



**Public Policy Forum Summary
December 12, 2011**

More than 125 staff and board members from human services organizations and community advocates attended the Public Policy Forum co-hosted by United Community Services of Johnson County and United Way of Greater Kansas City. The event, organized to provide the human services sector with the necessary information to engage effectively in the 2012 Kansas legislative session, featured Senators Tim Owens and Terrie Huntington and Representative Pat Colloton. Melinda Lewis, public policy consultant, framed the discussion with an overview of UCS' policy priorities and how they might unfold in the coming session. Particular concerns for UCS include:

- Proposed changes to tax policy in Kansas, which must be evaluated for their impact on the most vulnerable taxpayers and their adequacy to meet Kansas' human service and infrastructure needs
- Executive Reorganization Orders (EROs) that would move mental health, substance abuse and developmental disability services to the Department on Aging and transfer child care licensing oversight and some health department programs to SRS, among other changes
- Preservation of the Children's Initiative Fund, which sustains many critical early childhood interventions
- New rules in SNAP (formerly Food Stamps) and TANF that have created crises for households in need and which demonstrate the importance of the human services sector weighing in on state agency rulemaking, in addition to legislative deliberations

Senator Owens opened the legislator panel by approaching the budget question from the standpoint of determining what, specifically, it is that we want government to do and, only subsequently, asking how much money we need in order to fund those functions. He reiterated the importance of organizations' engagement on the revenue side of the debate, and he outlined three overarching themes that will shape the 2012 Kansas legislative session:

- Redistricting
- 2012 primary and general elections
- State budget

Senator Owens emphasized the chaotic nature of the early days of the coming session, especially because legislators are only now reviewing the details on some of the big agenda items to be considered, including changes to the state's school finance formula and tax policy. He closed with a reminder that human services organizations and those who care about vulnerable populations must be vigilant in order to preserve the quality of life in the communities in which we live and work.

Senator Huntington shared some evolving developments in health care, including the uncertain future of state implementation of the Affordable Care Act, given pending review by the U.S. Supreme Court, as well as ongoing advocacy around access to dental care for low-income and isolated populations. From her seat on the Children's Cabinet, she spoke of that entity's deliberations in the face of declining funds,

given the downward trend in revenue from the master tobacco settlement. In order to deal with approximately \$10 million in reductions this year, the Children's Cabinet rolled Smart Start funding into early childhood block grants, among other modifications. Senator Huntington stressed that, eventually, Kansas may need to explore alternative funding for early childhood programs.

Representative Colloton was the final legislator on the panel and spoke about the proposed EROs, emphasizing the importance of advocacy, as she believes that Governor Brownback's Administration is still open to discussion about how these might evolve. For example, the ERO for the Juvenile Justice Authority (JJA) has now been shifted to a subcommittee to look at how JJA interfaces with SRS, in a signal that the Administration heard community concerns. Representative Colloton also talked about the Governor's proposal for a move to Medicaid managed care, with the initial requests for proposals to managed care companies requiring a 5 percent reduction in Medicaid spending, without a clear sense as to whether that is expected to come from fewer services or actual efficiencies. There is a concern that, without standards to ensure that care is not reduced, the additional burdens of dealing with three separate managed care companies might spur providers to stop accepting Medicaid, which could be devastating for those who depend on Medicaid. Representative Colloton is part of a Kansas House Caucus for Community Mental Health Centers, which was able to restore \$10 million for the emergency hotline last year. Given the cuts that mental health has taken in recent years, restoring these services will continue to be a priority in 2012. Some of the work of this caucus has also included Rainbow Mental Health Facility, whose potential closure has prompted significant concerns from law enforcement and community leaders in Wyandotte and Johnson counties. She indicated that there may be an opportunity to use some gambling proceeds for infrastructure investments on the facility.

Participants spoke to several themes during the question and answer period, including cuts in funds for Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facilities (PRTFs), concerns about the Administration's marriage initiatives within public assistance programs, and potential state immigration legislation. The legislators asked organizations to share testimony about the impact of budget cuts on their organizations, and encouraged them to collect the data needed to make the case for their work in the 2012 session.

Brenda Sharpe of the United Way Board of Trustees stressed the need for human services organizations to engage their Boards of Directors and clients in public policy work, in order to diversify the voices communicating with legislators about these priorities. United Community Services closed the Public Policy Forum asking those organizations attending to complete a public policy engagement survey, so that UCS can gauge the extent of advocacy activity within the human services sector in Johnson County.

The full room, with some attendees standing in the back, attested to the urgency that human services organizations feel when they survey the upcoming Kansas legislative session. We know that ending balances are up, and yet restorations of the painful cuts are not forthcoming. We worry that priorities other than the well-being of those we serve are being emphasized. And we struggle to find the best ways to insert ourselves into an often complex and rapidly-changing system. United Community Services sees this Public Policy Forum as the first step in helping human services organizations in Johnson County and the surrounding communities to navigate the policy landscape, analyze the issues, and raise their voices in pursuit of policies that will support the needs of those we serve. In the 2012 Kansas Legislature and beyond, we look forward to working with you towards these aims.