

A COMPANION TOOLKIT FOR CHILD CARE POLICY & SYSTEMS CHANGE

The Politics of Change

A best practice guide to 501(c)(4) and political action
committees

About this series

This is one of six [companion toolkits](#) created to give advocates, funders, and policymakers practical resources for expanding public investment in child care. They were built from insights drawn from Vermont’s decade-long child care campaign, led by Let’s Grow Kids and Let’s Grow Kids Action Network, which culminated in the 2023 passage of Act 76. For the full story behind the campaign, see New America’s comprehensive case study, [Vermont Needed Child Care; Here’s How They Got It](#).

What follows is a set of best practices, grouped into themes. There is no required order. Every state has its own landscape, needs, challenges, and opportunities. You can determine the approach that works best for you.

This toolkit focuses on the political side of change: how a campaign builds the legal entities and the political power to turn public support into legislative action. Let’s Grow Kids paired a 501(c)(3) with a 501(c)(4) and two state political action committees so it could educate the public, lobby without limit, endorse candidates, mobilize voters, and hold elected officials accountable.



Photo courtesy of Let’s Grow Kids Action Network, used with permission.

▾ The Politics of Change

Build a 501(c)(3), 501(c)(4), and PACs so your organization can educate and act politically.

Building Legislative Change

Sequence policy asks, build the evidence base, and pass a bill.

Building the Grassroots Movement

Organize families, providers, and advocates into visible, sustained public will.

Engaging the Business Community

Recruit employers as credible messengers and advocates for a publicly funded solution.

The Role of Philanthropy

Catalyze and sustain a funding campaign.

Readying the System

Prepare the child care system for large-scale investment.

Build the entities that let you act politically

Until 2021, Let’s Grow Kids operated mainly as a 501(c)(3), which meant it could educate the public but not help elect candidates, and its lobbying activity was limited. Creating a 501(c)(4), however, allowed the group to lobby without limit, as long as the legislation related to its social welfare purpose.

“People would ask us why an issue like child care would need a ‘c4,’” said Emilie Tenenbaum, who created the campaign’s endorsement process. “Because we need to have child care champions in the decision-making seats, and you need the ability to elect them, support them, and hold them accountable.”

- **Create a big tent.** Let’s Grow Kids Action Network endorsed Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, asking only that candidates agree that public investment was needed and that child care would be an issue they championed.
- **Convert political capital into legislative leverage.** By helping to elect child care champions, Let’s Grow Kids Action Network created a wealth of political capital. When legislative leaders reached an impasse in negotiating Vermont’s 2023 child care bill, Let’s Grow Kids Action Network reminded them they had a caucus full of child care champions whose constituents were counting on them to pass it. The media also knew a vote was coming and would blame leadership if it failed.
- **Cast a wide funding net.** Fundraising for a 501(c)(4) can be tough. Start with your long-standing 501(c)(3) donors who are already politically sophisticated or frustrated by the outcomes of their efforts so far. Solicit support from national partners who understand the importance of 501(c)(4) vehicles, such as the Impact Fellows Action Fund, a Kansas-based organization that funds state-level advocates for young children and families.
- **Be “Eagle Scouts” on compliance.** Political and campaign finance rules are strict, the stakes and

consequences are high, and laws and reporting requirements vary by state. Work closely with an attorney, clarify your risk tolerance with your funders and board, and build the operational systems needed to manage compliance and reporting requirements.

SEE ALSO: The [Role of Philanthropy](#) toolkit explains how funders can support a 501(c)(4).

Vehicle	Function
Let’s Grow Kids 501(c)(3)	Research, public education, program support, system readiness, and some lobbying.
Let’s Grow Kids Action Network 501(c)(4)	Issue education and candidate engagement, candidate endorsements, voter mobilization, grassroots organizing, and unlimited lobbying.
Vote Child Care Fund (state-coordinated PAC)	Direct contributions to endorsed candidates, campaign event staff, coordinated communications, and campaign advice.
Child Care Victory Fund (state independent-expenditure PAC)	Independent mail, digital, and broadcast media supporting candidates. By law, it cannot coordinate with any campaign.

Run an endorsement process

Develop a system for selecting and endorsing political candidates who are willing to make a significant public investment in child care.

- **Ask questions.** Let’s Grow Kids Action Network conducted surveys and interviews to measure candidates’ grasp of the child care crisis and their willingness to invest public funds in long-term solutions.

- **Educate before they take office.** The group educated new and incumbent candidates on the campaign trail about child care policy, so they already understood the issue and the need for action by the time they were sworn into office. Since an endorsement from Let's Grow Kids Action Network could come with money and media supporting their campaigns, candidates had a strong incentive to listen.
- **Endorse champions.** Support the candidates in favor of public investment in child care. Hold them accountable to those commitments and do not endorse again if they don't follow through on their promises.
- **Give the pledge a public face.** "Be a Child Care Voter" signs, T-shirts, and honk-and-waves turned private commitments into visible pressure. Ahead of the November 2022 election, Let's Grow Kids Action Network staff and volunteers stood on roadsides holding "Be a Child Care Voter" signs. Supporters wearing "Child Care Voter" T-shirts attended candidate forums and asked questions about investing in child care.
- **Use the numbers as leverage.** Telling legislators how many people signed the pledge demonstrated that child care voters were watching—and would remember at the ballot box.

Build a child care voter movement

Endorsements only matter if candidates believe voters are watching. The [Child Care Voter Pledge](#) gave the campaign a visible constituency it could mobilize in every district. It was the electoral engine of the 501(c)(4), turning years of public education into political will.

- **Turn supporters into voters.** The pledge asked Vermonters to make child care their top priority when voting and to host or attend candidate events with this in mind. This effort built on Let's Grow Kids' child care petition, which grew from a few thousand signatures in 2015 to a community tens of thousands strong.
- **Keep the request simple.** Signing the pledge took seconds—at a county fair, a child care center barbecue, a farmer's market, or online. Every signer shared contact information, so the campaign could follow up with volunteer opportunities and, at election time, get-out-the-vote reminders.
- In your state, what types of activities or spending trigger a requirement for an entity to register as a political action committee? This will help determine if you need to create PACs in addition to a 501(c)(4).
- What is your state's definition of electioneering or partisan political activity?
- What are your state's lobbying reporting requirements?
- What are your state's campaign finance reporting requirements?

Adapt this for your organization and state

Vermont's structure is a template, not a prescription. The right configuration depends on your state's lobbying and campaign finance laws, your issue, and your stage of growth. A few questions to work through with counsel:

PLEASE NOTE: This toolkit is an informational overview, not legal advice. Campaign finance and tax rules vary by state and change often. Consult a lawyer who specializes in nonprofit and campaign finance law before establishing any entity or committee.



Take it further

Read this alongside New America's [companion toolkits](#), [legislative timeline](#), and [full case study](#).

- For compliance guidance on lobbying and political limits and on operating 501(c)(3)s, 501(c)(4)s, and political organizations, see [Bolder Advocacy's "Strategies for Creating and Operating 501\(c\)\(3\)s, 501\(c\)\(4\)s and Political Organizations."](#)
- For examples of Vermont's child care campaign election program, see Let's Grow Kids Action Network's 2024 [Voter Pledge](#), [Election Issue Education Ad](#), [Endorsements](#), and [Candidate Resources](#); and 2022 [Endorsements](#) and [Press Release](#).