

*Evaluating the Mission and Methods of Success by 6  
in Post-Katrina New Orleans*

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**Abstract:** This case study examines a non-profit organization's response to catastrophic disaster. The United Way Women's Leadership Council of Southeast Louisiana (WLC) worked towards improving quality childcare in the greater New Orleans area by assisting childcare centers in improving standards and achieving national accreditation. After Hurricane Katrina, most shelters housing childcare were destroyed, owners lacked the insurance to rebuild, and the city was stuck in a double-bind: even among centers with sufficient insurance to rebuild, centers were not assured that they would have enough clients who returned to the city to reopen and young families could not return to a city without adequate childcare. Using interviews with WLC members and outside sources documenting the problems with the rebuild after Katrina, this case discusses whether the Women's Leadership Council should reframe its goals for the Success by 6 program in New Orleans or encourage the opening of more childcare centers, even those without accreditation.

### **Introduction**

On August 25, 2005 Hurricane Katrina made landfall and severely damaged the city of New Orleans. What is rather less well-known is that this damage included both tangible and intangible damage to the majority of childcare facilities in New Orleans and the surrounding areas. Hurricane Katrina destroyed hundreds of childcare facilities, and many centers lacked sufficient insurance to rebuild (Agenda for Children 2006). Even those facilities in a position to rebuild financially faced several barriers to rebuilding. First, they were not entirely certain that there were enough families with young children in the city to sustain a childcare program; in 2006, New Orleans' under five population was at 22% of its pre-Katrina size. Further, it was extremely difficult to recruit workers (Agenda for Children 2006). Wages for childcare workers in Louisiana before the storm were the lowest in the nation. Recruiting workers to return for such low pay was not easy, particularly given the city's high housing rental rate after Katrina and the high wages offered at traditionally low-wage businesses such as fast food restaurants (Agenda for Children 2006).

These barriers meant that 200 out of the 272 childcare facilities in Orleans parish prior to Katrina were still not open as of 2006 (Agenda for Children 2006). Despite the fact that quality childcare was vital to the return of young families, the main planners of the city's rebuilding effort mostly ignored the child care issue (Agenda for Children 2006). This left the task of rebuilding childcare in the city of New Orleans largely up to non-profit organizations (Agenda for Children 2006). One such organization, though by no means

the only non-profit agent working towards improving child care in New Orleans, was the United Way Women's Leadership Council's Success by 6 initiative, a program which broadly sought to ensure that at-risk children would have the resources they needed to be successful by age six. In pre-Katrina New Orleans, Success by 6 was dedicated to improving the quality of childcare in the city by helping centers achieve higher levels of accreditation and particularly accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Success by 6 2010).

Prior to the storm, the Women's Leadership Council named Carol Wise the chair of the Women's Leadership Council for 2006. In January 2006, roughly four months after the storm, Wise called the first meeting of the Women's Leadership Council after Katrina. She did not know who was still in the city or who would make it to the meeting, but she wanted to send the message that the Council was still alive, and that it was time to begin to plan for the rebuild. Given the extreme need in the city in all aspects of childcare, the Council faced many explicit and implicit choices in rebuilding; choosing to spend money in one direction indirectly meant that money was not available for other initiatives. What should the Women's Leadership Council do? Should the Council reframe the methods of Success by 6? Or should they hold to their original plans for the program?

### **Background on the Women's Leadership Council<sup>1</sup>**

In 2002, Kim Sport, a local New Orleanian who was involved with multiple charitable organizations in the New Orleans area, was set to become the incoming chair for the United Way Drive of the United Way of Southeast Louisiana. Sport had been active in the United Way since 1998, and as she puts it, has done just about "everything" in the organization. Among the many positions she has held in the United Way, Sport has been the first woman chairman of the United Way fundraising campaign for the Greater New Orleans region, the first chair of the Women's Leadership Council, and the Katrina recovery chairman after the storm. The year before she was set to take over as the chairman of the fundraising campaign, Sport had an idea to form a Women's Leadership Council (WLC), or Women's Leadership Initiative as it was then known, in New Orleans. At the time, there were only about twelve in the country. To aid her in starting the Council, she recruited her friend and fellow philanthropist, Carol Wise, to be her second in command.

