



Elevating Caregiver Voices in Philanthropic Strategy

“ACS’ superior skill in strategic planning and facilitation, combined with their insight, experience, and subject matter expertise within the early childhood space was exactly what we needed to successfully execute RWJF’s vision for the Family Advisory Committee.”

**–Monica Hobbs-Vinluan,
Senior Program Officer,
RWJF**

Creating authentic engagement that lasts

Strategic funders like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) know that true and meaningful systems change must be informed by those who are most affected by the system in question. So, when RWJF wanted to center the voices of families—particularly caregivers—in its [Healthy Children and Families](#) work, it turned to Advocacy & Communication Solutions, LLC (ACS) to design and implement a meaningful and informative experience for all.

This was no “check the box” effort. RWJF wanted to learn deeply about the best ways to engage caregivers to inform its long-term strategic work. One idea was to test the creation of a Family Advisory Committee (FAC) that offered caregivers—biological parents, adoptive parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents, foster parents, or anyone who has a key responsibility in the care of a child—a forum in which to provide input and direction on issues, priorities, needs, concerns, and stories with RWJF, thereby painting a clearer picture of how policies and systems can best serve families and children.

The RWJF team wanted to ensure that they did not burden those they engaged with demands on time or unintended costs, that the Foundation’s role and power took a back seat to participants’ perspectives, and that the caregivers who engaged found the experience to be uplifting and empowering rather than extractive.

RWJF had a longstanding relationship with ACS that included working with intermediary organizations to build customized strategies for grantee collaboratives seeking to expand the potential for boys and young men of color. ACS also worked with RWJF to analyze and support power-building¹ activities in the Foundation’s home state of New Jersey. Because of the successful outcomes of these efforts, RWJF knew ACS was the ideal choice to design and coordinate the FAC.

¹The Power-Building Ecosystem Framework was created by the University of Southern California Program for Environmental and Regional Equity.

dornsife.usc.edu/eri/publications/power-building-ecosystem-framework/

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Keys to Authentic Engagement

Each funder or other powerful organization that wishes to engage community voices should pay attention to how it values those voices. It's paramount to avoid using community members' time and knowledge for show or extracting tidbits and nuggets for foundation reports or websites instead of making real investments or changes that validate the importance of what community members have shared. ACS and RWJF sought something deeper and more authentic to build the trust necessary for honest input and ongoing, respectful relationships.

RWJF tasked ACS with being a thought partner in determining the FAC's structure and responsibilities, a recruitment process that included solicitation of applications and conducting of interviews, communicating with applicants and selected participants, and creating internal processes to ensure successful meeting implementation. While each of these roles could be fulfilled with a "check the box" mentality, to achieve a truly authentic and empowering experience, ACS employed several key approaches that should be part of any community engagement effort.

Why ACS?

At ACS, our leaders are uniquely positioned to do this work because we have "walked the walk" of their clients and bring a firsthand understanding of nonprofit, for-profit, government, and philanthropic organizations through their past board and staff roles. Our team members have a unique understanding of and commitment to the issues that are most important to our clients, shining a light on their life-changing work and bringing attention to and support for the most vulnerable and at-risk individuals they serve. From small and scrappy nonprofits to large and influential funders, we meet each client where they are and leverage their strengths to develop a highly effective mix of tailored strategies and a solid playbook for success.

Taking Time to Plan

Respectful and thoughtful planning was key to anticipating the needs, concerns, and interests of those RWJF wished to engage. A well-planned experience signals to participants that they are valued and respected and invites them to engage in more meaningful ways.

Because the FAC planning started in the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and the work began in late 2021, RWJF reduced participant exposure to COVID-19 by initially convening the committee virtually. ACS took time and care to address administrative and operational details that would ensure all recruited participants would have a successful and seamless integration into this committee. This included thinking through ways that committee members could fully participate, even if their remote participation looked

"With ACS, we have built a relationship based on trust and respect that has, time after time, created successful results that help RWJF bring attention to and support for historically marginalized children and families."

–Dwayne Curry, Director of Talent, Organizational Development and Strategy, RWJF

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The Practical Challenge of Compensation

If a funder asks a caregiver to spend a day away from work and/or caregiving, then fair compensation is in order. But the question of how much can be tricky. In addition to reimbursing for unpaid work leave, participants also may incur costs for dependent care, food, transportation, internet access, and other unexpected expenses. For lower-income participants, compensation for all these expenses may push their income just high enough to endanger public benefits they may receive. For any individual, the additional pay could affect their tax bracket. In addition to addressing these issues, ACS and RWJF also realized that different departments within the Foundation were paying different rates for community engagement opportunities. If the idea is to replicate an effort, the payment levels must be sustainable and equitable. For all these reasons, the question of compensation is critical for planning appropriately for community engagement of any sort.

different from person to person (in a car, in a hospital, in a library, at home, etc.). The ACS team considered:

- The easiest ways for participants to share potential documents needed (e.g., W-9 forms, reading material);
- Proposed meeting dates, times, agendas, and logistics;
- Potential language barriers and accommodations, and how to address them (e.g., translation services);
- Delivery mechanisms for collateral materials (e.g., printed materials, online files);
- Stipend amounts and financial assistance with other expenses, such as dependent care, for participants.

