
Important Messages to Share

IN PRESENTATIONS AND CONVERSATIONS
ABOUT HOME VISITING IN ALABAMA

PREPARED FOR



PREPARED BY



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The goal of every conversation is not to convince, but to connect.

Summary:

Longleaf Strategies was hired by the Alabama Partnership for Children to help the organization identify key messages to help build a “surround sound” of support for expanding evidence-based, high-quality early childhood Home Visiting in Alabama.

Successful messaging is not a script, but a guide that helps spokespeople share their unique perspective on the value of Home Visiting to internal and external audiences, and explain why audiences should join our effort to expand the program to reach more families in a clear, easy to understand and consistent tone with other advocates.

The following memo provides basic messaging tools for APC staff and affinity partners to use to describe Home Visiting, its vision, values and purpose to external and internal audiences, and to guide the narrative and tone surrounding APC’s potential advocacy campaign.

This messaging guide contains several sections. The specific messages outlined should be used selectively depending on who APC’s spokespeople are speaking to and what their audience’s current beliefs are about Home Visiting. This document should serve as a reference point that helps anyone speaking or writing on behalf of Home Visiting advocates communicate as a singular entity.

Methodology:

Over the course of several weeks, Longleaf Strategies interviewed representatives from the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention (Children’s Trust Fund), Home Visiting providers, advocates and participants in the various Home Visiting programs in the state.

Our aim in these conversations was to assess how each group describes Home Visiting, and to learn their thoughts on the mission, purpose and goals of these programs. Each session lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. Unfortunately, due to the special session, we were unable to speak with any legislators about this project.

Following the completion of the interviews, Longleaf Strategies analyzed the recordings from these interviews, specifically looking for the common themes and keywords interviewees used to describe Home Visiting – both to each other and to those unfamiliar with the programs as a whole. Longleaf then compared this information to existing Home Visiting documents provided by APC as well as our own understanding of the challenges preventing the expansion of Home Visiting programs to more families.

Analysis:

The underlying theme from our interviews is a shared belief that early childhood Home Visiting programs connect parents with the resources they need to raise safe and healthy children in their own unique way. Interviewees stressed that visiting with families inside their homes is a more effective way to understand a person's situation and truly assess their needs. It enables home visitors (or parent educators) and their families to develop a better rapport and level of trust with one another. None of the interviewees believed that a clinical- or classroom-based program would be as effective.

Although early childhood Home Visiting programs have existed in Alabama for many years, according to research from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, in 2015 there were a total of only 55 program sites serving a total of 5,220 families across the state. This included a total of 6,280 children under the age of five. There are at least 11 counties in Alabama that do not have any Home Visiting services available for people who live there.

The small number of families served means that few in the state are aware of early childhood Home Visiting and what it offers families and communities. Some may wrongly believe that it is a mandatory program for families working with DHR and the juvenile court system, and others may think this program is a home health program like hospice.

The lack of instantaneous recognition among key stakeholders is compounded by the fact that there are at least 14 different models of Home Visiting in the state administered by two different state agencies. In addition, when discussing the current programs, advocates and participants independently promote their specific model instead of Home Visiting as a whole. As a result, it is likely that key stakeholders may know and have a positive opinion about HIPPY, Parents as Teachers or Nurse Family Partnership, but they may not necessarily see them as one of a series of programs available under the Home Visiting umbrella.

Although the system of diverse delivery does provide challenges for developing a consistent description of the purpose and goals of Home Visiting, it also presents an opportunity for advocates to emphasize how the program choices are driven by local community leaders based on their area's specific needs.

Advocates must seize the opportunity to develop a common definition that encapsulates all of the different Home Visiting programs and shares their collective impact and continuing need with lawmakers. The more that we are able to help our audience visualize what takes place during a home visit and how these lessons are strengthening families, the more likely it is that they will be open to supporting our campaign.

Finally, we understand that there are some concerns using the words "Home Visiting" in our campaign. The interviewees – including the parents enrolled in the program – continually emphasized that what made this program unique was that it worked with families in their homes. Most believed that stakeholders are more likely to be completely unaware of what Home Visiting is than to assume that it is a mandatory program administered by DHR or the judicial system. The latter was a common concern on conservative and alt-right news sites when the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) was included as part of the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) debate. This line of thought has seemingly died down in the six years since.

Recommendations & Next Steps:

After listening to Home Visiting advocates, providers and participants, we believe that there is an opportunity to position the program for additional state appropriations to support new grants.

For this effort to be successful, we recommend broadening the advocacy coalition beyond providers and individuals participating in the program by creating a Task Force similar to the Pre-K Task Force that would emphasize early childhood Home Visiting from birth to five as part of its platform. The expanded coalition should include all agencies and organizations that would ultimately be touched by children enrolled in Home Visiting programs with their parents – educators, pediatricians, employers – as well as individuals from the court system and DHR who can attest to the improved outcomes for children enrolled in the various programs.

