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**A Report for Council for Children's Rights**  
**A Process Evaluation of the United Agenda for Children**

**Submitted by:**

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# **A Report for Council for Children's Rights**

## **A Process Evaluation of the United Agenda for Children**

(January 31, 2011)

### **Executive Summary**

The United Agenda for Children was an ambitious effort to create community change in a short period of time – with an initial time frame of just three years. Like most, if not all, community initiatives, it tried to find the balance between process and outcomes, and the initiative evolved over time. The hallmark of this particular initiative is that it illustrates the complexity of engaging in community-level change, especially as it relates to participation, leadership, and capacity.

Initially, the United Agenda for Children's town hall event engaged and educated a large, diverse group of citizens about the well-being of the community's youth in a highly visible and public forum. Over time, a smaller group representing mostly service providers and funders moved forward with the work in a less visible way. They gathered information and developed strategies designed to make changes to improve the health, safety and education of children. The initial leaders of the initiative served as facilitators and conveners. As the work evolved to be more outcome-focused, there was a need to bring in technical assistance and more substantive expertise. Finally, there was a recognition that the voluntary, collaborative structure of the committees created to oversee and lead the process would need to be replaced with a more permanent structure in order to sustain the work over time.

For this project, we reviewed the program documentation recorded by The Lee Institute and the Council for Children's Rights (CFCR). These documents included: notes, minutes from meetings, white-papers, reports, presentations, and budgetary information. We conducted archival searches to identify and document the media's coverage of the initiatives. We worked with the staff at CFR and used snowball sampling to identify and conduct interviews with 40 of the initiative's key stakeholders – including committee members and leaders, the initiative's original organizers, and funders. Finally, we conducted an online-survey and focus group with a group of the participants from the United Agenda for Children's town hall. While these data represent the viewpoint of a small group of the initiative's participants and they do not represent the experiences of all of the participants, they do help us to develop a detailed picture of what happened during the initiative, and they help us to identify some of the lessons learned. Specifically, in this report:

- ◆ We describe the three phases of the United Agenda Children, tracing its evolution from planning for the town hall event to the formation of the Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures.
- ◆ We find that there is a general consensus that the United Agenda for Children could have done a better job keeping the original participants and the broader

community informed about the activities and outcomes associated with the initiative.

- ◆ We explain how those who were closely involved with the implementation efforts during “Phase 2” understand the connection between the United Agenda for Children and the creation of the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures.
- ◆ We describe how key decisions, such as focusing broadly on children and developing a structure to sustain the work over time, and larger, contextual forces, such as shared leadership and changes in the economy, played an important role in the implementation of the initiative.
- ◆ We find there is continued interest in what happened to the United Agenda for Children, which presents a valuable opportunity for the Council for Children’s Rights as it moves forward with the work of the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures.

The next step for this project is to prepare a journal article by distilling the findings in this report and placing them into the broader context of the existing literature on civic engagement, philanthropy, collaboration, and leadership.

## **A REPORT FOR COUNCIL FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS**

### **A PROCESS EVALUATION OF THE UNITED AGENDA FOR CHILDREN**

The purpose of the United Agenda for Children was to create a community vision and shared action plan to ensure that all children in Mecklenburg County were healthy, safe, and well-educated. Over the span of five years (2004-2008), a coalition of citizens, civic leaders, corporations, public entities and community agencies came together to identify a set of community priorities for children, examine the research about best community practices, and create a sustainable structure to support and maximize the impact of providers, agencies, and funders working on behalf of children. In an effort to document and learn from the experiences of the United Agenda for Children, the Council for Children's Rights commissioned this retrospective, process evaluation of the initiative. The evaluation was funded by a small grant from the Bank of America Foundation, and conducted by a faculty member and graduate student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

#### **Methodology**

The purpose of this research was to conduct a process evaluation of the United Agenda for Children. In doing so, we examined the initiative's coverage (who participated), components (operations at each stage), participant feedback (how well did the initiative meet participant expectations), short term outcomes (results), and lessons learned.

In conducting the evaluation, we relied upon a number of data collection methods. First, we reviewed the program documentation recorded by The Lee Institute and the Council for Children's Rights (CFCR). These documents included: notes, minutes from meetings, white-papers, reports, presentations, and budgetary information. Second, we conducted archival searches to identify and document the media's coverage of the United Agenda for Children's town hall event and subsequent activities. Third, working with staff at CFRCR, we created an initial list of key stakeholders to interview. Then, we used snowball sampling (asking the stakeholders to identify others who were key participants in the initiative) to increase our sample of interviewees. Fourth, we conducted an online-survey of the participants from the United Agenda for Children's town hall event, and invited the respondents to participate in a focus group. Taken together, these data serve as the foundation for this report.

#### **The United Agenda for Children**

The United Agenda for Children was a community-based civic engagement initiative originally spearheaded by The Lee Institute, a non-profit consulting group based in Charlotte, NC. The mission of The Lee Institute, at the time of this initiative, was to build collaborative leadership capacity. According to representatives we interviewed, The Lee Institute also had a "pretty strong vision about helping the community come together to solve problems." The idea for the initiative originated when several staff members

from The Lee Institute participated in the *AmericaSpeaks* 21st Century Town Meeting® for the Ground Zero Redesign (plans for the redevelopment of the World Trade Center) in New York City in 2002. The *AmericaSpeaks* model involves convening a large, demographically representative group of citizens at a town hall meeting, where the participants engage in small group, facilitated discussions and use laptops and keypads to express their opinions in response to a series of questions. The data are analyzed and presented back to the group, and later disseminated out to the broader community. According to *AmericaSpeaks*, the goal of the town meeting is to create “engaging, meaningful opportunities for citizens to participate in public decision making.”

