

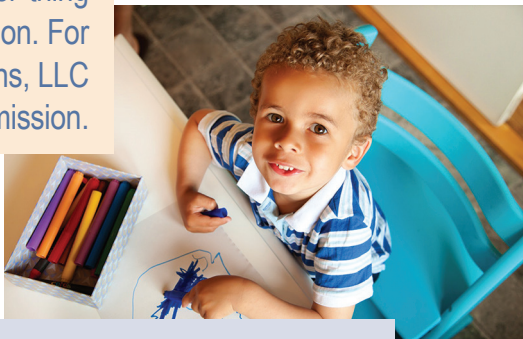
Bringing Out the Best:

The Benefits of Long-Term, Mission-Driven Partnerships

It's one thing to hire an outside firm to supply objective expertise. It's another thing entirely to build a lasting relationship that brings out the best in your organization. For First Things First in Arizona, working with Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) has been a long-term match based on a deep commitment to a shared mission.

From its inception in 2006, First Things First (FTF) in Arizona faced uncertainties and challenges. As a governmental agency created by a voter-led ballot initiative, its charge was broad: improve the quality of and access to early childhood development and health programs; increase access to preventative health and health screenings for children through age 5; offer parent and family support and education regarding early childhood development and literacy; provide professional development and training of providers; and increase coordination of early childhood development and health programs. FTF also was required, by law, to conduct community outreach and build awareness for early childhood issues.

Complicating matters was the fact that FTF had to show results—and fast—to win needed support from skeptical policymakers, government agencies, and other early childhood stakeholders across the state. Specifically, FTF had to demonstrate at home what the research said nationally: that when high quality early learning opportunities are provided to children 0-5, these children are more likely to be prepared on the first day of kindergarten, get along with their peers, read at grade level, and graduate from high school. In addition, they are less likely to be retained in school and be involved in the juvenile justice system. A daunting task to say the least, but one FTF knew was possible if the agency had the right staff, right strategy, and the right partners.



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While the FTF staff and board were experts in early childhood, they needed help to share their knowledge and to build champions throughout Arizona. The issues were sometimes overwhelming, and a more proactive approach was needed to move the agency forward. To help FTF meet those needs and fulfill the charge of conducting successful community outreach, they called on ACS.

ACS began as a thought partner for FTF's first CEO, Elliot Hibbs, as well as the agency's two subsequent CEOs, Rhian Evans Allvin and Sam Leyvas. After the initial consultation project, ACS took on a broader role in building and supporting the implementation of FTF's first two communication plans. Evans Allvin recalls, "ACS helped us think about the strategic trajectory of our organization and what needed to be accomplished from a communication and community outreach perspective to help the agency meet our statutory charge and ensure the needs of the children and families throughout Arizona were being met."

"ACS was the architect of our initial outreach plan and absolutely critical in establishing the structure for our community outreach," says Evans Allvin. "They helped us conduct messaging research, develop communication collateral based on that research, and then train our teams. Our community outreach team built local community relationships and advanced the critical messages about investing in young children at their most critical time of development. ACS really understood what our outreach would require and how to create the capacity and systems to carry it out."

Communication and Community Outreach Planning, Implementation, and Support

To drive FTF's communication and outreach, ACS created a comprehensive, data-driven communication plan that provided specific goals and objectives, strategies, and tactics for engaging key audiences, and meaningful measures of success. This combination of "big picture" information and specific tactics and measurements made a massive task more accessible for FTF



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staff, who could clearly see the purpose of the plan and their roles in implementing it. The plan also made it easy to promote accountability. In addition to developing the plan, ACS remained engaged in the implementation process, providing technical assistance and capacity support every step of the way, 24/7, through conference calls, on-site visits, trainings, and email.



At the end of the first three-year implementation period, FTF had exceeded its communication plan goals, increasing total awareness of early childhood issues by 14 percentage points (from 20% to 34%) and increasing the number of individuals who strongly support FTF by 14 points (from 33% to 47%).

Not surprisingly, FTF called on ACS to create a second communication plan for the subsequent three years. It also tapped into the skill of the ACS team as facilitators and capacity builders to strengthen other elements of the organization.

