**Oakland Starting Smart and Strong** is a collaborative that envisions an early childhood system where all Oakland children and families have access to opportunities to realize their full potential. Our aim is to ensure that every adult in a child's life – whether a formal educator like a preschool teacher or an informal caregiver like a family member – has the tools they need to support that child's health and development."

## Early Childhood Health Equity Landscape Project Early Childhood Health Equity (ECHE)

work seeks to strengthen early childhood systems to support healthy child development and reduce health inequities and disparities that can have a lifelong impact.

In an effort to understand how ECHE work is carried out at the local, state, and national levels, the **ECHE Landscape Project**, a joint venture of the National Institute for Children's Health Quality (NICHQ) and Child Trends and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, gathered and analyzed information on cross-sector initiatives promoting early childhood health equity through the **ECHE Landscape Survey**. To provide context to the ECHE Survey, the ECHE Landscape Project team has also held conversations with ECHE initiatives to inform a series of spotlight briefs on the topics of health equity, measuring and reporting progress and impact, sustainability, cross-sector partnerships, and state-local collaborations. The information from the landscape survey and series of spotlight briefs is intended to support innovation across sectors to advance health equity for young children.

## Parent Voices Oakland (PVO)

is a parent-led, grassroots organization that advocates for affordable, accessible, quality childcare. PVO organizes and empowers families with the highest need to build effective campaigns toward economic and educational justice.



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## BACKGROUND

In March 2020, voters in Alameda County, California, approved a ballot measure that sanctioned a 0.5% increase in the county sales tax to increase access to child care for families earning low and middle incomes, raise wages of licensed early childhood care providers in both center-based and family care settings, and maintain high quality pediatric healthcare facilities.<sup>1</sup> Gentrification in Alameda County—which includes Oakland—is driving up the cost of living, creating shortages of affordable housing, and increasing the cost of commercial rental space.<sup>2</sup> As a result, families have less disposable income to spend on childcare, while childcare settings face increased costs to operate. Infant care in Alameda County is currently more expensive than in-state tuition at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, between 2017-19, the number of slots in licensed childcare centers fell by 5% and in licensed family childcare by 17%.<sup>4</sup> Almost 10,000 children ages 0-5 are on waiting lists for childcare in Alameda County; almost half are children of Black mothers in Oakland.<sup>5</sup>

Parent voices were critical to getting the ballot measure passed. It would not have been possible without the community organizing by Parent Voices Oakland (PVO), a parent-led organization dedicated to increasing access to affordable childcare. In 2017, PVO used funding from Oakland Starting Smart and Strong (OSSS), a collective impact initiative, to learn how almost 600 families in four majority Black neighborhoods in Oakland accessed childcare. The resulting [report](#) directly informed the creation of the ballot measure and has been a catalyst for continuing systems-wide changes to early childhood programming in Alameda County. More recently, PVO worked in coalition with the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1021, SEIU 521, and the Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies in the county to get the ballot measure passed in March 2020.

The work by PVO and OSSS provides unique insight into how empowering families to engage in data collection and advocacy can lead to changes to early childhood policy and more accessible early childhood programs.



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## PROMOTING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

"It's really important that people who are most impacted by policies that are being made have a say," said Tanisha Payton, the Policy and Research Associate at PVO. Payton arrived at PVO after the conclusion of the 2017 childcare study and has built on the work by PVO Executive Director Clarissa Doutherd to continue giving parents leadership roles in the use of data to drive advocacy. "Clarissa began by going into a lot of these spaces where decisions and policies were being made about early education and childcare, and there weren't community voices at the table. She's actually famous for asking decision-makers, 'Where are the parents?'" Payton explained.

PVO worked with OSSS and a university partner at the UC Berkeley School of Education to engage families in a community-centered process to identify the realities of accessing childcare in their communities. "It was led by the community members," Priya Jagannathan, Director at OSSS, recalled of the 2017 childcare study. "PVO had parents drive the entire process: what questions do we want to ask in our own community? What kind of data do we want to collect? What's important for people to know about child care in our community?"

After their university partner taught the parents the basics of data collection, the parents went door-to-door with the research instrument they had created, talking to neighbors, and collecting information. After the data were submitted to the university partner, the parents were the first to see the results. "The university went to the parents and asked them to interpret the results," Jagannathan recalled. "What do you think this data means? What should our policy recommendations be?" In data presentations to both funders and the community, PVO chose parents to lead the conversation and policy recommendations.

## LEARNING FROM PAST ADVOCACY EFFORTS

The 2017 PVO study initially informed the development in Alameda County of a ballot measure, voted on in June of 2018.<sup>6</sup> Like the ballot measure passed in 2020, this ballot measure was a similar raise in county sales tax to fund early childhood programs, address child abuse, and expand supports for children dealing with adverse childhood experiences, such as housing insecurity or abuse. Although the ballot measure in 2018 failed to garner enough support to pass, the PVO and OSSS learned from the experience.

"Language is so important," Payton said. "When the ballot measure was drafted in 2018, we had to explain it to the community over and over again. If it's supposed to be accessible and you're always explaining it, then it's not as accessible as we think it is." When writing the ballot measure for 2020, they adapted the original plan to include more plain language and solicited feedback from parents and childcare providers to ensure it was easily understandable on first read.

