

Parents and Children Thriving Together: The Role of State Agencies in Crafting a Statewide Two-Generation Strategy

Introduction

In an effort to help governors and senior state leadership improve coordinated service delivery to low-income families, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) partnered with the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) to design “Parents and Children Thriving Together: Two-Generation State Policy Network” (PACTT Network), a two-year technical assistance (TA) effort.¹ The NGA Center and CLASP provide intensive TA, peer and financial support to participating state teams and governors in **Colorado, Georgia, Minnesota, New Jersey** and **Oregon** to achieve statewide systems change through the development and implementation of two-generation state strategies—that is, strategies that promote and work toward the well-being of children and their parents simultaneously. The partnership selected the states through a competitive application process based on a review of their proposed strategies.²

States selected to become part of the PACTT Network work closely with the NGA Center and CLASP to develop and implement two-generation statewide strategies that build on gubernatorial interest, growing evidence and emerging policy opportunities in the workforce, human services, education, health, child care and early childhood education domains to better meet the needs of low-income families. This paper provides an overview of the system-coordination gaps that two-generation strategies seek to address for low-income families. Subsequent publications related to this TA effort will include lessons learned and best practices.

Children and Families in the United States

A large number of children and their parents live in or near poverty in the United States. In fact, one in five

children lives in a household with an income below the federal poverty level (FPL) and 44 percent live in families with incomes less than twice the FPL. Rates of poverty are particularly high for children of color: 31 percent of Black children, 31 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN), 27 percent of Hispanic children, and 25 percent of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) children live in poverty, compared to 11 percent of non-Hispanic White children and 11 percent of Asian children.³ One in four parents under age 30 lives in poverty.⁴ Poverty disproportionately affects families of color: Approximately 20 percent of Black and 18 percent of Hispanic families lived in poverty in 2016, compared to 6 percent and 7 percent of White and Asian families, respectively.

These known disparities in poverty rates across ethnic and racial groups in the United States pose a risk for the future socio-economic success of families and our nation. Poverty has lasting effects, particularly for those who live in poverty as children. Low-income children fare worse on a range of health, education, employment, and economic outcomes in childhood and into adulthood, when compared to their higher income peers.⁵ Elevated rates of poverty among people of color convey structural barriers to opportunity and success, and also underscore the importance of incorporating an equity lens into anti-poverty policy interventions.

Parents of low-income children struggle to achieve economic security despite working hard to earn money for their families. Eighty-four percent of low-income children live in households with at least one wage earner.⁶ Low wages, inadequate or unpredictable hours, and low job security are common barriers to family economic stability. The challenges of low-wage employment not only threaten family economic stability, but also make

it difficult for adult workers to be successful caregivers. For example, unpredictable work schedules can increase the difficulty of planning for and securing high quality child care for children. Stress around balancing work and caregiving responsibilities can jeopardize parents' ability to maintain good health, and to be effective employees and wage earners. This stress can also jeopardize their ability to be effective parents, which hinders children's learning and development from infancy through adolescence and beyond.⁷ Finally, unstable work schedules also make it difficult to hold second jobs to meet family's financial needs and to take classes or training necessary to find better paying work, which would improve the economic stability of parents and children.⁸

Parent and child well-being are inextricably linked. Parents are crucial to children's healthy development and to families' ability to move out of poverty. State policies aimed at improving family economic security and child well-being do not always consider the needs of children and parents together.

A Note on Service Delivery Coordination for Low-Income Families

Public programs and services designed to assist low-income adults often operate separately from, and without consideration of, other state and local government-funded programs and services designed to assist low-income children. For example, workforce development programs typically focus on the skills adults need to get and keep a job, but do not always consider whether the participating adult is a parent. As a result, programs may miss the opportunity to simultaneously plan for the appropriate care of the participating adult's children, which could have long-term effects on the development of the child. Without high-quality, reliable child care, worker productivity and job retention can reduce the overall efficacy of workforce efforts. Similarly, programs that primarily focus on early learning or on parents' roles as caregivers, can miss opportunities to work with parents on employment or educational goals, which can also affect children's well-being.

Decades of research demonstrate that the well-being and success of children and parents is interdependent.⁹ Well-intentioned policy interventions operating in "adult-focused" or "child-focused" silos can fall short of meeting their goals. Simultaneously promoting the needs of children and parents together has a greater likelihood of successfully promoting improved outcomes for families. "Two-generation" strategies seek to promote children's learning and healthy development and parents' success as both caregivers and breadwinners—giving low-income families a double boost in their efforts to achieve economic success and stability. Two-generation strategies reflect strong research findings that the well-being of parents is a crucial ingredient in children's social-emotional, physical, and economic well-being. Parents' ability to succeed in school and the workplace is substantially affected by the well-being of their children.