Wise, a small business owner, had been active in philanthropy all over the city, but though she had donated to the United Way before, she had never before worked directly with the organization (Barenson 2009). However, Wise had previously been involved with Lion of Judah, a Jewish women's giving group. Wise wanted to involve women in giving as a group rather than just individually, and as a working woman, Wise felt left out of the fundraising work in which women who did not work participated. In the giving group, she founded a business and professional woman's division that gave working women a chance to give back to the community and to have a voice in the community (Barenson 2009). She believed that people supported what they created and that women, in particular, like to see where their money is going. Additionally, Wise, a small business owner herself, notes that while women make up a significant portion of small business owners, non-profits rarely target them for charitable giving; she thinks that this is a mistake.

Sport and Wise recruited 48 other women to serve as the founding members of

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<sup>1</sup> This account is taken from personal communications between the author and Kim Sport on November 12, 2012 and Carol Wise on October 1, 2012.

the Council. Each woman had to agree to pay \$1,000 if they were older than 35 and \$500 if they were younger than 35. Sport and Wise wanted a diverse group of founding members in terms of ethnicity, age, and profession, among other factors. Sport, in particular, wanted the women in the community to look at the founders and find themselves in the group. Wise and Sport also wanted these women to be leaders in their communities.

The pair also had several goals for the new group and the women involved. Sport did not want the group to be just one of many women's groups already in the city. New Orleans had an active Junior League and women's professional councils. Still, there was no woman's group that served the health and human services community in the way that the United Way could. They felt they could make a difference. Both Sport and Wise wanted to make the members feel that they were investing in a systemic change in the community.

The first meeting of the WLC was in August, and Sport was set to take over as fundraising chair in January. All 50 founding women attended. At the first meeting, the members decided that they wanted to work on school readiness, but did not put forth specifics on what that would look like. They knew other groups in the city were working on reforming the school system, but that was too large an undertaking for the fledgling group; however, they thought they could make sure all children were ready to learn when they entered school. According to Sport, the group initially proposed but ruled out initiatives that included women's health and total school system reform, among others.

After the initial August meeting, another meeting was scheduled for January where they wanted to invite as many women as they could to join the WLC. *The Gambit*, a local New Orleans paper, ran an ad showing the 50 founders and calling for new members. In the meantime, the WLC now had more than \$50,000 to spend just from the contributions of the founding members. They formed a charter and by-laws to create a structure as they narrowed their focus and recruited new members. At the January meeting, they hoped that 400 people would attend, but they were not sure that they would even come close to that goal. In fact, they filled up the 400-person room. After recruiting over 200 new members, the WLC's next step was to form an issues committee to determine their specific cause.

Although the rookie Council knew they wanted to work with school readiness, they were not entirely sure how to operationalize their goal. After the January meeting, the WLC sent out requests for proposals, and they ended up funding a Kingsley House initiative covering offsite childcare. The Council would fund Kingsley House as part of a 5-year pilot program on childcare, giving the organization \$250,000 (Winkler-Schmit 2006). The project would allow Kingsley House to demonstrate what quality childcare looked like. Kingsley House was one of the best childcare centers in the city, but they were constantly full. With the WLC money, Kingsley house could now offer childcare offsite from the main location. Still, the women of the Council felt this was not really what they wanted to do on a long-term basis.

The women of the WLC began to consider implementing Success by 6, a United Way trademarked initiative that supports programs to assist in early childhood development. Although they knew there were several Success by 6 initiatives around the country, no Women's Leadership Councils ran them, and there was not one in place in New Orleans. Furthermore, since programs included in Success by 6 vary state to state, the Council would have to decide how they would want to implement the program in the city. Subsequently, they hired a staff person to begin work on Success by 6 to help determine how that would ultimately look.

Sport asked Wise to be the first chair of Success by 6, though it was still not clear

what Success by 6 would be. The Success by 6 Committee held months of meetings where they studied which national best practices would most improve the early development of children. Ultimately, they determined that the biggest impediment to school readiness in the Greater New Orleans area was a lack of adequate childcare. The quality of childcare in Louisiana ranked far below the rest of the nation, and before Katrina, only 6% of the 550 state-licensed centers in the Greater New Orleans Area were accredited by national standards (Agenda for Children 2006).

