

The Massachusetts Work-Family Council Initiative: A Short History

The idea of establishing state or regional Work-Family Councils was first proposed in a report of the Sloan Work Family Policy Network called “Integrating Work and Family Life: A Holistic Approach” (2001). Since 2002, the MIT Workplace Center, has worked on putting the idea into action.

The purpose of the Council is to promote understanding of work-family issues as matters of public concern and importance, to define the issues as requiring coordinated responses from multiple stakeholders, and to provide an instrument for constructing solutions by bringing together the full range of stakeholders involved in particular conflicts. Depending on need, the Council could discuss issues and proposals under consideration in the political process, propose both private sector and public policy initiatives, sponsor educational projects, and disseminate findings from academic research.

As there is no model for such an institution, the process of creation has been experimental at each step. Approximately 100 people have been active participants in Council events. They are associated with a wide range of employers and institutions and form a multi-stakeholder constituency for an ultimate operation of a publicly influential, policy-initiating, problem-solving Council.

Constructing a Stakeholder Base

- **Fall 2002:** Formation of a consortium of regional academic centers engaged in work and family issues for various populations to complete the following tasks: define salient issues; identify major stakeholding groups; outline a general Council mission; propose a range of potential Council projects; and organize steps for the creation of a Council.
- **Fall 2002-Spring 2003:** Broad-scale collection of names of people active in six stakeholder sectors—business, government, labor, professional associations, community organizations, and low income advocacy and service groups—and invitations through letters and email to those identified to participate in the development of the Council.
- **Spring 2003:** Series of separate sector meetings—to learn the particular work-family issues, outcomes of attempted solutions, and present positions of stakeholders in each.
- **June 2003:** Experiment with cross-sector dialogue in a meeting of representatives from all six sectors. *Format:* 6 tables of 7-10 people, at least one from each sector, with discussion facilitated by a consortium member. *Subject:* identifying issues of greatest concern and potential grounds for solution acceptable to the diverse stakeholders involved. *Aim:* Test possibility for people with conflicting interests in work-family issues

to recognize benefits of coordinated solutions. *Outcome*: expression of clear differences but also common concerns about basic issues—workplace flexibility, family care, and job and income security.

- **November 2003:** Joint meeting for a "Solution-Seeking Workshop," with an academic presentation on the state of the Massachusetts workforce, followed by cross-sector solution-seeking dialogues in the same format as the cross-sector dialogue that took place in June of 2003—resulting in the formation of working groups on family care and flexible work arrangements.
- **April 2004:** Joint meeting on work-family and public policy co-sponsored by the Boston College State Legislators Network Project. Presentation by a panel of state legislators on committees dealing with work-family issues, followed by cross-sector dialogue exploring potential policies relating to family care and workplace flexibility.

Deciding to Establish a Massachusetts Work-Family Council by Legislation

- **Summer-Fall 2004:** Meetings with state legislators to test the idea of establishing a Work-Family Council by legislation.
- **Winter 2004:** “An Act to Establish a Massachusetts Work-Family Council” is filed by Rep. Lida Harkins, Majority Whip, with Sen. Jack Hart as co-lead sponsor. Thirty-two additional senators and representatives co-sponsor the bill.
- **Spring 2005:** The bill, House, No. 3727 is assigned to the Joint committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies, chaired by Rep. Daniel Bosley and by bill co-sponsor Sen. Jack Hart.
- **June 2005:** The Joint committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies hears the bill, and reports it out favorably. Bill is assigned a new number, House, No. 4216.
- **July 2005:** Bill discharged to the House Committee on Rules.
- **September 2005:** House and Senate leaders give assurances of swift passage of the bill. House committee on Rules recommends bill ought to pass, and refers it to committee on House Ways and Means.
- **February 2006:** Representative Harkins files a request to amend the bill, adding a \$200,000 appropriation for staff and seed funding for a survey of work-family benefits currently offered by Massachusetts businesses.

- **April 2006:** Senate President Travaglini introduces a bill, co-sponsored by Senators Karen Spilka and Thomas McGee, to support working families which establishes the Massachusetts Work-Family Council, creates a Paid Family and Medical Leave program, and increases tax deductions available to working families (S 2535).
- **May 2006:** Senate 2535 is referred jointly to the Joint committee on Children and Families and the Joint committee on Workforce Development.
- **June 2006:** The Joint committee on Children and Families and the Joint committee on Workforce Development hold a combined hearing on S 2535, and is expected to report out the bill by the end of the month.
- **June 2006:** House committee on Ways and Means recommends that House 4216 ought to pass. It is placed in the “Orders of the Day” for a second reading by House committee on Steering, Policy and Scheduling, read second and ordered to a third reading.
- **October 2006:** House 4216 is read third and passed to be engrossed by the House, and is then read and referred to Senate Ways and Means. Senate Ways and Means recommends the bill ought to pass, and the bill is read second and third and passed, with minor amendments, to be engrossed by the Senate.
- **December 2006:** House 4216 is approved by all relevant House committee Chairs and sent to the Governor’s desk.
- **January 2007:** Governor Romney leaves office without acting on the bill, causing it to be pocket vetoed.
- **January 2007:** Representative Lida Harkins files House docket 2078 to establish a Massachusetts Work-Family Council, and the bill was subsequently assigned the number H361.
- **October 2007:** The Joint Committee on Economic Development and Emergency Technologies, having heard the Bill in July, reports it out favorably. Bill is assigned a new number, **H4308**.

The testing of cross-sector dialogue has been a key element in the development of a Council, and it pre-figures the mode of operation of an established Council. Its basic premises are an ultimate common interest of employers, employees, governments, and communities in resolving work-family conflict and the possibility of doing so on positive terms for contesting parties. The dialogues do not deny deep differences. Rather by bringing a wide range of parties to the table,

they demonstrate the complexity of the issues and the need for multi-party negotiation for stable solutions to be reached. And they open up the possibility of identifying mutual benefits to solutions reached in this way.

We see a Massachusetts Work-Family Council, as a multi-stakeholder organization, drawing on the rich resources of talent and energy in the state and its tradition of innovative thought and action. In operation it would make Massachusetts a national model for work and family integration.