Two-generation policy strategies are emerging at the state and local level in the interest of making a range of goals more achievable, including advancing children's educational success, adult credential attainment and workforce readiness, and family economic opportunity. State work in this area demonstrates opportunities for redesigning child- and adult-focused services to better serve low-income families as a whole. Such opportunities include reforming policies, cross-training staff, sharing and using data in new ways, and streamlining and aligning programs and practices. Furthermore, state efforts to develop and implement two-generation strategies also highlight the inherent challenges in developing and undertaking large-scale, systemic changes in state government.¹⁰

A State Policy Framework for Families

Two-generation strategies have been in existence for decades. Much of the recent work on two-generation strategies has focused on the development of "on-the-ground" programs that directly serve families on a regular basis. Such two-generation programs typically provide services to both adults and their children, either by a

single organization, or through a partnership between two or more organizations. For example, a program may combine exemplary early childhood programming with robust parent education and employment services.

Two-generation strategies can also be applied at the state policy level as a framework for increasing connections between state-administered programs, and for working across state systems to more effectively improve the lives of low-income families. States interested in more efficient ways to meet the interrelated, often complex needs of low-income families are considering two-generation strategies to provide appropriate, coordinated, and seamless services to both the adults and the children in those families. Two-generation policy and system reform strategies offer the opportunity to affect many families at once, operating at a large scale compared to two-generation programs in individual programs or agencies.

A successful two-generation approach should seek to:¹¹

- **Improve access to opportunities for improving family economic security.** This can include access to postsecondary education, career training and certification programs, workforce development programs, financial education and coaching, asset building, housing assistance, and access to state and federal income support programs (such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) that help meet families' basic needs.
- **Improve access to quality care and education for children.** This can include access to quality child care, early childhood education, before- and after-school care, structured positive youth development activities for adolescents, and enriching elementary school experiences, including effective instruction and strong connections with parents.
- **Improve access to programs, services, and networks to support parents and help them**

advocate for their children and support their healthy development. This can include access to home visiting services and health and mental health screening and treatment; fostering parent engagement in their child's education; and building community connections and support networks with friends, family, peers, and co-workers.

Adopting a two-generation approach to serving low-income families does not necessarily require new laws, new money or new programs. States can focus on aligning current policies, streamlining current practices and strengthening linkages among existing programs in existing child- and adult-focused service delivery systems.

Two-generation approaches can be particularly beneficial to families that face systemic barriers to success, particularly members of communities of color, which face disproportionately high rates of poverty. Including the perspectives and experiences of diverse racial and ethnic families in the development and implementation of two-generation strategies offers an opportunity to address structural barriers to socioeconomic success that are inherent within many policy areas and state systems.

Policy Areas

Two-generation state policy and system reforms involve an intentional focus on the whole family by developing, assessing, and improving policies, programs, practices, rules, regulations, technical assistance and training, performance measurement, financing and reimbursement practices, data systems, research and evaluation, and other components of key adult- and child-serving systems. Two-generation systems reform may also involve bringing this same focus to work with state family courts, and with the state legislature on legislation and the state budget.

States can consider applying two-generation strategies to numerous policy areas. For example:

- **Strengthening and developing policies that**

pair adult education and training pathways with child care and early education. For parents to be successful in the workplace, they must have reliable, high quality child care to pursue education, training, or employment. The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), offer opportunities for revised state child care and workforce policies to better support parents. States can consider ways to improve or align child care subsidy policies and workforce development policies to ensure that both programs better meet the needs of children and their parents at the same time. States could also consider plans that build connections between other early childhood programs and postsecondary or workforce programs.

- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), either on its own or linked to workforce, early childhood or physical and mental health programs and services.** The design of TANF allows it to function on its own as a two-generation program. Intended to serve low-income parents with children, TANF is a federal block grant that offers states enormous flexibility to increase their focus on child development, family economic stability and supporting parents as caregivers. A state interested in developing or advancing a two-generation approach in TANF should consider how the program could better support parents' economic success (such as including more robust access to postsecondary education) while increasing its focus on child development (such as ensuring that TANF child care policies support access to quality settings that meet the needs of parents pursuing education or work). A state could also rethink the program entirely to provide more comprehensive services and support to parents with infants.¹²
- **Child welfare, alone or linked to workforce,**

early childhood or physical or mental health programs. Child welfare has the potential to function as a two-generation program; yet, the child protective service aspect of child welfare often focuses solely on the provision of services such as parenting classes or counseling to the parents and may not look to parents' economic security or advancement. In addition, although child protective service efforts are made to secure a child's safety, efforts could be made during long-term case planning to redress the trauma of maltreatment and help ensure that family disruption does not derail the child's educational trajectory. For example, connecting families to mental health services and high-quality and consistent early childhood education can support positive child development. From a prevention perspective, helping low-income parents gain greater financial security could potentially reduce financial stress, thereby reducing the risk of child abuse or neglect. Finally, families in which the parent is a youth, or a young adult who is in foster care (or recently aged out of foster care), represent a particularly vulnerable group for both the young parent and the child, and such families could be an intentional focus of two-generation strategies.¹³

- **Physical and mental health services connected to early childhood and workforce opportunities.** Addressing the physical and mental health needs of low-income parents and their children can promote family economic security through increased adult participation in workforce-related activities while fostering children's education and development. State Medicaid rules offer opportunities to apply a two-generation lens to the provision of these services. For example, states can approve "dyadic treatment" (that is, treatment for a parent and child together) under a child's Medicaid eligibility; extend pregnancy-related Medicaid coverage for a longer period to ensure access to

postpartum screening and treatment; or explore the use of Medicaid funding to support two-generation approaches such as the expansion of home visiting services. These strategies can be coupled with employment or educational strategies to ensure that parents have help successfully moving into the workforce as larger health and mental health issues are addressed.