The staff at The Lee Institute found the town hall experience to be transformational, and decided to bring the *AmericaSpeaks* model to Charlotte. After initial meetings with community leaders, funders, and stakeholders, The Lee Institute crafted a concept paper proposing to use the *AmericaSpeaks* model to create a well-planned, specific public policy agenda and work plan for the major issues that impact children and youth in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The focus on children and youth came about due to a number of reasons. First, Charlotte had a long history of pursuing community initiatives focused on children and youth -- with mixed, if not little, long-term results. In the program documentation for the United Agenda for Children, we found reports that reviewed more than 20 prior community initiatives focused on the children and youth of Charlotte. While each initiative had its strengths and weaknesses, we found several common themes relating to the weaknesses of these initiatives including: a lack of capacity, a lack of coordination, key stakeholders missing from the table, and few results. Second, there was a consensus among the initiative’s initial leaders that Charlotte needed to look more broadly about the needs of children and improve the connections between the schools and the children’s service providers. There was a growing movement of people outside the school system who “cared about kids...[and] really wanted to make a difference.” The hope was that the *AmericaSpeaks* model would “really bring a vision to the table” of “locked arms between [the schools] and everybody else.” And third, according to The Lee Institute, the focus on children and youth was the “right issue” for the time. There was increasing focus in the community on the need for coordination within the children’s services sector and the community seemed ripe for a larger collaborative effort. The Children’s Alliance, a group of children’s service providers collaborating to improve the well-being of children and families in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, had recently formed and was beginning to share information and resources. Also, the Children and Family Services Center, comprised of nine agencies that serve families and children, had just formed and moved into a centralized location where they could share resources and serve children and families in a more comprehensive and coordinated way.

In order to bring the *AmericaSpeaks* model to Charlotte, The Lee Institute recognized that the community would need to raise a considerable amount of money (with estimates of close to one million dollars) and convene a broad array of stakeholders. In order to get people excited, they convened a smaller test event, called The Region Speaks, where 175 people from 14 counties in the Charlotte region gathered to discuss the impact of growth on the region and create recommendations for the future.

According to Lee Institute, this experience helped them learn how to recruit for the United Agenda for Children's town hall event, and they were able to "show lots of funders how it looked."

Once they had initial success with the town hall model, The Lee Institute began the challenge of scaling up to accommodate up to 1,200 participants at the United Agenda for Children. Planning for the town hall event was a considerable effort. *AmericaSpeaks* served as production manager for the event, providing the overall strategy as well as the technology resources required for the town meeting model. The Lee Institute served as the local project management team, in addition to their role as convener and primary fundraiser for the initiative. Most important to the success of the event, however, was the "massive effort" of "two levels of very strategic volunteers." Dozens of planning meetings were held by the leadership team, created to oversee the initiative, as well as meetings of working committees created to oversee program design and content, communications, outreach (participant recruitment), volunteers, and implementation. And, many private, one-on-one, fundraising meetings were held with potential funders.

After more than two years of planning, the town hall event was held on December 11, 2004. The event was funded by a consortium of funders, including: Bank of America, BB&T, BellSouth, Carolinas Healthcare Foundation, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, City of Charlotte, Duke Endowment, Duke Power, Foundation for the Carolinas, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Mecklenburg County, United Way of Central Carolinas, and Wachovia. Estimates of the number of participants ranged from 860 to 1,100. The participants were recruited to match, as closely as possible, the demographics of the county, in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, household income, and geography. The participants received a guide that contained key facts about the demographics of the county, a snapshot of community funding for children and youth, and information about the broad spectrum of nonprofits serving children and families. The guide also included a compilation of research into what we know about the state of children in the community, organized under the core values of health, safety, and education. The participants were then asked a series of questions to facilitate small group discussions about what actions were most important to ensure that all children and youth in the county are healthy, safe, and well-educated. The result was a list of 14 community priorities (See Appendix A: United Agenda for Children Priorities).

Part of the *AmericaSpeaks* model involves working with the media to ensure that the public is informed about the citizen engagement project. To that end, the town hall event received a considerable amount of media attention, with front-page and ongoing coverage from *The Charlotte Observer*. For example, in the lead-up to the town hall event, *The Charlotte Observer* launched an in-depth look into the challenges that faced Charlotte's children. Called "The Zero to 21 Project," the coverage had three main components: reporting on national and state data describing the well-being of children in North Carolina; results of a local poll asking middle and high school students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg what are the most important issues facing young people today?; and a special section chronicling a day in the life of a variety of youth in Mecklenburg

County as they faced those challenges. Details of the upcoming town hall event were published nearly every day for two weeks leading up to the event, and *The Charlotte Observer* played a key role in recruiting hard-to-reach demographic populations such as suburban white males, adults without a college degree, and children ages 15 to 18. Coverage of the United Agenda for Children town hall event included a front-page story with photographs, an editorial, and a section highlighting the local data on the state of children in Mecklenburg County that had been disseminated at the event.

After the town hall meeting, the United Agenda for Children moved into “Phase II” (lasting from January, 2005 to March, 2007). The challenge during this period was to how to harness the energy from the town hall event and move forward with the priorities that were identified at the meeting. By April, 2005, a new steering committee had been created, along with committees representing the three issue areas: health, safety, and education. The committees were comprised of citizens, elected officials, funders, business advocates, university/school representatives, faith-based organizations, and government and nonprofit agencies. A Youth Advisory Council was formed to create opportunities for youth to stay engaged in the process, and a number of other ad-hoc committees were also created as needed. While an executive director was hired during this phase to support the work of the various committees, The Lee Institute continued to serve as the primary convener of these many volunteer groups.

