



GIST/GCYF/GIH Communications Collaborative 2012 EITC Rapid Response Fund Grant Report Summary

Overview

In early 2012, four organizations (Oklahoma Policy Institute – OPI, Michigan League for Human Services – MILHS, Kansas Action for Children – KAC, and Washington State Budget & Policy Center – WSBPC) received grants through the EITC Rapid Response Fund. Three of the four organizations faced serious threats to their state’s EITC and WSBPC saw an opportunity to introduce a state EITC (called Working Families Tax Refund – WFTR). Through detailed informational campaigns, re-framing the debate, and mobilizing constituents, the organizations were able to avoid or reduce the negative impact on the EITC. While WSBPC was unsuccessful in passing a state EITC, they were able to increase awareness and visibility of a state EITC. The Rapid Response funds allowed the organizations to increase the volume and quality of communications, which were essential elements of their strategies. Key take-aways included recognizing the importance of the fiscal context, community data, personal stories, and constituent involvement.

Political Situation

Oklahoma, Kansas and Michigan all faced a significant likelihood that the state EITC would be cut or eliminated. These proposals were widely supported by lawmakers. While Oklahoma and Kansas saw explicit proposals to reduce or abolish the EITC in 2012, Michigan saw dramatic reductions in 2011, knowing that the trend could continue, MILHS has spent the year pushing to restore the EITC to 2010 levels. The situation in Washington State differs because currently there is no state EITC. The WSBPC attempted to attach a state EITC to proposals calling for an increase in the sales tax.

Strategies

I. Detailed Informational Campaign

To help shape the debate, the organizations, in general, focused on increasing the awareness of lawmakers and the public regarding the state EITC. Emphasizing the value and effectiveness of the EITC, all four organizations issued briefs to lawmakers and several attended meetings to share their data and analysis. OPI released and updated a simple outline of the contents of the various tax cut bills running through the House and Senate. All of the organizations felt that it was important to ensure that lawmakers and constituents understood the EITC and why it matters. Citing the importance of local data in swaying policy makers, all four organizations issued district-specific fact sheets and analyses. KAC also adjusted their messaging to respond to specific proposals.

2. Re-Framing the Debate

As part of the information campaign, all organizations re-framed and personalized the debate using videos and personal stories. MILHS highlighted how the EITC helps small businesses and veterans. OPI talked about it in terms of a tax increase on Oklahoma families to pay for a tax cut for top earners. They also referred to the EITC as “the conservative anti-poverty program.” WSBPC stressed the EITC as a way to balance a regressive tax and as a benefit to local economies, where recipients would spend their returns. Overall, the organizations emphasized ways that they put a face on the issue, connecting lawmakers and the public with real people who are affected by changes in the EITC.

3. Mobilizing Constituents

Another piece of the strategy was to increase public support and legislative pressure for the EITC. To increase public awareness, OPI used blog posts and op-eds and KAC wrote letters to the editor, news conferences, and social media. MILHS calculated district effects and published them on an advocacy website, which was picked up by the media. To turn opinion into action, KAC reached out to partners to activate their grassroots base and contact legislators. WSBPC organized lawmaker visits and email campaigns. All of the organizations used various strategies to grow a support base and encourage constituents to contact their legislators.

Use of Funds

All of the organizations reported using the Rapid Response Funds to increase and improve their work, specifically in regards to their communications. OPI used the funds to sponsor professional polling, produce an online video, and distribute district-specific briefs to all legislators. KAC used funds to build relationships with new constituencies, improve strategic communications and increase media coverage. MILHS was able to hire a communications firm and another organization to follow story bank leads. WSBPC was able to educate lawmakers, organize and educate constituents, and increase the visibility of the EITC in tax policy discussions.

Lessons Learned

Reports were predominantly positive and most of the organizations felt that their strategies were effective in protecting the EITC. However, MILHS noted the importance of understanding any special circumstances that active duty military personnel may face when appearing in any EITC promotional materials. Also, WSBPC emphasized the importance of fiscal context. They saw an opportunity to increase state revenue and protect lower-income families by linking the EITC to a sales tax increase. However, the EITC then relied on an increase to sales tax. WSBPC also found it difficult to convince lawmakers to support a direct appropriation of state funds when the state is facing large revenue shortfalls.