



## Conversations with the Experts

### The Family Impact Seminars



**Karen Bogenschneider**

**Bio:** Dr. Karen Bogenschneider is a Rothermel Bascom Professor of Human Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a Family Policy Specialist for University of Wisconsin Extension.

Since its inception in 1993, Professor Bogenschneider has served as director of the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars—a series of seminars, briefing reports, newsletters, and discussion sessions for state policymakers. The Seminars aim to connect research with state policy, and promote a family perspective in policymaking. Since 1999, she has served as Executive Director of the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars, which is currently providing technical assistance to 23 states across the country conducting or planning to conduct Family Impact Seminars in their state capitals.

The second edition of Dr. Bogenschneider's book, *Family Policy Matters: How Policymaking Affects Families and What Professionals Can Do*, was recently released. She also published an accompanying instructor's manual for teaching undergraduate and graduate family policy courses. She has published widely in academic journals like *Child Development* and applied journals like *Family Relations*.

She has received a Faculty Excellence Award from the School of Human Ecology and was named one of the outstanding Child and Family Extension specialists in the country.



**Heidi Normandin**

**Bio:** Heidi is the Associate Director of the Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars. For over two years, Heidi has worked with Karen to recruit and train new states to conduct Family Impact Seminars in their state capitals, gather and analyze data on how state policymakers use information, and plan and conduct the annual Family Impact Seminars in Wisconsin. She has her Master's degree in Public Affairs and Policy Analysis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's La Follette School of Public Affairs.

### An Interview with Karen Bogenschneider and Heidi Normandin

By Sandee Shulkin and Karen Corday

**Shulkin:** What are the family impact seminars?

**Normandin:** They are a series of seminars, discussion sessions, briefing reports, and newsletters for state policy makers on current family policy issues. They provide non-partisan, solution-oriented research and opportunities for dialogue on

current issues such as Medicaid, health care, early childhood care and education, and helping poor children succeed. We have 22 sites in our network, and since 1993 we've conducted 130 seminars for state policy makers across the country. We do quite a bit of evaluation as well. Policy makers report that the seminars increase their knowledge of research on family issues in ways that shape the development and enactment of public policy. They also report that the seminars make them more likely to see the value of research and to consider the impact of legislation on families. **Casey:** How else does supporting breastfeeding benefit businesses?

**Shulkin:** Have work-family issues been a part of the seminar?

**Normandin:** So far, there has not been a seminar specifically about work-family issues. We've done several seminars on early childhood or child care topics over the years, but work-family was not the primary focus. We choose the seminar topics by interviewing state legislators on the subjects they most want to discuss. Work-family issues have not topped the request lists of enough legislators. We've heard that several legislators refer to work-family as a "wish list issue."

**Shulkin:** So the "wish list issues" are different from the priority agenda items?

**Normandin:** Exactly. The budget usually dictates which topics they will focus on in their upcoming sessions.

**Bogenschneider:** I've been surprised by the lack of priority given to work-family issues, as I have a personal interest in the topic. When you take a look at polls, work-family issues are high priority items for parents. Legislators often view their constituents as their top source for useful information. I've always liked the way Theda Scocpol describes work and family as the "double squeeze." It's a squeeze on economic resources as well as the time and energy you need for your family and community commitments. Policy makers are usually very responsive to their constituents' needs, but I think one reason the issue may not have the traction with legislators that working families think it deserves is that it's elusive to policy makers what they can do. I've interviewed state legislators who have told me that work-family is one of their top issues, but they are not sure about their role. One option they mention is giving employers tax breaks when they provide family-friendly benefits for their employees. However, with the budgetary constraints that many states are facing right now, any new programs have to take a back seat to the rising costs of corrections, health care, Medicaid, and public schools. Work-family hasn't quite risen to the top of the priority lists. I'm being patient, and I encourage others to be patient, because you never know when issues are going to come to the forefront.

**Shulkin:** Is there anything our users can do to encourage conversations with state public policy makers about work-family issues?