The United Agenda for Children achieved three important outcomes during this time period. The first outcome was securing increased county funding for school nurses (one of the priorities to emerge from the town hall meeting). The second had to with expanding Bright Beginnings, an early childhood development program, and Partners in Out-of-School-Time, primarily expanding afterschool and summer programs for youth (other priorities from the town hall meeting). The third was increased community education and awareness about the status and needs of children, achieved through the collaborative production of a series of white papers. More than 65 community experts contributed to the white papers, which described the latest research and offered recommendations for best practices in the areas of health, parenting, out-of-school time, early child care, and mentoring. Many of the stakeholders also described some of the more qualitative benefits from this phase of the initiative, including closer working relationships with specific service providers and improved relationships with the school system. Minutes and summary reports in the program documentation also describe greater collaboration between agencies, more communication, and improved connections with the school and mental health system. Also, the Foundation for the Carolinas reported using the community priorities to inform their grant-making activities, while several service providers described how they used the community priorities in their funding appeals to foundations, government, and individuals.

During Phase II of the United Agenda for Children, a number of efforts were made to coordinate the work of other community initiatives with the community priorities identified at the town hall event. In June of 2006, a two-day retreat was jointly convened by the United Agenda for Children, the Children’s Alliance, Charlotte Model Courts, and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. The purpose of the retreat

was to discuss and determine what the next phase of collaboration would look like following the “sunset” of the United Agenda for Children initiative, scheduled to occur in early 2007. At the end of the retreat, the group decided to create a committee to develop a new collaborative structure that would be reflective of the group’s goals and discussions. This structure committee met monthly for six months to review past and current children’s initiatives in Charlotte and to study national collaborative models with the goal of developing a collaborative structure to move forward with the priorities set by the United Agenda for Children.

Yet, according to members of the structure committee, this was challenging. More detailed research and analysis was needed because all the models they studied looked like they worked. Also, there was a growing realization that the community could not continue to rely on volunteers to organize this type of collaborative effort. One of the committee leaders made a pointed analogy about the differences between the private sector and the public sector in this regard. He said, “When [the banks] are going to put in...an automatic teller machine, they spend more money to figure out where to put one automated teller machine than [the funders] were willing to spend to put together an entire structure to figure out how they’re going to serve all the needs of all the children in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.” Moreover, there was a general consensus that while “many communities have identified priorities or community agendas, no one is charged with driving them.” While the structure committee members reported feeling pressure from the funders to quickly identify a collaborative model, instead, they came back with a proposal for further study to develop a sustainable organizational structure to drive community change for children.

The proposal called for a design team to be staffed with national and local experts, who would conduct national research about existing models for a sustainable structure, as well as conduct local interviews and focus groups, in order to utilize research and community input to develop a proven structure. According to the program documents, this process would not only “leverage proven best practices” and “be tailored to local needs,” but it would also help “build credibility through the process.” While the structure committee members acknowledged that this process would involve additional costs and take additional time (and risk losing some of the initiative’s momentum), they effectively made the case to the funders that “a group of volunteers with no resources” could not “do justice” to the task at hand.

The funders agreed with the proposal, and, following the official end of the United Agenda for Children in March, 2007, the design team began its work. They hired Charlotte-based Smith+Harbrecht as the local project manager, and engaged The Finance Project as the national consulting firm. Together, they conducted research into intermediary organizations, with an eye toward learning “What is happening nationally and what communities seem to be getting traction? And how does that overlay with what seems to work in the Charlotte community?” Locally, the consultants conducted 5 focus groups and 26 interviews with nonprofits (staff and board members), public agencies, and other community partners (including foundations, churches, and media outlets). Nationally, they reviewed the models of 55 organizations across the country, and they

conducted detailed research on 11 of these organizations. At the end of 2007, the design team presented a proposal to create a Children's Intermediary Organization (CIO) as a sustainable structure for moving forward with community change for children. According to the initial proposal, the CIO would serve as a catalyst for change, and engage in four key roles: strategic planning; public relations and awareness; research and evaluation; and public policy and advocacy efforts.

In addition to defining roles for the CIO, the design team spent considerable energy determining where to house the new structure. There were debates about whether to create a new organization or empower an existing one. According to one of the funders we interviewed, the funders considered "almost every organization that serves children," in the search for the organization that had the best fit in terms of "mission, leadership, and alignment." Some service providers expressed concern that a new organization would only create more competition for resources. In their proposal, the design team strongly recommended that the CIO be housed within an existing organization rather than creating a new nonprofit entity to perform these functions, and the Council for Children's Rights was named as a potential home.

Following the design team's proposal, the funders began meeting in the beginning of 2008 as a work team to flesh out the details of how such an intermediary organization would operate in Charlotte. With continued facilitation from Smith+Harbrecht, the work team determined that the CIO would have professional staff, a governing board with four committees (executive, administration, research, and policy/advocacy) and funding would need to be significant. The work team developed an initial operating budget that called for an investment of \$7.2 million over 10 years, with almost two-thirds of the funding coming from the private sector and one third coming from the public sector and various earned income sources. With a clear picture of the CIO's structure and operations, the work team officially approached the Council for Children's Rights about being the home for the CIO. As one of the funders put it, "We felt like they had a good reputation in the community. They were, at the time, heading up the Children's Alliance. [The executive director] is a person that we felt had potential."

Moving forward, however, it took the Council for Children's Rights close to a year to figure out how to incorporate the intermediary into its current operations. The Council formed a task force from their board of directors to work with the funders' work group. There were numerous, sometimes tense discussions about how to transition from being an organization that advocates for at-risk children to one that takes on a broader mission to work on behalf of all children, and grow their policy and research capacity. In an effort to ensure that the intermediary be sustainable and have longevity, the funders hired The Bridgespan Group, a management consulting firm, to work with the Council to develop the structure and vision for the intermediary – which eventually took the form of the Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures (named for the former director of CFCR who was a strong community advocate for youth).