Jagannathan pointed to another reason she believes the ballot measure didn't pass in 2018. "We didn't do a lot of workforce specific outreach," she said. Some populations (e.g., childcare providers) who would have benefited may not have been aware due to a lack of messaging. In 2020, PVO along with other partners engaged in active outreach efforts to build support, drawing on parents, community leaders, and healthcare providers to champion the initiative.

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## USING DATA TO BETTER UNDERSTAND FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

One of the driving reasons for undertaking the 2017 PVO study was to determine why certain neighborhoods in Oakland seemed to be “childcare deserts,” according to Payton. Jagannathan agreed: “We had this narrative that we needed to do more outreach to get families to enroll in center-based care.” Research has long shown that children living in poverty – almost 13% of children in Oakland – who have access to high quality early childhood education have better educational outcomes than those without.<sup>7,8</sup> Since increasing the quality of center-based care was a priority target for OSSS, understanding why certain communities were not enrolled seemed crucial to improving access for those families who want to use center-based care.

However, their plan to use the data to encourage more families to enroll in childcare centers was immediately thwarted by PVO’s parent-led study. The vast majority of parents surveyed used family, friend, and neighbors (FFN) care, rather than using a childcare center. Survey results indicated that parents felt childcare centers were too hard to access, too expensive, not open during their work hours, or didn’t feel welcoming either at enrollment or when their child was at the center. Outreach alone would not have addressed those systemic issues.

While some of the reasons parents cited for not enrolling in childcare would require additional resources to address – decreasing the cost of care or expanding center hours, for example – others were emblematic of a system that didn’t welcome all families and presented a starting point for PVO and OSSS to engage in solution-oriented work with families. “We were able to lift up the findings from the study to think systems-wide about our childcare center enrollment and family engagement practices,” said Jagannathan. “We used the parents’ stories about discrimination to work together and change our practices.” These efforts to dismantle unintentionally discriminatory childcare practices, such as not having staff who speak a parent’s language or not addressing parent concerns in a culturally sensitive manner, help to ensure that future childcare programs funded by the ballot measure will be equitable from the start.

## FOSTERING INCLUSIVE TRAINING FOR FAMILY, FRIEND, AND NEIGHBOR CAREGIVERS

“We had so many families who were using non-licensed childcare for a variety of reasons and we wanted to find ways to support FFN caregivers,” Payton said. The first step, according to Jagannathan, was to change the terminology they used when referring to caregivers. “We have to be careful with our language because if we say, “early childhood educators,” FFN caregivers may not see themselves,” she said. “We are working to make sure they feel included.”

Jagannathan now uses a more inclusive approach to educational training for all caregivers. “We had an early learning symposium to bring together folks who take care of young children across all settings. We were able to include licensed and unlicensed care providers, and it was really incredible for providers to see they are facing some of the same challenges and coming up with creative solutions that they can share with each other,” she said. “We’ve been able to continue that online throughout COVID.”

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## EDUCATING FAMILIES IN DATA COLLECTION, ANALYSIS, AND REPORTING

Watching parents “come into their power” when working with data is a passion for Payton and she encourages data education in her role at PVO. “We educate parents on how to collect data but also how to look at it and how to understand it. Most importantly, we talk about how data is being used to provide them with services,” she said. Payton highlighted how one data report can drive a policy or program and engages parents in thinking critically about whether the data represents their lived experience and how they can use it to advocate for families in their community. “Ultimately, so many of the problems our families are facing are resource problems, and we show them how good data can help us fight to increase resources,” she said.

## EMPOWERING FAMILIES TO LEAD DEVELOPMENT OF TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Similarly, Jagannathan connected family engagement to resource development. She pointed to work being done to support boys of color in Oakland – a workgroup helming the effort wanted to develop a toolkit of best and promising practices based at area schools and community centers to support boys of color throughout childhood. Parents of boys of color were engaged early on to contribute their experiences to the toolkit and Jagannathan recounted the value of their contribution in shifting the conversation from how to mitigate deficits to how to lift up young men of color.

“Having the families engaged in the process was crucial for us to make sure we were centering the toolkit in the experience of families. We learned that communities have been implementing strategies and coming up with creative ways to support [boys of color] and we want to make sure resources are going towards these efforts,” she said. “We can get so wrapped up in identifying and paying attention to systems-wide problems, that we’re not paying attention to what is actually working in the community and how we can shift financial resources toward them.”

## LOOKING AHEAD

The lasting impact of the parent-led PVO East Oakland childcare study in 2017 is significant both for the increased funding for early childhood programming through the passage of a ballot measure, and for the ways in which family leadership is increasingly a core component in the development of child-focused policies and programs throughout Alameda County.

As part of PVO’s Black Community Wellness Initiative, Payton is working with Black mothers and birthing people to collect data to better understand the wide racial disparity in preterm birth and infant mortality with the goal of developing policies to foster the health of Black birthing people and babies. At OSSS, Jagannathan is working with other agencies to learn more about how to listen to parent, family, and community leadership and leverage data in support of community priorities.

For both PVO and OSSS, promoting community leadership is a core value. “It’s so important to have the community participate in creating solutions. Take a step back and listen,” Payton said. “It’s way more effective than finding out after the fact that we got it wrong.”



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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