In addition to Success by 6, the Women's Leadership Council began to get involved in politics. They hosted public policy breakfasts, and they asked candidates in the 2003 gubernatorial race for their opinions on childcare. They also quickly gained recognition for their work. In 2003, at the United Way's National Summit on Women and Philanthropy in Atlanta, the WLC was named one of the top three councils in the nation for innovation; in 2004, the Louisiana Association of Non-profits named the WLC the most successful advocacy group in the state. By the end of Sport's two-year term as the chairman of the WLC, the Council had grown from the original 50 founders to 419 members. Additionally, the WLC had invested over \$500,000 of its own money in the Kingsley House pilot project and the Success by 6 demonstration projects.

### **Background of Success by 6**

Before settling specifically on childcare as their main issue, the Council considered working with abused women, childhood diseases, and vaccination efforts—all of which could fit within a framework of early childhood success. Thus, before they established their Success by 6 initiative, they could have chosen to pursue several avenues of work. The women of the Council decided on childcare because they perceived it to be an area of high need where they could make systemic change. The Success by 6 committee recruited a large consortium composed of individuals involved in all aspects of childcare, including providers, funders, parents, and women from the WLC. Within the Success by 6 Committee was a small group of executive committee members who made decisions about the direction of Success by 6 based on the consortium's recommendations. The committee took the issues raised by the consortium and ensured they fit with what the Success by 6 initiative called for.

The committee held monthly meetings of the consortium examining early childhood development in New Orleans. At one meeting, for example, they determined that there were 400 different facilities or organizations available for children between birth and age six. The consortium felt that this number was too large for any parent to sift through alone. So the consortium decided that what was needed was to look at how child care providers could be helped to become the best they could be and how parents could learn to look for high-quality childcare. They felt that putting together a rating system for childcare would increase the quality of childcare in the community and give children a chance to be successful by age six.

The committee followed the consortium's recommendations, though it took nearly a year to get to the point of implementation. This meant that the Success by 6 initiative would not be just about childcare for the WLC—it would be about quality childcare—and that meant accreditation (Winkler-Schmit 2006). To that end, the Success by 6 Committee began working with a lobbyist and created the three-year High Quality Childcare Project. The lobbyist with which the WLC worked began to push for legislation that would implement a state-wide quality ranking system for childcare centers. The goal of the High Quality Childcare Project was to create a learning model that other child-care providers in the state

could use. The Council chose three centers at different stages of development—one new, one well-established, and one between the other two—to serve as models of how to move from a certain stage to national accreditation. Then, Hurricane Katrina hit (Success by 6 2010).

### **The Future of Success by 6 after Katrina: Relevant Decision Factors**

Katrina hit during Carol Wise's tenure as the chairman of the Women's Leadership Council. She called a meeting in January 2006, not entirely certain that people would show up. Wise wanted people to know they were back in business. She had a room set up for 50 people, but roughly 150 members showed up. This meeting would form the beginning of the rebuild and set the agenda for the WLC after the storm. Childcare was still important to the city, but now the issue was not just improving quality, it was helping centers get back in business. Even among the WLC members at the meeting there were women who were back and working and who needed a place for their children as soon as possible. At the first meeting, the WLC had to discern where they could get money to rebuild and what to rebuild. And, most importantly, the WLC had to decide if they would wait on the state-wide policy improvement program when so many childcare centers were destroyed and needed money to rebuild or if they should focus on improvement and rebuilding at the same time.

### **Institutional Capabilities of the Women's Leadership Council and the United Way**

Kim Sport founded the United Way of Southeast Louisiana's Women's Leadership Council based on the idea that there was a benefit to recruiting women to join together to face common problems in the community. Yet, the Council's choice of Success by 6 as its initiative and its main goal of improving the quality of each childcare facility were secondary choices and tertiary choices, respectively. By no means were these the only choices available to a council trying to pick an initiative that would appeal to women. The Council had a great deal of autonomy in their mission, but they also had autonomy financially.