In 2009, the center was given \$1.5 million of funding for three years from many of the original funders of the United Agenda for Children, including: Bank of America Foundation, Duke Endowment, Duke Power, Foundation for the Carolinas, John S. and

James L. Knight Foundation, and the Wachovia Foundation (now part of Wells Fargo). They hired a staff of four and began building the infrastructure to move forward. Today, the Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures seeks to make lasting, system-wide changes for children through research, strategic planning, public policy, and public awareness. Though the United Agenda for Children officially ended almost four years ago, the sustained efforts of all those involved resulted in the community now having the capacity and the structure to achieve the initiative's original vision (See Appendix B: Timeline of United Agenda for Children).

## **Evaluation**

During the course of the United Agenda for Children, there were efforts designed to evaluate different parts of the initiative. These included a satisfaction survey of the town hall meeting participants about the facilitation of the meeting, the specification of outcomes and indicators throughout the different stages of the initiative, and a formal logic model that captured the work being done in Phase II. In the program documentation, there were reports to the funders with summaries of activities, outputs, and outcomes, as well as reflections on lessons learned and proposals for next steps. For this evaluation, we collected interview and survey data and reviewed the program documentation with the intention of supplementing the formative evaluation efforts that occurred during the initiative.

In our analysis of these data, we found that many of the experiences from the United Agenda for Children initiative reflect the inherent challenges associated with community work – especially those relating to participation and engagement, leadership, and capacity.

## **Interviews with Key Stakeholders**

We conducted interviews with 40 people involved in the United Agenda for Children, including funders and conveners of the initiative (13), representatives of service providers (13), government agencies (5), and the private sector (4), and other community leaders and citizens (5) who participated in the initiative. The interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol consisting of 11 questions (See Appendix E: Interview Questions). The questions were designed to explore the context of the initiative, examine the role of each of the participants, identify key moments and important decisions, and assess the outcomes and accomplishments of the initiative. Typically, the interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and we conducted a conventional content analysis allowing the codes and themes to emerge from the data.

One of the major themes to emerge from the interviews has to do with participation and engagement -- in the town hall event, as well as in the later phases of the initiative. When we asked the interviewees about their experiences with the United Agenda for Children, not surprisingly, many began by describing their participation at the town hall event. One of the youth participants described it as “a great experience.”

Another explained, “It was just such a powerful moment in our time in history to see over a thousand people out that day and creating these networks and these connections around children.” Another said, “I think it was one of Charlotte’s best moments.”

At the same time, however, several providers commented about the considerable “expense” for a “one-day event” or “media production.” Others described that while there was a diverse group of people represented at the meeting, they thought service providers and the schools seemed over-represented. Several reported that the faith-based community and political conservatives were under-represented.

During the interviews, some of the people we spoke with made reference to the sheer challenge of determining how to proceed after the town hall event. According to some, because there had been tremendous investment in planning for the town hall event, recruiting diverse participation, and “having the day go well,” little attention had been paid to identifying a strategy to harness the significant momentum and public will that had been created at the event. The initial strategy was to rely upon smaller committees of volunteers to examine the priorities and develop plans to implement those items in the community. Yet, many of those who participated in the town hall event wanted and expected to be included in the next stages of the process. As one service provider noted, “I was really disappointed that even with that diverse group of people, there was little effort if any to engage them after the fact – keep them engaged. I knew people, including my mother, who said ‘I never got a piece of correspondence after [the town hall event.]’”

Similarly, with just a few exceptions, most of the key stakeholders that we interviewed acknowledged that as the committees moved forward with their work in “Phase II,” they could have done a better job of communicating with the people who were initially engaged in the United Agenda for Children. As one of the committee members explained to us, in retrospect, “One of the areas that we could have done a better job...was [at] every step of the way of progress doing a much better job of educating, following-up, updating the community on what was going on after all these results.”

For some, this lack of follow up came across as exclusionary and contributed to a sense that the United Agenda for Children was being “driven” by the funders. As one provider noted, “Every once in a while we would hear a report back, and then it went back to this mysterious group that had all this power and control.” Another said, “It was like the United Agenda for Children belonged to the people from [foundation name].”

In analyzing how the initiative unfolded, it is clear that the funders began to play a larger role after the June retreat in 2006. In reflecting upon the work done after the sunset of the United Agenda for Children, particularly during the structure and design phases, one of the funders explained how some of the service providers and people originally involved in the initiative probably “feel like we kept them in the dark for a while.” Another funder described how his organization was the “leader” of the initiative and described the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures as “our vision.” Indeed, we found that many of the people we interviewed still do not understand how the creation

of the Larry King Center built upon the work of, and the lessons learned from, the United Agenda for Children.

A second major theme to emerge from the interviews was the importance of social networks, personal connections, and shared leadership, particularly as it relates to sustaining the work of the initiative over time. Throughout the interviews, we heard the participants talk about “who was in the room at the time,” and the importance of having the “right people” and “community-level” leaders involved in the process. When we asked The Lee Institute how they were able to bring so many people to the table and create the funders’ group, they explained that “It was just a lot of meetings and talking to people.” Other committee leaders also described how particular phone calls, lunches, and meetings for coffee helped to cultivate and sustain support for the initiative. And, as one of the funders noted, even as the initiative progressed and the initial momentum waned, nobody declined an invitation to sit on the steering committee or the design committee, and funders continued to invest in the initiative. One participant noted, “Basically we felt like [the United Agenda for Children] is too important to let it die.”

During the interviews, people spoke candidly about specific individuals who were viewed as being particularly instrumental in shaping the initiative and moving it forward. Obviously, The Lee Institute was credited for kicking off the initiative, but other participants were viewed as being important as well. For example, one participant was identified as being instrumental in securing the increased funding for school nurses, the most commonly recognized outcome of the United Agenda for Children. Further, one of the funders was identified as being a particularly good facilitator, while another funder was credited with giving the initiative high visibility. And, a particular committee leader was identified as being instrumental in shaping the work of the structure committee. Yet, as we began to analyze the interview data and the program documentation to identify the “key” participants, the list grew very long and the people who were in leadership positions changed over time. Not only does this suggest that there was a shared sense of leadership, but there was also a long and sustained investment in the process.