ACS also worked with RWJF to think through criteria for participation in the FAC, and encouraged the Foundation to expand its thinking about committee size. This was important to ensure that committee members represented broad diversity (e.g., age, race, gender, ethnicity, ability, geography, caregiving role) and held valuable knowledge from their roles as individual parents and/or parent organizers in their communities.

As a result of the investment in planning, RWJF and ACS had a clear path forward, and began to focus on recruitment of 12 FAC members for a 12-month commitment with an optional 12-month extension. From June 2022 to November 2023, the FAC would meet eight times in virtual gatherings from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern Time, and for a two-day, in-person meeting in August 2023 and one-day, in-person meeting in November 2023. In 2024, the group would meet twice—once virtually and once more in person.

Recruiting with Clarity and Care

To successfully recruit participants, ACS created an approach that was unique to the needs of RWJF, using the Foundation's primary partners and ACS' extensive national knowledge of parent and caregiver organizations to build a curated list of 30 trusted referral sources that would understand the "ask" of potential FAC participants and could identify 60 likely candidates for the 12-person committee. Ensuring proper representation across all demographics was critical, so ACS created a custom tracking system by which relevant parties could review applicant recommendations from organizations; applications sent and returned; applicant age, race, ethnicity, gender, marital status, income, education, number and ages of children, and employment status; applicants selected; and interview requests and confirmations.

Application materials were available in various formats for easy accessibility, including via Survey Monkey and Google Forms (English and Spanish), along with options to call and leave a voicemail with application answers, or to submit answers via email.

Once a preliminary list of potential applicants was created, ACS began contacting them through direct email and phone outreach or in cooperation with the referring organization, depending on the approach that would best resonate with each applicant. ACS ensured that application materials were available in various formats for easy accessibility, including via Survey Monkey and Google Forms (English and Spanish). ACS also offered an option to call and leave a voicemail with application answers, and an option to submit answers via email. Application questions were related to applicant demographics, experience, education level, and caregiver role.

From among the 34 individuals who completed applications, ACS selected 27 for interviews, based on demographics and application information, with an eye toward securing broad diversity and a variety of experiences serving on committees or boards, or with other parent organizing efforts. In each 30-minute interview, candidates were asked the same questions, designed to gauge interest, capacity, and diversity of candidates. Questions explored leadership and decision-making styles, how applicants typically interacted with others, and issues about which applicants were most passionate.

ACS made FAC member recommendations to RWJF based on interviewee responses and demographics, as well as the type of community in which they lived (urban, suburban, rural) and their locations throughout the country, to ensure adequate participation from all regions and communities. Once RWJF approved the recommendations, ACS contacted potential FAC members and invited them to join the committee and notified remaining applicants that the committee selection process was complete.

Reaching Out in Every Way

Every FAC member had their own preferences for receiving and responding to communications, so ACS provided multiple avenues of communication to make engagement as equitable, accessible, and accommodating as possible. During applicant interviews, the ACS team began cultivating trust by clearly explaining the role, expectations, processes, and next steps. ACS included the full timeline of FAC meetings and key dates via email to those who were formally invited to be a member of the FAC. The team used regular surveys (one prior to the first meeting to collect biographical information and one after every meeting to collect feedback and identify next steps) to continue building trust and better understand how the FAC members would like to connect—with ACS, RWJF, and each other.

After every FAC meeting, ACS completed post-meeting check-in phone calls with each individual FAC member to garner feelings and feedback. Additionally, ACS hosted virtual meetups at which FAC members had the option to connect informally to discuss a range of topics suggested through the post-meeting surveys or whatever else was on their minds.



“ACS knew—through years of experience with other major engagement projects—that FAC members needed consistent communication. Weekly, if not multiple times a week, and across a long period of time, ACS used email, phone calls, surveys, virtual meetings and more in a way that worked for each of the FAC members.”

**—Jenn Judkins,
Senior Communication
Manager, ACS**

Committee members were expected to only wear one of their many “hats”—that of caregiver. No one was expected to represent the views or experiences of anyone other than themselves, and no one would be considered a representative of any broader group identity.

To ensure reliable and consistent communication, ACS assigned a single member of its team to lead primary communication so that referral organizations and potential participants could communicate with the same person in each step of the process.

Of course, internal communication with RWJF was also critical to a successful outcome. While RWJF Program Officer Dwayne Curry (now serving as the Foundation’s Director of Talent, Organizational Development and Strategy), Senior Program Officer Monica Vinluan-Hobbs, and Program Associate Mike White participated in the FAC meetings, they and the rest of their team needed to stay abreast of any potential unfolding sideline conversations and be aware of next steps. ACS maintained a high level of ongoing communication by facilitating bi-weekly meetings with RWJF to review timelines, responsibilities, next steps, and outstanding or new issues; vet the run-of-show for each upcoming FAC meeting to perfect timing and messages and anticipate potential issues and responses; and debrief after each FAC meeting to discuss any issues and plan for further engagement. ACS also helped RWJF ensure that lessons for the funder were recorded and disseminated to other internal engagement project teams.