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Taking it to the Next Level: Capacity Building and a Flagship Initiative

With the communication plan implementation in high gear, FTF needed to ensure its outreach staff was prepared to carry the organization’s banner into the community. That meant providing access to ongoing professional development training to advance FTF’s message statewide in a diverse set of communities, each with unique needs and populations. FTF engaged ACS to help provide facilitation skill development, communication and messaging capacity building, and public speaking training to 30 FTF community outreach staff and regional leaders from across Arizona. ACS provided customized professional development sessions nearly every quarter, which included:

- A customized facilitation training that included one-on-one technical assistance;
- A customized spokesperson training that included video assessment and review, and one-on-one technical assistance; and
- A grassroots outreach strategy implementation training for community outreach staff.



“With the diversity and the size of the group, we recognized we needed strong facilitators,” says Michelle Katona, FTF Chief Program Officer. “ACS not only brought that skill, but also helped frame the whole effort. They clarified what we needed to do and how we should move forward, which allowed us to encourage broad participation from outside stakeholders.”

With a mission focused on achieving positive, measurable outcomes for Arizona’s youngest children, FTF always has an eye on how to continuously improve itself. One initiative was Quality



First—Arizona’s early childhood Quality Improvement and Rating system (QIRS), a critical component of the overall early childhood system. FTF embarked on a focused effort to determine a long-term strategic direction for Quality First, including identifying refinements to the model, increasing integration and coordination with the early childhood system, and establishing financial sustainability. FTF’s board appointed a 22-member Quality First Advisory Subcommittee (QFASC) and asked ACS to facilitate the 18-month planning process to develop a set of recommendations that would guide this flagship initiative for the next 10 years. The QFASC membership was broad and diverse, representing the statewide early learning landscape with members from a range of government, nonprofit, and private-sector organizations from rural, urban, and tribal regions across Arizona. This was delicate work, because QIRS systems are complex and require the coordination and cooperation of multiple and diverse stakeholders with a wide range of opinions and priorities.



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One Step Beyond: Planning for the Future

After working with FTF for nearly seven years in multiple roles, ACS knew FTF well at both a strategic and tactical level. So when it came time for FTF to consider building their vision for the next phase of the organization's work with its stakeholders, having ACS facilitate that process was a logical next step.

"ACS knew us well, knew our partners, and knew the landscape," says Katona. "They served a critical role in facilitating our largest group yet, our 50-member Early Childhood Task Force. This was an intense, nine-month process that would outline the key strategies to shape our agency's future for the next five years and beyond."

Never willing to rest on current knowledge and assumptions, ACS approached the strategic planning process by conducting surveys and interviews with internal and external stakeholders and by studying the national landscape. This helped FTF consider itself from both the local point of view and the broader context. From there, ACS facilitated an engaged group of 60 stakeholders—representing such



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diverse perspectives as early educators, health professionals, businesses, faith communities, tribal representatives and state policymakers—through a clear and highly productive process. In addition to the full task force dialogue, meetings with committees of subject matter experts allowed for deeper dives into particulars of the plan and increased the number of stakeholders engaged in the planning process. The full task force discussed priorities and overarching issues, and then worked to align committee recommendations to those priorities. The result was an ambitious, yet attainable, statewide plan for advancing the work of FTF and Arizona's early childhood system over the next five years. Moving forward, FTF will be able to use that strategic direction to create



programmatic implementation plans that are integrated across its multiple divisions and aligned to the expectations of its early childhood system partners during the next five years.

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At the end of the process, FTF emerged with a clear five-year strategic plan, a solid map of steps for implementation, and a distinct understanding of the capacity that would be required for successful execution.



“When it comes to supporting the health and learning of young children, there are so many viewpoints to be considered. ACS made sure that everyone felt heard and valued as part of the discussion,” says Basha. “Because our system partners were so deeply engaged in the planning process, they feel more ownership of the plan and can be more highly and effectively engaged in its execution and outcomes.”

Looking Forward

Both FTF and ACS are looking forward to a long relationship on behalf of Arizona’s youngest children and their families. It’s a mission to which both organizations adhere deeply.

That clarity of purpose is what builds the basis for the long-term engagements that ACS and many of its clients enjoy.

“Working with ACS is like working with an extension of your organization that brings out all the best you have within you,” Michelle Katona, FTF Chief Program Officer. “They get to know you and your needs, they focus the resources necessary to help you meet those needs, and they push you to think differently while simultaneously staying focused on solutions. They clearly enjoy and have a passion for our work together, and they bring that out in our team as well.”