The third theme to emerge from the interviews was related to the challenges of building the capacity to sustain the initiative over time. After three years, key stakeholders began to recognize the challenge of trying to sustain the initiative through a voluntary, collaborative structure of committees. As one of the organizers explained, “We had such a broad base of ownership that nobody really owned it. At the end....everybody had day jobs.”

As the initiative evolved through the structure and design phases, the work of capacity building was confounded by the impending recession. About one-third of the people we interviewed described how the downturn in the economy played an important role in how the initiative unfolded. By 2007, “cutbacks were happening all over Charlotte,” and according to many, it was clear that the county was going to play a much smaller role in funding the children’s intermediary organization than originally planned. In an increasingly uncertain economy, the private funders also realized that raising 10

years of funding for an intermediary that had yet to be developed was going to be a significant challenge.

Housing the intermediary at the Council for Children's Rights made sense for most of the people we spoke with. For example, many people reported that the Council's name kept emerging as a strong leader in the interviews and the focus groups conducted by the consultants. Others said that CFRC had a "history" in the community and "the trust" necessary to both establish and sustain the work. But, this decision was not clear to everyone, nor was it without its critics. While almost everyone we spoke with remarked that the Council for Children's Rights has a solid reputation as an advocacy organization, some wondered about them taking on a larger role as a children's intermediary. Several of the funders emphasized the need for "an organization that could address the needs of all children in the community" and expressed concern about the inherent tension between the intermediary's role as convener and the Council's traditional role as child advocate. One person, in particular, described how difficult it is to reconcile the adversarial role that the Council takes in their position as advocates for children with the convening role that the Larry King Center plays in establishing partnerships among providers in the community.

Finally, with respect to the media, most of the people we interviewed agreed that the town hall event received considerable coverage by the media. Yet, some suggested that the media did not pay enough attention to the later phases of the initiative. In our review of the media coverage, however, we found that *The Charlotte Observer* and other media outlets did publish periodic articles on the United Agenda for Children as it progressed through the next phases of the initiative, but clearly not to the extent that it had for the town hall event. This is probably due to the fact that the initial coverage of the town hall event was the result of a deliberate partnership between *AmericaSpeaks* and the media, and points to the importance of creating and leveraging media partnerships when engaging in community change work.

### **A Survey of the Town Hall Participants**

In an effort to gather additional information from more of the participants of the town hall event, we conducted an online survey. We used the master list of participants maintained by The Lee Institute as our sampling frame. On this list, we had contact information for 675 participants. First, we sent an email to the 448 participants with an email address listed and asked them to complete a brief online survey. One hundred and seventy-one of the emails were returned to us because the email address was no longer valid. Next, we sent a post card to the 398 participants for whom we didn't have a valid email address (227 post cards to those for whom we didn't have an email address and 171 post cards to those with invalid emails). Eighty-seven of the 398 post cards were returned to us because the mailing address was no longer valid. Overall, 54 of the 588 participants (9%) who received our invitation responded to the survey (See Appendix D: Survey Questions).

We asked the participants how they got involved in the town hall event. Outreach efforts clearly played a role, with 30% of the respondents describing how a friend or colleague personally invited them to participate in the event. Sixteen percent explained that they responded to the efforts used to publicize the event – through brochures, fliers, advertisements, or emails. Others described getting involved as a result of their history of volunteering and working on children’s issues (30%) or through their professional affiliations with the schools, county agencies, or nonprofit organizations (24%).

We asked the participants to describe their expectations for the town hall event. A majority (57%) of the participants described their expectations in terms of the steps or actions they hoped to see arise from the event, such as: identifying and prioritizing the needs of children in the community; creating a more unified strategy for addressing children’s issues; having the opportunity to express their opinion and give input; and including a diverse and broad range of stakeholders in the process. Others (19%) reported that they didn’t really have any expectations (or they couldn’t recall), while some (14%) expressed that they had hoped to learn something about: the issues that affect children and the broader community, effective program strategies, and working collaboratively with others. A minority (10%) reported that they had “low” expectations for the event or they were skeptical that the event would not “live up to its billing” or produce any type of “lasting effect.”

When asked how well the town hall event met these expectations, the responses were decidedly mixed. While some (7%) of the respondents reported that they simply could not remember (given that the survey was administered six years after the event), many (41%) reported that the event met or exceeded their expectations, with some elaborating on how meeting was well-run and well-attended by a diverse group of participants. Others (52%) were a bit more critical. Some reported mixed feelings or being generally disappointed. Others were more specific, suggesting that the facilitated process inhibited or limited the discussion, while others were concerned about who attended the event (i.e., a prevalence of service providers, a lack of conservative leaders and constituents, etc.). Finally, while some described the event in favorable terms, they went on to comment about how there had been “little progress” or “no action,” since the town hall event, with asking us “What was accomplished?”

In an effort to get a sense for whether participating in the town hall event had any impact on civic engagement, we asked the survey participants if, following the town hall event, they were more (or less) engaged with children’s issues in our community. The vast majority of the respondents reported that their level of engagement was about the same as before, with many describing how they have continued to work or volunteer with specific organizations in the nonprofit and public sectors. A few described how they participated in some of the next phases of the United Agenda for Children, while others described becoming more involved with specific nonprofit organizations or the schools and the school district over time.

During the town hall event, the participants were asked to make a personal commitment to improving the lives of children in our community. About half of the

survey respondents remembered this request. When asked to describe these commitments, most of the respondents (who could remember) described making a commitment to be more involved in the lives of children – either as a parent, as a volunteer, with the schools, or in their professional life.