**Bogenschneider:** Well, first of all, keep in mind that we don't put items onto legislators' agendas, we respond to items on their agendas. However, we did come up with a couple of ideas. First, you could try piggy-backing onto an existing issue in your state and reframe it to call more attention to work-family. For example, in many states long-term care is an issue, and if there are big budget deliberations about long-term care, or your state is facing a debate about whether or not to develop community-based long-term care, you could expand the discussion to include the role of families in providing long-term care. You could discuss it from a budgetary standpoint, i.e. the state would save some money on Medicaid dollars if family members were allowed to take time off to care for their elderly loved ones. If the state is concerned about "brain drain" issues, where young people are leaving the state to work elsewhere, you could do some background research to see if people are leaving because they want to start families and view the state as not being family-friendly.

Another idea is to bring citizen feedback directly to policy makers. Conduct community forums around the state or a state-wide poll to discover citizens' top concerns. Legislators like state-, district- or county-specific data as opposed to national data.

Finally, policy makers pay a lot of attention to the media, so issues will rise on their agendas when they get a lot of media coverage. Users can provide data through the media; we often get requests for basic facts such as, "How many parents are working? How many hours do they work? What effects do long work hours have on families? How have other states responded to these issues? How effective are these responses?" In our surveys with policy makers in Wisconsin and New York, we've found that they are interested in real-life stories and catchy phrases. When presenting data to the media, it helps to include the impact on constituents along with the facts.

One of the most frequent requests we get from legislators is for information on the activities of other states. Highlighting states that are pioneers on work-family issues is another way to capture policy makers attention. Featuring states that have paid family leave and partial-wage replacement will generate legislative attention and interest. It's important to keep in mind that legislators from large states will be interested in the experiences of other large states, those from small states will want to know what's going on in other small states, and all legislators want to know about activities in neighboring states.

**Shulkin:** Could you talk about the Policy Institute's current research?

**Bogenschneider:** We've been interviewing legislators about the characteristics of research that are most useful to them; the three qualities that were rated as most important are believability, accessibility, and timeliness. Believable research is classified as scientific and unbiased. Accessible research is easy to understand with efficient summaries, so policy makers can fit reading into their busy schedules. Timely research is available when the policy maker needs it. Research that

passes these three tests is the most useful to policy makers. Another factor to keep in mind is that for many legislators, a summary of the available research on a certain topic is more useful than one in-depth study. They want a solid overview of the subject and want to know how many researchers have explored this topic.

**Normandin:** Legislators are interested in very basic information such as the demographics and the budget and important facts such as missed productivity. Simple information along these lines is the most useful to them.

**Bogenschneider:** One interesting fact we've discovered is that policy makers not only like information that supports their positions, but it's even more important to have the right information. Legislative bodies pass thousands of bills a year, and legislators can't speak with an expert on every issue, so they specialize, much in the way that academics do. They have colleagues with other specialties, and they use each other as sources in a system that operates on trust. Policy makers can lose the respect of their colleagues if their information is inaccurate. They want to be confident that they have correct, complete information before they present it to colleagues and to the media. Thanks to the internet, it's very easy to fact check, and if a legislator reports incorrect information, he or she will be discovered almost immediately. The leading legislators want to do the right thing; when they pass a law, they want it to work. Several legislators have told me that the best information is the kind that saves them from themselves! They don't need more information; they need better, objective, valid information that comes without a direction. Most information they get comes with a spin. They like our seminars because we don't come at them with a list of recommendations, and that's refreshing to them.

**Shulkin:** In terms of providing timely information, how can our users find out what is on a legislator's agenda?

**Bogenschneider:** It's important to stay informed; read the newspaper and see what issues are getting lots of press. Talk to advocacy groups, who often track issues, as well as legislative aides. Follow the news and develop some contacts; that's what we do!

**Shulkin:** What are some of the hot topics right now that are connected to work-family issues?

**Normandin:** As I mentioned above, child care and early childhood education are getting lots of attention. Minimum wage and the financial security of families is a new one we've heard a lot about lately.