However, advocates must be able to address the following concerns:

- Why are the grants administered by two state agencies? Are there different requirements to receive funding from these agencies and how does that impact quality from program to program?
- How do Alabama's Home Visiting programs compare to similar programs nationwide? Are the programs in Alabama more effective? Do we hold higher expectations for grantees?
- Similar to NIEER and pre-k, is there a group nationally that can independently verify the quality of our programs over other states?
- How much funding would it take to provide Home Visiting services to every family that wanted to participate?

Finally, we recommend partnering with an independent third party to determine the economic impact of Home Visiting programs in Alabama. In particular, this third party would provide a specific figure advocates could use to inform lawmakers how much is needed to provide Home Visiting to every family that wants to participate, as well as how much could be saved over the long term through increased investments.

Suggested Campaign Messaging:

Core Message Elements:

At its core, what is it that we are seeking to convey in our conversations about Home Visiting?

Message Foundation

(what does our campaign stand for)

“safe, healthy and educated children”

Message Pillars:

(what are the primary messaging elements that support what our campaign stands for...)

- **Helping Parents to Parent**
Evidence-based, high-quality Home Visiting programs help parents be parents in their own unique way.
- **Supporting Strong Families**
Participating families set their own expectations about what they want for their children, and the parent educators provide support and reinforcement to make sure parents follow through with their decisions.
- **Reinforcing Local Decisions**
Local community leaders determine which Home Visiting programs they want to offer families. State grants ensure that programs are adhering to minimum quality standards.

Campaign Vocabulary:

(These words came up repeatedly and play an important role in describing Home Visiting and setting the tone for the added value it provides.)

Nouns	Adjectives	Verbs
Bond	Child-Centered	Care
Community	Consistent	Coach
Comforting	Flexible	Comfort
Confidence	Local	Empower
Connection	Natural	Encourage
Hope	Nonjudgmental	Impact
Impact	One-stop	Model
Relationship	Parent-Focused	Reassure
	Successful	Strengthen
	Trusting	Support
	Voluntary	Teach
		Working

What we Believe:

- We believe that it is a family's responsibility to raise their children to be successful, healthy adults. However, some parents simply do not know what they need do to help their children succeed.
- Alabama consistently ranks in the bottom of national statistics measuring the wellbeing of our children. According to KIDS COUNT data, too many children are born at an unhealthy, low weight. Too many die a preventable death due to neglect. And, too many enter school behind and are never able to catch up.
- Ninety percent of a child's brain is developed by the age of five. The habits they develop in the first five years will influence their outcomes for the rest of their lives. The earlier that we can work with children and engage their healthy development, sense of creativity and inquisitiveness, the more likely we will be able to help them succeed.
- No child comes with an instruction manual, and every parent will face a situation in which they will turn to others for help. Some lack an example to model their parenting after. Others simply don't know that they are exhibiting behavior that will impact the development of their child.
- Home Visiting in Alabama is a free, voluntary program to support parents at home and help them learn how to be more engaged in their child's life.
- While other early childhood programs focus on the child, Home Visiting seeks to engage the parent first. They teach parents what to do with their child – whether they need advice on discipline or on how to instill a foundation for continuous learning – so that parents can reinforce these lessons with their child on their own long after the parent educator leave.
- The results speak for themselves. Families who have participated report that their child is not only healthy, but thriving in school. However, too few families are able to participate. The program is simply too small to move the needle gauging the well-being of Alabama's children.
- More funding is needed to enable local communities to offer these programs to more families that want to enroll.

Key Messages to Share in Every Conversation:

- It is the **responsibility of families** to raise their children to be safe, healthy and successful Alabamians who are inquisitive, excited and ready to learn and contribute.
- From sharing best practices on how to parent to encouraging mothers and fathers to be their child's first teachers, evidence-based, high-quality Home Visiting programs **empower** parents to be more active in their child's life.
- Every community is different, and every family has their own unique needs. The State of Alabama enables local communities to choose the specific Home Visiting program they want to operate based on their assessment of the area's needs. The state's role is to help ensure that each program adheres to that model's specific guidelines for quality and to ensure that the program is doing what it says it is striving to do -- improving the wellbeing of the children.
- State-based evaluations show that evidence-based, high-quality Home Visiting programs are making a difference in the families they serve. However, due to a lack of funding, only a small percentage of families interested in participating are able to do so. Increased investments are needed to enable local communities to offer these programs to more families that want to enroll. Will you (*sign this petition; vote for this initiative; write your legislators; etc*)?

How We Talk about Home Visiting:

In one sentence:

Home Visiting in Alabama is a free, voluntary program to support parents at home and help them learn how to be more engaged in their child's life.

Basic Message:

Home Visiting in Alabama is a free, voluntary program to support parents at home and help them learn how to be more engaged in their child's life. Each program is funded through state grants, which are used to enhance and monitor the quality of the programs being offered.

Expanded Message:

Home Visiting in Alabama is a free, voluntary program to support parents at home and help them learn how to be more engaged in their child's life. Each program is funded through state grants, which are used to enhance and monitor the quality of the programs being offered.