Managing Expectations

In addition to making sure each FAC member clearly understood the logistics of the FAC, the ACS team provided utmost transparency about the purpose and roles of the committee members. This included being clear that committee members were expected to only wear one of their many “hats”—that of caregiver. All other aspects of their lives were theirs to share as they saw fit. No one was expected to represent the views or experiences of anyone other than themselves, and no one would be considered a representative of any broader group identity.

ACS also helped manage participants’ expectations about RWJF. The team explained that this was a learning experience and an experiment for the funder, and that the FAC had a unique and unrestricted opportunity to share their candid opinions and experiences. RWJF had no preconceived notions about how the experience should play out and no specific outcomes in mind. RWJF was simply curious and desired to learn how best to use the talent and knowledge of caregivers to improve the well-being of children and families. And, although ACS is well-versed in “funder speak,” the team ensured that all messaging and information about RWJF was understandable to those outside the philanthropic world.

Explicitly stating these expectations helped participants feel more comfortable and excited about their roles.

Getting to Know One Another

Encouraging participants to learn about one another—not just the issues—makes for deeper and more meaningful conversation and connection. The first full-day



“For most caregivers, it takes extensive planning and organization of personal and professional responsibilities to commit to this level of participation and to allow for them to be present in this work. ACS had to ensure that we met caregivers where they were and offered them unlimited grace and understanding when it came to juggling their responsibilities at home and as part of this committee.”

—Lori McClung, CEO, ACS

virtual FAC meeting was dedicated to helping members get to know one another, recognize what they had in common, and learn about and respect differences. ACS continued to incorporate exercises such as family stories and organizational highlights to continue this work in subsequent meetings.

This intentional time for learning about each other allowed for deep connections among FAC members. In fact, committee members enjoyed one another so much that they developed their own offline network to continue connection and mutual support beyond the FAC framework.

Following Participants’ Lead and Responding Accordingly

Even the most thoughtfully designed family engagement plans must leave room for adaptation, based on the needs of those entering the engagement. The FAC members’ life and work demands often conflicted with meeting schedules. ACS regularly adjusted meeting schedules to ensure that all participants could engage fully without distractions. Because the six-hour Zoom meetings, as well as the topics and discussions during those meetings, sometimes proved to be emotionally draining, ACS went the extra mile by financing and sending FAC members “self-care” packages. The first, sent after the June 2022 meeting, contained a scented candle, lip balm, body butter, and a bath bomb; the second was delivered in person at the August 2023 meeting and contained lip balm and stress oil.

The committee engaged deeply in each meeting—and made it clear to ACS that they wanted to continue those conversations individually and as a group. To support this deeper engagement, ACS used the scheduled one-on-one follow up calls and informal virtual meetups to give committee members space to talk about anything—from points carried over from the formal meeting to stories about themselves and their families—without the restrictions of any agenda.

In the formal meetings, the individual follow-up calls, and the virtual meetups, the ACS team listened carefully and used the feedback and questions they heard to create the agenda for the next FAC meeting.

Evolving Engagement

Because of its knowledge of best practices for caregiver engagement and its thoughtful and thorough processes, ACS created a committee of individuals from varying demographics, gave them the space and security to voice their opinions on parent and caregiver issues honestly and authentically, and strengthened relationships with and amongst them that allowed for deeper and more meaningful connections. In fact, members of the FAC still call and text each other—and ACS—regularly.

FAC members have been key informers of RWJF’s strategy development, providing input on and making recommendations for its grantmaking processes, creating



“In just a short amount of time, ACS cultivated strong and supportive relationships within the FAC—with each person and with members of the RWJF and ACS teams—and facilitated meetings in a way that allowed FAC members to learn about, listen to, and share experiences with the issues most pressing in their communities and lives, and how RWJF is working to change the narrative of caregivers in aggressively pursuing avenues to alleviate those issues.”

**—Mike White,
Program Associate, RWJF**

criteria, and reviewing applications for a new \$500,000 regranting effort. They have also been co-designing initiatives focused on economic inclusion and public policy and honing their own skills as communicators and advocates for themselves and for their community’s children and families.

In addition, RWJF provided committee members the opportunity to move beyond the FAC member role and participate in other foundation-sponsored initiatives, including the [Every Family Forward](#) Storytelling project, through which caregivers can share their lived experiences with others to reinforce the need to support the critical work they do in raising the next generation of healthy children, and Catalyze, a summit that brought together activists, researchers, and community partners to uplift community power, dismantle structural racism, and spark lasting progress.

Because ACS created and implemented such a positive experience with the FAC, committee members are continuing to make positive and lasting contributions that align with RWJF’s Healthy Children and Families work, changing narratives about caregiving, and influencing systems to ensure that more children and families can thrive.