The Women's Leadership Council was a unique arm of the United Way. When the Council was founded, the Board of the United Way granted them fundraising and allocation permissions. This meant that the WLC could decide how to spend any money designated to Success by 6, and that they had unprecedented autonomy in the United Way; however, the Women's Leadership Council never formed a separate 501(c)(3) and continued to operate under the auspices of the United Way. After the storm, the WLC could have concentrated on raising money for capital improvement grants to give to rebuilding childcare centers, or they could have focused on improving the state rating system of childcare. They could not, however, have simply started new childcare centers around the city. The United Way does not fund its own programs; it funds other, pre-existing nonprofits or underserved businesses. This somewhat limited the scope of what the Women's Leadership Council could do.

### **The Childcare Situation**

Even before Hurricanes Katrina and Rita hit Louisiana, the quality of childcare in Louisiana was far worse than that of other states and the median wage for individuals working in child care was the lowest in the nation (Agenda for Children 2006). These low wages made it difficult for employers to recruit and maintain well-qualified workers and led to high turnover of employees (Agenda for Children 2006). Most of the lead teachers in childcare centers in Louisiana were only high school graduates, and while the directors of programs

had to have some prior experience, personnel did not have to have any prior experience in childcare or education (Agenda for Children 2006). Additionally, though there are requirements for on-the-job training, the requirements for employees to begin working at childcare centers are few, including the provisions that an employee must be 18 years of age, have passed a criminal background check, and test negative for tuberculosis (Agenda for Children 2006). These low standards were what the Women's Leadership Council's Success by 6 initiative was trying to improve in the state of Louisiana through their quality ranking program. The low caliber of childcare overall explains how difficult it was for any family to have access to high-quality childcare even before the storm.

After Katrina, hundreds of childcare centers were destroyed—200 out of the 272 childcare facilities in Orleans parish prior to Katrina were still closed in 2006 (Agenda for Children 2006). The Women's Leadership Council was making its decision in this landscape, but it was not the only non-profit working with childcare. The Greater New Orleans Child Care Rebuild Collaborative (GNORCCC) began in early 2006, around the time the WLC was planning for the rebuild (Foundation Center 2012). Agenda for Children, another non-profit working on improving outcomes for children in Louisiana, invited community partners already working on childcare in the city, including The United Way (Foundation Center 2012). The focus of the GNORCC was initially to rebuild centers and meet the area's need, but by 2008, only seven centers in the city had been rebuilt using GNORCC funding, serving only about 238 children (Foundation Center 2012).

While the Women's Leadership Council was not the only organization working on childcare after Katrina, the pace of rebuilding was slow. Still, quality childcare was known to be a problem in the state of Louisiana—even before the storm. Rebuilding offered a chance to help centers improve their quality. The Women's Leadership Council had to decide whether to concentrate less on their hopes for a quality rating system (and thus improving quality) and focus more on pure, physical rebuilding or to do both at the same time by allocating less money for the rebuilding process.

### **The Non-Profit Situation**

The United Way and the Women's Leadership Council were also not the only non-profit organizations in the city faced with difficult decisions after the storm. Non-profit heads were trying to rebuild their own organizations while at the same time evolving to meet client needs—many of which were not necessarily the same needs as before the storm (Smith 2012). The heads of non-profit organizations reported that after Katrina, new client needs included housing and financial assistance, the needs of child and families, and mental health needs (Smith 2012). Heads of non-profits also had to be prepared to absorb the responsibilities of other non-profits that could not be sustained after the storm (Smith 2012). Although this process was difficult, and the storm was deeply destabilizing, Katrina offered a chance for imagination and for refiguring old ways of doing things (Smith 2012). New legacies could come out of such a disaster, and organizations would not have to be locked into the same way of doing things (Smith 2012).