- **Working conditions for low-income parents.** Low-wage working conditions, including lack of paid leave and highly varied or unpredictable schedules, can present barriers to education, better employment, and financial stability for low-income working parents. These parents often have trouble finding affordable child care or finding training and education programs that fit their work schedules. The inability of parents to further their education or obtain better employment can lower the likelihood that their children will achieve education and career success. Moreover, unpredictable work schedules create enormous stress for parents, which interferes with effective parenting and can negatively affect children. States and localities are addressing the challenges of low-wage work through policy and program changes. Some states and localities are assessing ways to expand access to paid family and medical leave, require advance scheduling, and mandate higher minimum wages through legislation. These workplace improvements not only support family economic stability but would also support low income workers in their role as parents and caregivers by alleviating stressful work conditions.

Systems Reform

Within select policy areas, states can also consider pursuing any number of systems reform strategies. A single strategy may not be “two-generation” on its own, but when coupled with other strategies, may be used to achieve the policy and systems change necessary to

improve educational outcomes for both generations, increase parental employment with family-supporting wages, and promote greater family economic security. Examples include:

- Revising policies, especially in adult-serving systems, to be more supportive of parenting and children’s development (for example, adapting hours and requirements in community college courses and workforce development programs, or revising TANF provisions such that parents of infants are able to work while also accessing high-quality infant care).
- Revising policies, especially in child-serving systems, to be more supportive of parents’ economic progress (for example, adapting hours and work-based eligibility requirements in child care to support parents who are both working and attending school).
- Improving performance measurement and incentives to support two-generation strategies. For example, to redesign workforce development programs so they can be more supportive of parents who are simultaneously earning credentials, working, and raising a young child, the state could develop additional state measures under WIOA that support parents (e.g., tracking the number of parents who access quality child care) and provide performance bonuses for local areas that excel on those measures.
- Improving funding allocation and reimbursement policies to support two-generation strategies. For example, federal guidance offers ideas for Medicaid billing and related policies that would better support screening and treatment for maternal depression in both pediatric and adult primary care settings—and identifying and treating maternal depression is likely to have positive consequences for both young children’s development and parents’ economic progress.

- Aligning eligibility criteria and verification requirements (such as documentation of income) across benefit programs and streamlining eligibility determination, enrollment, and renewals to reduce burdens on families and increase access to benefits.
- Conduct comprehensive family needs assessments, and link families to available services based on those assessments. For example, a TANF program could build in assessments of the broader needs of family members, linking them to a range of physical health, mental health and nutrition supports.
- Strengthen training at all levels, including leaders, managers, frontline workers and supervisors. Strengths-based two-generation training of state workers would enhance the child development knowledge of adult-system workers, bolster the workforce development understanding of child-system workers and further improve the capacity for collaboration and teamwork among those service delivery systems.
- Integrate funding to maximize benefit. For example, states can incorporate Medicaid reimbursement into their home visiting strategies, potentially expanding capacity and quality by bringing this source of funding together with other federal and state funding.
- Assess the need for shared data and improved technology across the child- and adult-serving systems to better understand the multiple needs of both generations in low-income families—for example, the share of families receiving multiple services.¹⁴
- Foster cross-agency collaboration—perhaps establishing a cross-agency coordinating body, such as a Children’s Cabinet or interagency

commission—to develop two-generation strategies and metrics, with a system for tracking and reporting on progress.

Going Forward

State reform is not an easy feat. At the center of systems change is collaboration across agencies and sectors, which—although inherently challenging—can yield great rewards. States getting started on applying a two-generation lens to policy and systems reform can begin by clearly articulating their vision, goals and anticipated outcomes while identifying the steps required in the short and long terms.

States begin in different places. Assessing a state’s capacity to move a systems reform effort forward is a good place to start a two-generation systems-change effort. States should assess strengths and weaknesses with respect to:

- Senior-level buy-in and leadership;
- Cross-sector collaborations in development or already in place;
- Governance structures that can support cross-agency decision making;
- An equity lens on the development of policy and service delivery;
- Policy alignment across relevant programs;
- Community engagement and collaborations with relevant local, county or community providers;
- Mechanisms for gathering input on the lived experiences of affected families and communities; and
- Information technology and data systems in development or already in place to support whole-family enrollment and services delivery.

As the five “Parents and Children Thriving Together: Two-Generation State Policy Network” states move forward to address the needs of families with policy and system innovations grounded in two-generation strategies, the National Governors Association Center and the Center for Law and Social Policy will share successes and lessons learned.

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Endnotes

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