We asked the survey respondents if they were involved in the United Agenda for children in other ways (aside from participating in the town hall event). While most reported that they were not involved, about one third of the survey respondents reported that they were involved, as part of one of the many committees, or informally as a service provider or interested citizen. One respondent, however, noted that he or she was never contacted to become more involved. Another respondent reported that they “requested to be involved,” but they received a response email which indicating that they were not being invited to participate in the next phase of the initiative.

Toward the end of the survey, we asked the survey respondents to describe their overall experience with the United Agenda for Children. One third of the respondents summed up their experience as “positive,” “good,” “worthwhile,” or “great,” with some elaborating on their experience in greater detail. For example, one respondent described the town hall event as a “good exercise in participative democracy.” Another participant responded “I really enjoyed the experience. The atmosphere was very positive. Everyone seemed to be on board to make the school system better.” A teacher who participated said “I felt empowered and I felt like people care. We get very isolated in teaching and feel like the community doesn't care. It touched me deeply to see this kind of turn out.”

Many of the respondents, however, described their experiences as “disappointing” or a “waste” of time and money. Some elaborated by reporting that while the town hall event was a positive experience, they were disappointed at the perceived lack of follow-up or tangible results. For example, one participant reported, “I think we came up with a number of great ideas and thoughts as to ways that we could help the youth in Charlotte-Mecklenburg...[but] I am not aware of any of the things being implemented.” Another participant echoed this sentiment, but with some stronger words, describing the initiative as a “one-shot deal full of sound and fury, resulting in very little of concrete goals and measurable objectives,” and some lamented that the community has returned to “business as usual” and the “same ole... same ole.”

The final question on the survey asked the survey respondents if they had heard about the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures. The majority (60%) of the respondents had not heard of the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures. Moreover, among those who reported hearing about the Center, less than half could describe a clear sense of the Center’s strategy or mission.

### **A Focus Group with Town Hall Participants**

On the survey, we invited the respondents to participate in a follow-up focus group in order to gather more detailed information about their experiences with the United Agenda for Children. Seven of the respondents participated in the focus group

(See Appendix D: Focus Group Questions). The focus group was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Not surprisingly, the findings from the focus group echoed some of the findings from the survey – just in greater detail.

For example, the focus group participants reiterated that outreach efforts, networking, and media attention had played a large role in getting people to the town hall event. However, they reported that efforts to keep the citizens informed and engaged following the event were much less coordinated. Some participants remembered getting follow-up correspondence and participated in other meetings, while others reported never hearing from the United Agenda for Children again.

Most of the focus groups reported that the town hall event was a positive and exciting experience. One participant described the meeting as “a wonderful experience” and another remembered being pleased with the diversity of the participants where “everyone was pulling together” to support children. Another echoed this theme, saying “I loved the community of the table and the diversity and...being able to share with people in the community that I wouldn’t have gotten to know.”

While most of the focus group participants reported being impressed by the demographic diversity of the crowd at the town hall event, one participant expressed frustration that there was not greater diversity of opinions and ideas. He said some of the ideas generated at the table never made it to the podium, such that:

I saw a lot of people just fall away because they threw up their hands and said – it’s the same old thing. They are not coming here to listen to what we want. They’re bringing us here to tell us what we should want, and why we should want it, and then get us to go do what they want us to do.

While feelings about the experience of the town hall event were mostly positive, all of the focus group participants expressed disappointment at the lack of results they saw after the day. One participant said “I’m not 100% satisfied with what we did. I think there was a lot of talk and we generated a lot of paperwork.” Another said “I think there was more we could have done. I don’t have a sense that we completed it.” One woman was particularly frustrated:

I got the survey results, and okay, [I] thought something else was coming. But nothing else ever came out. Nothing came out in the newspaper. Nothing came out in the communities. And people got disenchanted because they never saw anything.... The schools didn’t get better. The community didn’t come together. Parents and people in general didn’t come together and work like they made it seem like .... it was going to happen.

Another participant commented:

I think it's also been very disappointing to see that there wasn't a true manifestation of all those action items we put together and put in place. Nothing ever really materialized from it.

As far as outcomes from the United Agenda for Children, two of the focus group participants identified and attributed the increase in the number of school nurses to the initiative. Yet, this outcome was cited by someone who was highly involved with the initiative following the event (a steering committee member) and someone whose work was directly impacted by the change (school guidance counselor). The other participants didn't know about this outcome. In talking about the school nurses, the counselor said "that was the one thing that made [the United Agenda for Children] so dramatically positive for me and was the thing that even made me willing to come to this focus group - because I knew that impact."

When we asked the focus group participants if they knew about the Larry King Center and its work, no one in the focus group had heard of the Larry King Center. Moreover, the focus group participant who served on the steering committee said, "I'm a little shocked that I don't know about the Larry King Center... having been on the Steering Committee and teaching ...and being real involved in the community, why don't I know about this?"

Finally, the theme that resonated throughout the focus group was that the people were still very passionate about children's issues and improving the lives of children in the community. They want to get involved, but they want to feel like they are working towards change in a coordinated fashion. Despite the promises of the United Agenda for Children, they still don't feel like there is any coordinating going on, they don't feel like they have good information, and they don't know how to get "plugged in." In reflecting upon trying to stay involved, one of the focus group participants said, "I think it's hard for people to become involved and engaged when they don't know what's going on." Others said the process is "not smooth," "there's a disconnect in there somewhere," and "I think if they put it out there, the involvement would be overwhelming."