### **The Decision**

Prior to the storm, the United Way Women's Leadership Council's primary focus had been working with centers to achieve national accreditation on which they had only just begun to take action. Their course of action manifested in two parts. First, the council ran a project

with three childcare centers in different levels of development to help them achieve national accreditation and to then serve as models for their peer centers. Second, the Council's Success by 6 initiative used a lobbyist employed by the local United Way to begin to push for a quality ranking system that would help parents choose between childcare centers. Quality would be measured by factors like continuity of care for children, whether or not the staff had received training in state educational guidelines for children, and how to screen children for social-emotional development issues ("Louisiana" 2012). Families who send their children to ranked centers receive a tax credit, and the tax credit would increase with the ranking of the center. The initiative would give centers an incentive to raise their quality ranking and give parents an incentive to send their children to better-ranked centers.

During Katrina, all three of the shelters housing childcare center were destroyed. With the model project temporarily on hold while the shelters concentrated on rebuilding, the Women's Leadership Council needed to decide what their focus would be in the meantime. The major question the WLC had to answer was whether or not they should also temporarily halt the legislative aspect of their plan and, instead, focus on raising money to give capital grants that would open more centers.

The focus of Success by 6 had always been on quality childcare—not just providing childcare in general. Concentrating only on rebuilding would mean, at least temporarily, changing the goals of the organization. Young families desperately needed childcare to return to work in the devastated city, but even though other groups were working on rebuilding childcare, the rebuild effort was moving slowly. By changing its mission, the WLC could help to raise the number of centers rebuilding after the storm.

But at the same time, without the legislative improvements, centers would be rebuilding just as they were before the storm. The city would miss a chance to improve the quality of childcare through legislative improvements. Of course, the improvements had been sought before the storm with no legislation to show for it. And while the Council could always try some combination of lobbying and money, time spent lobbying meant less money that the Council could give to direct rebuilding.

Given everything that was wrong in the city, not just childcare, Carol Wise and the remaining members of the WLC had huge decisions to make. Wise had been one of the original founding members of the WLC, and as the first chairman of Success by 6, she oversaw the initiative's evolution into a program geared toward improving the quality of childcare in the city. She truly believed that improving childcare quality was necessary to help children achieve success by age six.<sup>4</sup> But, at the first meeting of the WLC, it was apparent that there was great need for childcare in the city, even among WLC members. Should Carol Wise, as the head of the Women's Leadership Council, push the WLC to meet the new need in the city and help open childcare centers? Or, should Wise stay the course and pursue the WLC's previous goal of a state law creating a quality ranking system for childcare centers?

## **Epilogue**

After Katrina, the WLC felt that while most of the attention was on the need for available housing in order for residents to return, childcare was also an extremely important part of a young family's ability to return. The WLC decided its goal post-Katrina was to make sure any center that needed rebuilding would rebuild with high quality in mind. The WLC ended up "fast-tracking" the public policy proposals for a quality ranking system

through the legislature. The logic in this tactic was that they would simply move into the rebuilding process with the quality standards in place. Quality Start, the WLC's quality ranking system, passed the Louisiana legislature in 2007.

Sport thinks the major contribution of the WLC after Katrina was bringing national attention to the destruction of childcare centers. The United Way started a public relations campaign running ads saying "Do the Math: 0 childcare = 0 employees = 0 business." Additionally, the WLC hosted a national conference in New Orleans called "Seeing is Believing." They invited other WLC's to come and view the devastation of childcare centers which generated financial support from around the country for the WLC of Southeast Louisiana. The WLC also did some minor political work with the mayoral election in 2010, got a city council resolution passed, and called on WLC members to ensure that a plan for child care in their communities would be included in the "Unified New Orleans Plan."

Additionally, the WLC revived the High Quality Child Care project, and the three model centers destroyed by the storm were rebuilt with grants from the local United Way. Other United Ways gave money, too, and the WLC was able to allocate over one million dollars to training 60 child care center directors on how to run a child care center. There were also grants given for construction and furniture. On November 15, 2012, one of the model centers, the Royal Castle Child Development Center, received national accreditation—a long-time goal of the WLC for childcare centers in the area. Since the initial rebuild effort, the WLC also expanded its mission and began a partnership with the St. Bernard Project to form an annual "Women's Build Week." They have also built a Kaboom playground and have expanded to supporting a Nurse-Family partnership program.



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