Parents are a child's first teacher, but many parents are unprepared for raising a child today, and this jeopardizes the likelihood that their child will be successful in school or grow up without needing costly social services.

High-quality Home Visiting programs connect parents with a specialized parent educator who helps them establish their own expectations about what they want for their children, and provides support and reinforcement to make sure parents follow through with their decisions.

How Home Visiting Makes a Difference:

- While there are many classroom and center-based programs that families can enroll in during their child's early and school-aged years, there are few programs available that focus exclusively on meeting families where they are – in their home.
- High-quality, evidence-based Home Visiting classes are held in a family's living room. As a result, parent educators build relationships with families that can only be formed in the home. This bond enables parent educators to assess a family's situation and better understand what their needs are.

Defining / Connecting with your Audience:

Our main audiences are the groups and individuals whose positive engagement holds the key to our success, and whose actions will ultimately determine whether we are successful.

Who are we trying to reach: *Lawmakers & State Leaders*

Ultimately, for Home Visiting programs to be successful in Alabama, state leaders and lawmakers need to make an investment in expanding grant opportunities for communities to participate and offer the course(s) of their choice to families.

Why Is Home Visiting Important?

(Functional Messaging)

Ninety-percent of a child's brain is developed before the age of five. Alabama's Home Visiting initiative provides grants to local communities to manage developmentally appropriate, voluntary home-based programs to help parents raise healthy children and teens. Fully funding these programs will enable more families to participate and better opportunities for children growing up in Alabama.

Why Does Home Visiting Matter?

(Emotional Messaging)

Many parents simply do not know that they are exhibiting behavior that will impact the development of their child, and the habits that children form in the first five years will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Encouraging parents to be more involved in their child's life builds better families which will lead to better communities for all of us to live in.

Hear. See. Feel.

What do our constituencies need to hear, see and feel in order to join and/or support our campaign?

- Hear:**
- *Every child can succeed if their parents are engaged in their life
 - *Encouraging parents to be more involved in their child's life builds stronger families
 - *Decisions about which Home Visiting model is used are made locally
 - *Participation in this program is 100 percent voluntary and free for families
- See:**
- *Results
 - *Opportunity
 - *Potential
- Feel:**
- *Hope
 - *Empowerment
- Do:** Demand more funding to expand Home Visiting to more families

Who are our best messengers:

Results – *It is vital that we are able to express to lawmakers how Home Visiting programs are moving the needle. We specifically need to highlight how children with access to Home Visiting are performing relative to those without.*

Businesses – *The Republican legislature has previously relied on economic indicators to determine which social programs to invest in. The business community is needed to highlight the importance of Home Visiting programs to school readiness and ultimately to developing a qualified workforce for employers.*

Parents from diverse economic and social backgrounds – *This group could attest to what this program has meant to them and their families, and will help counter misperceptions about who the program serves.*

Educators / Pediatricians / Healthcare / DHR Leaders – *These groups are needed to provide specific and personal anecdotes about the wellbeing of children in Alabama and how early intervention through Home Visiting can positively address many of these issues.*

Potential Questions to Prepare For:

Alabama is a poor state... How do you propose that we pay for this expansion?

The state is wasting millions of dollars annually funding social welfare programs to support individuals who might have benefited from Home Visiting programs during their childhood. We cannot go back and provide these services to them, but we can help break the cycle of social welfare by working with their children and grandchildren. Research proves that the best time to invest in an individual's life is from birth to when they start school. We cannot afford not to invest in Home Visiting.

Why do you believe it is the responsibility of government to tell parents how to raise their child?

Alabama's Home Visiting programs are locally-managed based on a community's specific needs. The parent educators are non-judgmental and are not there to tell parents how to raise their kids. The programs are designed to teach parents how to be involved in their child's life in their own particular way in, the manner that most makes sense for them. The parent educators are there to make certain parents have the resources they need to set expectations for their children, and the confidence to follow through with their decisions.

Increasing home visitations will lead to more "raids" by DHR protective services. Why should we make it easier for more children to be separated from their parents?

That is simply not true. Alabama's high-quality, home visitation programs are 100 percent voluntary. Their goal is to help parents be better parents and more engaged in their child's life. Appointments are scheduled in advance. The advantages of working with families in their homes instead of a center-based program is that it a parent is much more likely to reinforce the lessons long after the parent educators leave.

Some people call Home Visiting HIPPPY. Some say Nurse Family Partnerships. Others say Parents as Teachers. Are they all the same program?

There are 14 different models of Home Visiting in Alabama. Currently these programs collectively only serve 5,200 families. Each plays a different role and serves a different purpose. It is up to the local communities to determine which programs that want to offer families. The state administers grants to these programs to bolster quality and ensure that each program is working towards improving the wellbeing of all children in their community.

Why are Alabama's Home Visiting programs managed by two different state agencies?

The Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education and the Alabama Department of Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention provide grants and other assistance to local community-based initiatives. Although the two agencies work in tandem on many issues, each agency serves different purposes and addresses different aspects of a child's development. The specific expertise these agencies hold ensures that each model they provide grants to practices the highest quality possible.