## **Overall Lessons and Findings**

The United Agenda for Children was an ambitious effort to create community change in a short period of time – with an initial time frame of just three years. According to the vision articulated from the town hall meeting, the United Agenda for Children hoped to achieve three primary outcomes:

1. The community will be better educated about the welfare of our children;
2. The community will have established a way to work towards a shared vision and action plan to make sure that every child is healthy, safe, and well-educated; and
3. The community will have quantifiably improved the lives of children and youth in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

In any evaluation of a community engagement initiative, while it is important to identify and assess the accomplishments, it is also important to recognize that the process, in and of itself, can be an outcome. Or, as one of the people we interviewed noted:

People keep saying – oh, you’ve had so many of these children’s projects, and they’ve all stopped. And my answer to that is – no, they have not. Blueprint for Children grew into Children’s Summit grew into Children’s Alliance grew into United Agenda for Children grew into the Larry King Center. It’s all one.

Nevertheless, with respect to the first outcome for the United Agenda for Children, the white papers and work of the various committees clearly contributed to improving education about the welfare of children, especially during the first few years of the initiative. With respect to the second outcome, the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures was created as a children’s intermediary organization to ensure that the community had a sustainable structure to continue the visioning and planning.

The third outcome, having quantifiably improved the lives of children and youth, is clearly the most challenging – not only for this initiative, but for all communities. This outcome requires defining a set of measures to track over time. While there were some efforts to do this during Phase II, creating a more permanent structure to carry out this work became the primary focus. That said, by creating the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures, the community has started to build the capacity to identify a set of measures or assemble a “community report card,” and to track these changes over time.

With respect to the overall process, the United Agenda for Children illustrates the complexity of sustaining and leading a long-term, community-level initiative. Initially, the United Agenda for Children’s town hall brought together a large and diverse group of citizens and stakeholders in a highly visible and public forum. Over time, a smaller group representing mostly service providers and funders moved forward with the work in a less visible way. When this happens, there is always a risk that those who are no longer connected to or informed of the process will feel excluded or wonder if anything was actually accomplished. Exacerbating this further is that when resources are at stake and funders are perceived as leading the community process, there is a risk that those who are not “in the loop” can see this as philanthropic paternalism. However, it is clear that if this group of community leaders and funders had not stepped forward and supported the initiative over the span of more than five years and create a children’s intermediary organization, the community would still lack the capacity to pursue the vision of United Agenda for Children.

In addition, from the beginning, the conveners were hoping the town hall event and the work that followed would strengthen the connections between the school district and the community’s service providers. This was one of the primary reasons for selecting children’s issues, as a broad issue, from the beginning. During the course of the initiative, however, the ties to schools seemed to wax and wane, in part due to leadership transitions that were occurring at the superintendent level. Moreover, given the anecdotal reports that we heard from this group of participants and providers, they would have liked to have more opportunities to be informed and engaged.

Moving forward, it seems that the task at hand is to reconnect with the broader community about what happened to the United Agenda for Children. Throughout the evaluation, it was clear that media exposure and the nature of the town hall event helped to create high expectations for the initiative. Yet, the complexity in how the initiative then unfolded – with a multitude of committees, dozens of meetings involving many different people, over a long period of time -- makes it hard to sustain the responsive and participatory spirit of its inception. We hope that this process evaluation, however, will help the Council for Children’s Rights and the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures convey the message. Continued engagement is important in this case not only because the initiative began as a community engagement event, but also because community change cannot occur without the participation and collaboration of the entire community, particularly the children and families whom the change is meant to affect.

In closing, we would like to acknowledge the limitations of our work. This process evaluation was a retrospective examination of the events associated with an initiative that spanned more than five years. We relied heavily on self-reported data and the recollections of the people involved in the process. Moreover, the survey and the focus group participants represented a small group of people who participated in the town hall event. Nevertheless, while we cannot generalize our findings to the larger population, we do believe that the consistency of the commentary and the descriptive feedback does provide insight into how the overall initiative unfolded and how it was perceived by those were involved.

## **Appendix A: 14 Priorities from the United Agenda for Children Town Hall Event**

### Priorities in Health

1. Provide healthcare services where the children are: home, school, day care
2. Increase school resources for healthcare services, especially school nurses
3. Implement universal healthcare
4. Coordinate services among providers, non-profit organizations, and faith-based organizations
5. Increase healthy programs in schools

### Priorities in Safety

1. Prepare parents for parenting and hold them accountable for child safety.
2. Increase after school and out-of-school activities
3. Increase quality, quantity and accessibility of child care and day care options.
4. Employer support for: child care options, school visits, and mentoring

### Priorities in Education

1. Require higher standards and provide better pay for teachers and assistants, including mentoring programs
2. Expand and improve facilities—smaller classrooms and better student-teacher ratios
3. Improve communication between parents and teachers
4. Expand Bright Beginnings; take it into community sites
5. Add more mentoring programs for students

## Appendix B: Timeline of the United Agenda for Children

PHASE ONE: TOWN HALL EVENT	2002	July	AmericaSpeaks Event in NYC: Listening to the City – Ground Zero Redesign
		December	Educational Issues Working Group held in Charlotte
	2003	March	The Region Speaks Town Hall Event (“Trial Run” for the United Agenda for Children)
		June	Concept Paper: Community Conversation about Children
		July – November	Citizen Engagement Project – 5 Meetings to bring together key stakeholders
	2004	January	Funding presentation to the Foundation for the Carolinas
		February	First Coalition Meeting for the United Agenda for Children
		March – November	Planning and design of the United Agenda for Children Town Hall Event: Committees included Executive, Steering, Communications, Outreach, Program Content, Volunteer, and Citizen Advisory
		December	United Agenda for Children Town Hall Meeting
	PHASE TWO: IMPLEMENTATION	2004	December
2005		January	Stakeholder Implementation Planning Retreat Leadership Team Meeting
		February	Task Force created to design leadership structure for implementation of UAC priorities Children’s Alliance Retreat facilitated by The Lee Institute
		April	United Agenda for Children Steering Committee formed, commits to two-year implementation process Youth Advisory Council established Foundation for the Carolinas provides grant to The Lee Institute to facilitate alignment of the Children’s Alliance with priorities of the United Agenda for Children
		June	UAC Retreat held – Established three sub-committees: Health, Safety, and Education
		July – September	Committee Meetings Work proceeds on implementation plans and the White Papers
		September	Draft logic model for United Agenda for Children proposed by The Institute for Social Capital
		October	UAC Hires Executive Director

<b>PHASE THREE: SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURE</b>	2006	January – May	Committee Meetings Work proceeds on implementation plans and the White Papers
		May	Collaborative effort of United Agenda for Children, Children’s Alliance, and Youth Advisory Council wins increased funding for school nurses from the Mecklenburg County Board of Commissioners
		June	Retreat: A Community Collaborating for Children – collaboration of the UAC, the Children’s Alliance, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, and Charlotte Model Courts Establish work of the Sunrise Committee (later renamed Structure Committee) Funders’ Collaborative established
		July - November	Meetings of the Children’s Initiative Structure Committee
		December	Structure Committee makes recommendations to Executive Committee Aha Moment: Form a Design Team to develop a sustainable structure
	2007	March	Event held to release United Agenda for Children White Papers ATM Story Told Official Sunset of the United Agenda for Children
	2007	May – September	Meetings of the Children’s Initiative Design Team Facilitation and consulting by Smith+Harbrecht and The Finance Project Local research: Interviews and Focus Groups held Study of national models, including site visits
		November	Design Team Recommendations Finalized: Community should create a children’s intermediary organization and consider housing it within the Council for Children’s Rights Identified 4 roles: Catalyst for change through strategic planning, public relations & awareness, public policy, and research & evaluation
	2008	January - June	Work Team established to work out the details of the Design Team recommendations Look at a 10-year plan for funding, staffing, planning, and organizational capacity
		June	Work Team presents proposal for the launch of a children’s intermediary at the Council for Children’s Rights
July – December		Work Team works closely with Board and Staff at Council for Children’s Rights Pivotal moment: Putting children at the center of the table	
2009	January - June	The Bridgespan Group works with The Council for Children’s Rights	
	September	Media launch of the Larry King Center for Building Children’s Futures	

## Appendix C: Survey Questions

1. Do you remember participating in the United Agenda for Children town hall event on December 11, 2004?
2. How did you get involved in the United Agenda for Children?
3. What were your expectations for the United Agenda for Children town hall event?
4. How well did the United Agenda for Children town hall event meet your expectations?
5. Following the United Agenda for Children town hall event, were you invited to volunteer in the continuing work of the initiative?
6. Following the United Agenda for Children town hall event, were you any more or less engaged with children's issues in our community? If so, please describe.
7. At the United Agenda for Children town hall event, all of the participants were asked to make a personal commitment to improving the lives of children in our community. Do you recall the commitment that you made?
8. What commitment did you make toward improving the lives of children in our community? Did you keep it?
9. In addition to participating the United Agenda for Children town hall event, were you involved in the United Agenda for Children in other ways?
10. In what other ways were you involved with the United Agenda for Children?
11. Since participating in the United Agenda for Children Town Hall event, have seen any changes in the community's approach to issues surrounding children?
12. Please describe any changes you have seen in the community's approach to issues surrounding children.
13. Overall, how would you describe your experience with the United Agenda for Children?
14. Have you heard of the Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures?
15. Please describe what the Larry King Center does.
16. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group to tell us more about your experience with the United Agenda for Children? The focus group is scheduled for Wednesday, December 1st from 6:30 - 7:30 PM at the Children & Family Services Center uptown. Parking is free and refreshments will be provided. If yes, please enter your e-mail address below so that we may contact you with an invitation.
17. If you would like a summary of our findings, please enter your e-mail address below. Your e-mail address will be kept confidential and will not be used for any other purpose.

## **Appendix D: Focus Group Questions**

1. How did you get involved in the United Agenda for Children town hall event
2. What were your expectations for the United Agenda for Children town hall event?
3. How well did the United Agenda for Children town hall event meet your expectations?
4. Did anyone ever follow up with you or ask you to participate in initiative in any other way?
5. Do you know what happened after the United Agenda for Children town hall event?
6. Did you see any media coverage of the United Agenda for Children before or after the event? What was that like?
7. Since the United Agenda for Children town hall event, were you more (or less) engaged with children's issues in our community? If so, please describe.
8. Have you heard of the Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures? Do you know what they do?

## Appendix E: Interview Questions

- 1) How did [organization name] get involved in the United Agenda for Children?
- 2) What was [organization name]'s role initially?
  - a. Who from [organization name] participated? (Staff board? Board members?)
  - b. What was their role?
- 3) How did [organization name] role change over time?
  - a. What were some of the important decisions that were made? How did they come about?
- 4) We know the Larry King Center was created out of the UAC.
  - a. Are you aware of how that came into being? If so, tell us about that.
  - b. Were there other options on the table that were being explored?
  - c. What were they? Why weren't they pursued?
  - d. Tell us about the role that Bridgespan played.
  - e. Did others play a key role? What about funders? Other organizations?
- 5) What do you think the UAC intended to accomplish? Did it?
- 6) Did your participation in the initiative change who you work with?
- 7) Were there community partners that you think should have participated, but didn't?
  - a. If so, tell us more about that. Why? Why not?
- 8) What role did the media play? How well do you think the initiative was covered? Are there things that might have been done differently?
- 9) Moving forward to today and the connection between the United Agenda for Children and the Larry King Center.
  - a. Do you think those who participated in the UAC understand the connection?
  - b. Do other nonprofits understand the connection?
  - c. Do local government agencies or funders?
  - d. Does the community at large?
  - e. What role do you think the Larry King Center should play?

As we move forward with the evaluation:

- 10) Are there specific events or decisions that were made that you think we should look closely at?
- 11) Who are the people that you think we need to talk to?