**Bogenschneider:** The financial security of families is an issue which might piggy-back work-family concerns. This constitutes a whole host of problems; more and more families are less financially stable than they were in the past, due to rising housing prices and enormous health care costs. Families are going bankrupt because they can't pay their medical bills.

**Normandin:** Another issue is that lots of families are defaulting on their mortgages because they had lower mortgage rates for the first few years of home ownership, and now the rates have gone up and people can't afford the monthly payments.

For state policy makers, their big issues are early childhood education, health care and Medicaid, long term care, corrections policy, and school funding. One state requested a seminar on children's mental health. I'm wondering if concern about high energy costs is rising; we haven't seen this yet, but it might be on the way.

**Shulkin:** Is there anything else you'd like to say about the Family Impact Seminars?

**Bogenschneider:** The Family Impact Seminars, in addition to addressing specific topics and bringing information and research to legislators, encourage policy makers to consider the impact of legislation and policies on families. We have a Family Impact Checklist that we suggest using with proposed legislation and policies to assess the intended and unintended consequences on families. It's available on our web site. Just as legislators assess the economic impact of a bill, we promote assessing the family impact. We also have checklists for communities and schools to assess their family-friendliness. We'd love to see a similar checklist for workplaces.

**Normandin:** If you wanted to bring in the timeliness aspect, a good time to do a family impact assessment would be when a business downsizes or files for bankruptcy. This would allow people to see the direct effects these changes will have on families. This would get a lot of attention from the press, policy makers, and the public alike.

Another observation I'd like to share that comes from my dealing with state public policy makers is how approachable they are! Policy makers are a cross-section of all of your families and neighbors—they're farmers, lawyers, teachers, and small business owners. I've been pleasantly surprised at how much I learn from policy makers—there's always something new to learn about the policy making process, a specific issue, or an individual legislator. The goal in working with policy makers is to develop a long-term relationship with them—this develops trust and makes learning a two-way exchange, which will make you a better citizen and a better researcher.

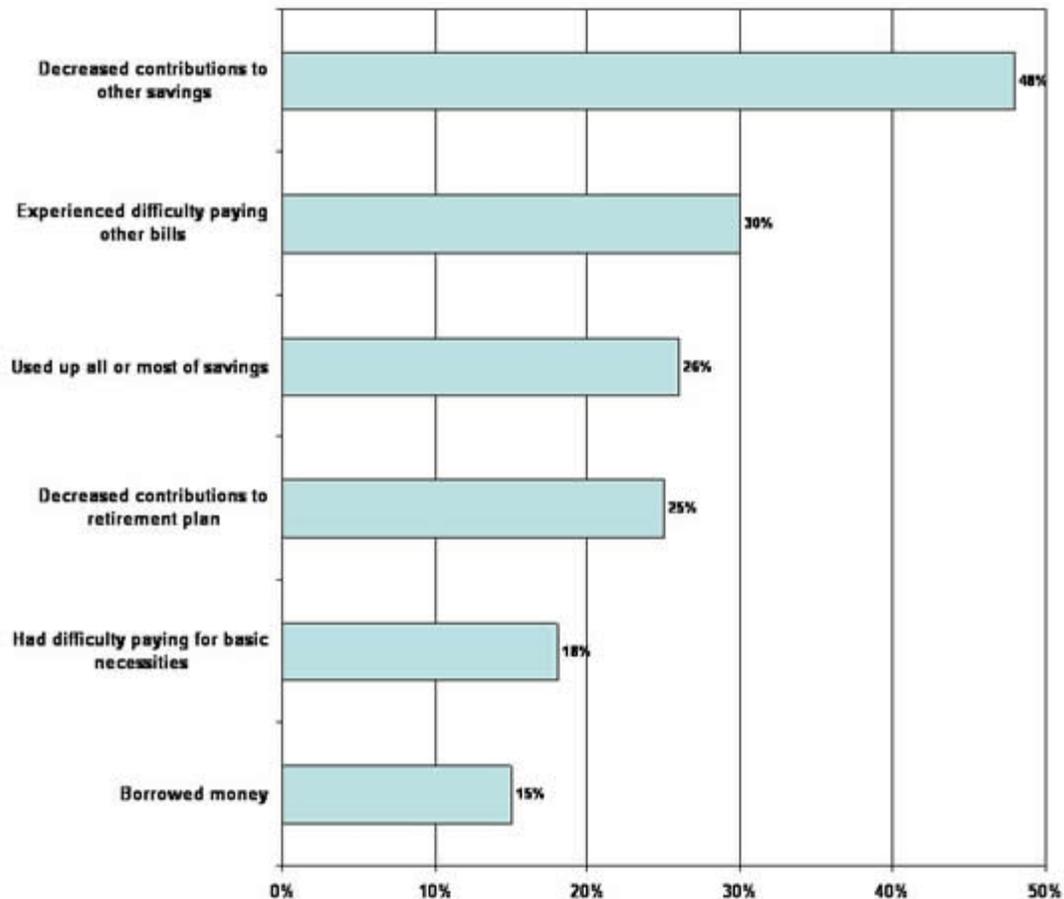
**Bogenschneider:** We're The longer I work with policy makers, the more I come to respect them. They run for office because they want to make a difference—they work long hours, they get called at home, and they take a lot of grief. It takes a great deal of skill to succeed at policy making—you need to make alliances, compromise, build relationships, "take the pulse" of your constituents, and listen to information that contradicts your own political views. It's not easy! For people

