

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). For the past two years, 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 are active participants in Council events. They are associated with a wide range of employers and institutions (see attached list) and form a multi-stakeholder constituency for an ultimate operation of a publicly influential, policy-initiating, problem-solving Council. The process for constructing the stakeholder base included the following steps:

- **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 Step 4—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.
- **Summer-Fall 2004:** Meetings with state legislators seeking support for the establishment of a Massachusetts 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.
- **September 2005:** House and Senate leaders give assurances of swift passage of the bill.

The testing of cross-sector dialogue, is a key element in the development of a Council. It prefigures the mode of operation of an established Council, the basic premises of which 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.