For 25 years the Voices for Utah Children’s KIDS COUNT Project has been producing our annual data book “Measures of Child Well-Being in Utah.” The book provides state and county level indicators in 5 areas of child well-being and is the go-to resource on the well-being of children in Utah.

*Measures of Child Well-Being in Utah* stimulates dialogue on children’s issues, and promotes accountability and action. Information is power. Equipped with facts, people can make a huge difference. That’s why we took on the ambitious goal of visiting every county in Utah before the end of the year, seeking a dialogue between what the data says and what communities know about kids - particularly about the disparate life prospects for kids in diverse communities. We shared county information from our annual KIDS COUNT book and talked about the importance of the upcoming Census 2020. We chose the name “Talking Kids Tour,” because our primary purpose was to listen and hear what was taking place in each community.

We appreciate the welcome we received across the state and look forward to continuing to spend time working with many new partners on issues that are important to the children of Utah.
What We Heard

We wanted to share some of the key issues that we heard fairly consistently.

• Mental Health: This was the number one issue that we heard across the state. We still have one of the highest rates of teen suicide per capita and heard that students as young as 4 are showing signs of crisis. We were also made aware of the lack of providers in many counties as well as school counselors taking on expanding roles.

• Early Childhood and Education: We have a childcare issue statewide. The average cost of a year of childcare is more than an average year of college. We have a great Head Start Program, but it does not receive any state funding. Many districts are self-funding Pre-K programs and would love to expand based on local demand. There is also an increased demand for Optional-Extended-Day Kindergarten. We have more families where both parents are in the work force and are in need of the above services at different times in their children’s development. There is an increase in grandparents as caregivers.

Several communities noted that the “cliff effect” in childcare subsidies is making it hard for families to improve their economic situation and move their families out of poverty.

Many of the communities talked about the fact that up to 40% of their teachers are APL (alternate path to licensure) or long term substitutes due to a lack of licesed teachers and the fact that the state has fewer teachers graduating from state universities than are needed.

• Health Insurance: Utah experienced the largest growth the last two years in uninsured children. We currently have approximately 72,000 uninsured children in the state. We also have a month by month Medicaid coverage issue. If a parent takes on an extra shift or works overtime, it can trigger a loss in benefits for the following month. The average child on Medicaid is only covered for 11 months per year.

• Addiction: We still continue to have an opioid crisis statewide. We were also made aware that Meth is making a big comeback, primarily in rural areas. This is consistent with a national trend.
• Tax Restructuring: We heard many concerns regarding the effects of tax reform on local communities. The concern ranged from issues surrounding the gas tax and sales tax to the long-term effects of restructuring on education funding. Many of the rural districts do not have an adequate tax base and are concerned they would have to absorb the cost of reduced state funding through local property taxes.

• Economy: Many of our rural counties are seeing a migration of young people moving to urban counties. The levels of poverty in these rural areas is growing and is a major issue moving forward.

Working With Less - Thinking Outside the Box

As we traveled around the state we heard various ways that service providers were doing more with less and coming up with inventive ways to help close gaps in services including:

• Offering dental screenings at the food banks allowing families access to needed oral health simply and efficiently.
• Creating homeless coordinators in the school to help homeless students access all the services they are eligible for.
• Developing partnerships with mental health care providers to come to Head Start programs, taking away transportation and costs issues.
• Finding local money to help expand all-day kindergarten and preschool programs.

• Using Indian Health Services money to provide scholarships to individuals going into mental health/health studies. These students are coming back to their communities to help provide services.
• Developing racial equity programs in a county where leaders could see a changing demographic in their community.

Recommendations

The following policy recommendations came out of our discussions with community leaders that they felt would help children and families. Chief among them:

• Removing the cliff effect on child care subsidies.
• Creating reciprocity in licensure for mental health providers, similar to nursing.
• Provide state funding for Head Start.
• Provide more state funding for optional-extended-day kindergarten.
• Assist communities with early childhood care and education coordination.
• Ensure children have year-round continuous health insurance coverage.
• Help parents get covered without restrictions or barriers.
• Expand school based health services.

Conclusion

Many of these topics will be addressed in the upcoming legislative session. Voices is working on bills in many of these areas and will continue to advocate for the best interest of Utah’s children. We want to thank all of the people who took the time to meet with us and to share their stories. We are looking forward to continuing this outreach in 2020 and developing policy positions that meet the needs of all our children.