who are just starting to work with policy makers, it's important to approach them with humility and respect and to acknowledge their wisdom and expertise.

We've known for years that policy makers depend more on the spoken word than the written word, but what's effective are written reports that are mailed or e-mailed to policy makers. However, if you're going to turn good research and ideas into sound policies, it requires more than delivering a report. The development of relationships with policy makers is a critical component for success.

The Policy Institute for Family Impact Seminars: <http://www.familyimpactseminars.org/>

### Cost-Saving Strategies Used by U.S. Workers in Response to High Health Care Costs



**Source:** Helman, R. & Fronstin, P. (2004, November). *Public attitudes on the U.S. health care system: Findings from the Health Confidence Survey*. (Issue Brief No. 275). Washington, SC: Employee Benefit Research Institute.

### Additional Resources Related to Families and Policy

**Center for Child and Family Policy, Duke University:** "The mission of the Center for Child and Family Policy is to solve problems facing children in contemporary society by bringing together scholars from many disciplines with policy makers and practitioners." The site includes reports, policy briefs, newsletters, and presentations.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.pubpol.duke.edu/centers/child/>.

**Family Policy Resources:** This page from the University of Maryland's Family Impact Seminar includes links to several family policy publications, links to other state family impact seminars, and family policy tools to use in analyzing proposed or current policy.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.hhp.umd.edu/FMST/fis/resources.html>.

**Institute for Women's Policy Research:** "The Institute for Women's Policy Research conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialogue, and strengthen families, communities, and societies. IWPR focuses on issues of poverty and welfare, employment and earnings, work and family issues, health and safety, and women's civic and political participation."

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.iwpr.org/index.cfm>.

**The Clearinghouse on International Developments in Child, Youth, and Family Policies at Columbia University:** "The Clearinghouse provides cross-national, comparative information about the policies, programs, benefits and services available in the advanced industrialized countries to address child, youth, and family needs. Coverage focuses on 23 advanced industrialized countries. Expansion to other countries and other parts of the world is under way." Administered by the Institute for Child and Family Policy.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.childpolicyintl.org/>.

**Social Policy Research Centre:** "The Social Policy Research Centre is a research centre of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales. The SPRC conducts research and fosters discussion on all aspects of social policy in Australia." The site includes many full-text papers and reports.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/>.

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.



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*The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation*