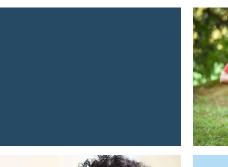


### OFFICE OF REGIONAL OPERATIONS (ORO)

# **Economic Mobility**

Reducing Family and Intergenerational Poverty

















2022 Report



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# Message from the ORO Director

#### Carlis V. Williams



Dear ACF Colleagues,

It is my pleasure to share with you the compilation of work done by Regional Administrators and their teams promoting economic mobility across the country this past year. Economic Mobility is a priority of our Assistant Secretary, January Contreras, and this administration. It is embedded in our ACF Strategic Plan which addresses this issue throughout the 5 goals. The RAs and their teams held convenings throughout 2022 focused on galvanizing states, community organizations, foundations, parents, and other federal agencies around the need for intentional, innovative, and inclusive approaches to providing services for vulnerable families. They worked in partnership with the regional program staffs, federal partners, parents, foundations, non-governmental agencies, states, tribes, and others, to provide venues for peer to peer sharing of best practices, for encouraging new ways to deliver

services, to celebrate achievements, and showcase the very important work being done throughout the country.

The poor economic conditions of families are often the cause of them entering into the "safety net" system, which includes many ACF programs. The impacts of poverty are often manifested in child welfare neglect cases, in the temporary assistance for needy families program, in community services programs, in runaway and homeless youth programs, in head start and childcare programs. I can go and on. These programs and services provide needed assistance, but more must be done to help families thrive, not just survive. ACF is focused on that goal.

The impacts and next steps from the convenings are detailed in this document. There is much work to be done in 2023 as we all strive to better understand the challenges of families and how to provide appropriate, equitable, and accessible services to them as they strive to move into economic stability and to reach their potential.



# Introduction

### Economic Mobility in ACF

Strengthening the economic mobility of families is at the center of ACF's vision and embedded in the ACF Strategic Plan, which guides the work of program and regional offices. ACF contributes to and elevates state and local solutions that have given low-income families the tools and opportunities that they need to transition from federal assistance to economic mobility.

# **Background**

#### ORO Overview



One important forum for doing that work is holding regional economic mobility convenings, which are cross-sector, collaborative events to build knowledge among partners about the economic mobility challenges facing their communities. In 2022, nine ACF regional offices held events, carried out with the leadership of the Office of Regional Operations (ORO). ORO did not do this work on their own, however – they brought other federal, local, nonprofit, business, and philanthropic partners to the table. ACF and HHS offices such as Children's Bureau, Early Childhood Development, Office of Child Support Enforcement, Office of Family Assistance, Office of Human Services Emergency Preparedness and Response, the Health Resources and Services Administration, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

Administration helped in planning or carrying out events. Other Federal agencies, from the Departments of Labor, Agriculture, and Education, the Federal Reserve Banks, and AmeriCorps, were also significant partners in arranging and bringing their knowledge to these events.

Economic mobility-focused events have been an important part of ACF's work for several years. This year's events were particularly significant for some. Region 1's Whole Family Approach to Jobs Initiative has been engaging New England states in improving family wellbeing and security since 2017. This year was their first opportunity to reconvene in person since the start of the COVID pandemic. The joint Region 5 & 7 event was co-hosted by ACF, the Department of Labor-Employment and Training Administration, and the Department of Agriculture-Food and Nutrition Service. This year's summit was the 5-year celebration of that collaboration. And this was the first summit for the learning community in Region 4. They have teamed up to address challenges they are facing in the recruitment and retention of their human services workforce.

# **Areas of Engagement**

### **Economic Mobility**

In preparation for this year's economic mobility events, ORO conducted a scan of regional activity to determine the emerging areas of priority that would be important and timely to cover in this year's events. These areas were determined to be: the cliff effect, cross-sector collaboration, parental engagement/customer voice, eligibility and enrollment, innovations and knowledge-building, and workforce development.

#### **Cliff Effect**

Families may be hit with the cliff effect if they receive a federal benefit or service that uses income to determine the benefit level. Any additional income a family earns can affect their ability to continue receiving the benefit or service the program provides. This cliff effect weighs on family decision-making about whether or when to accept an employment offer or additional hours at their current job. Workforce development and human services are intertwined in this issue. This is why, in the Region 5 & 7 event, a presentation covered the collaborative change that human services and workforce were making together to improve the cliff effect.

The CLIFF calculator, designed by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, is a helpful tool for many states and families to understand the particular financial impacts of different decisions and whether a family may encounter the cliff effect. This tool was presented to participants at the Region 4 event, along with a new tool to inform the design and development of mobility pathways for participants of ACF programs. Region 1's event also tried to contextualize the cliff effect by considering intersections between and among the cliff effect, racial equity, the child tax credit, and parent voice. States also shared their work to address the cliff effect and strengthen work supports for families.

#### **Cross-Sector Collaboration**

All regional summits engaged in some cross-sector collaboration. Besides the many federal partners who were involved in the regional events, other nonprofit, state, or philanthropic partners with different areas of expertise in human services and other fields were target audiences or speakers. In R2, the partnership with the Pascale Sykes Foundation led to work being done that focused on whole families and employment. This work resulted in a convening addressing how research can inform practice and policy development and the impacts on family economic conditions.

#### Parental Engagement/Customer Voice

In addition to the work that Region 1 has done to bring parent voice into the conversation about the benefits cliff, they also provided parent engagement/customer voice experiences throughout their event. This included a formal parent training to prepare parents to offer insight and learning during the event so they felt comfortable and ready to make contributions during sessions. All regions have engaged their state leadership in promoting intentional engagement of parents and those with lived experience to inform their policies and practices.

#### **Eligibility and Enrollment**

Region 6's event created an opportunity for states to share progress on innovative work they are doing to improve eligibility and enrollment in federal programs. For example, Oklahoma is modernizing their distribution system and streamlining their application and eligibility processes to improve the ease in which people can be evaluated and enrolled in benefit programs and other services.

A virtual regional event co-hosted by Regions 8 &10 promoted awareness of a time-limited opportunity offered by the U.S. Department of Education. People with federal student loan debt may enroll in the special Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) waiver. This waiver provided new opportunities for some student loan borrowers to get debt forgiven if they are working in the public or nonprofit sectors. The event was targeted to people in the human services workforce and gave them knowledge and tools to complete their application right away.



#### Innovations and Knowledge-Building

Events provided different formats for states and other participants to learn about innovative program designs or activities, and exchange knowledge about trending issues. Some events gave states an opportunity to speak directly about their work. For instance, Region 9 held an idea lab that shared federal and state innovations among human service leadership. Region 6 heard from New Mexico leadership about their Child Care Assistance program, which recently expanded its income eligibility from 200% of the Federal Poverty Level to 400% and waived all parent co-pays. Meanwhile, Region 10 employed a workshop format for one of their events. It was attended by business and human resources leaders and designed to provide them with information on how to support the child care needs of working parents and action steps they could take.

Two regions sought to provide information about supports available to youth in foster care. Region 4 connected their states with information about the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) as a potential employment pathway for youth aging out of foster care. And region 6 focused on housing assistance options for youth in extended foster care or transitional living provided by one of their states.

#### Workforce Development

Discussions about workforce development at the economic mobility events emphasized career opportunity: giving people pathways to careers, or into careers in the human services field. Human service and workforce development partners in Regions 5 & 7 presented on career pathway efforts in their state. Like many industries, human services programs and agencies are having difficulty recruiting, retaining, and motivating staff. Region 10 partnered with the Children's Bureau to host several state and tribal listening sessions to learn how ACF can help with recruitment and retention of child welfare staff, in particular. Region 9 presented on the challenges and opportunities in addressing the human services workforce shortage. States that are part of Region 4's human services workforce learning community heard about technology options to modernize the hiring process and messaging and storytelling for job postings.



### **Overall Impact and Next Steps**

#### What's Next?

The events covered a broad swath of targeted discussion areas ranging from benefits cliffs to workforce development. However, two topics emerged as common areas of discussion in more than one event that were not part of the original, core areas of focus. The first topic was meeting the needs of youth in foster care, extended foster care, or transitioning out of foster care. The events discussed meeting their housing and employment needs, but there is more ground to cover in those areas, as well as in supporting their health, educational opportunities, nutrition needs, or other services they may need. The second topic was the challenges facing the human services workforce. Jurisdictions and other employers are struggling to fully staff their workforce, including in roles that are important to the health and safety of children and families. Both topics may be areas for future discussion at the local or national level, and/or potential focus areas for convenings in 2023.

Uncovering new challenges facing youth and families is part of what these convenings, and the partnerships that form from them, are about. The economic mobility convenings are a point-in-time opportunity for relationship-building and discussion. Before, and after, these events, the selection of priority issues and learning and collaboration between state, federal, and other partners continue. After meeting at the convenings, partners have committed to the following steps to further this work through formal and informal pathways:

- Formal Learning Communities. Learning communities made up of leaders in state government have been working together on economic mobility issues since prior to the 2022 economic mobility events. The communities in Regions 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9 will continue to collaborate and grow together throughout 2023. Some specific examples from that work include:
  - o States in Regions 5 and 7 will establish shared action plans a combined plan submitted by multiple state agencies to make progress on specific state policy issue(s) in 2023.
  - o Region 1's state partners plan to add new learning communities to their current roster of parent engagement, benefits cliffs, and racial equity.
  - o Region 6 has regularly scheduled exchanges for human service leadership and will have the opportunity to see their learning community grow and change as the recent elections will lead to turnover in state executive leadership.
  - o Peer-to-peer learning exchanges with child welfare directors will take place in Region 10 in 2023, to share workforce strategies to improve the recruitment and retention of child welfare staff and highlight effective strategies.

- o Two additional states committed to joining the Region 4 learning community.
- Informal, As-Needed Learning Opportunities
  - o Summarizing current work in progress from states to share with one another and more easily identify potential topics for learning opportunities in Region 1.
  - o ACF and its other federal partners in Regions 5 & 7 meet monthly to identify continued areas of collaboration and support they can provide states to meet cross-programmatic challenges they face.
  - o Region 4 states have set up meetings with AmeriCorps to learn more about their NCCC program and how to use it to assist youth.
  - o Future learning or assistance opportunities to Region 9 states may include Census data analysis, policy impacts on non-citizens, model data sharing agreements, and questions of language accessibility.



### Conclusion

### Summary

ACF's economic mobility events succeeded in raising awareness of the challenges – sometimes place or circumstance-specific and sometimes universal – facing families as they strive toward economic independence. After the convenings, this awareness leads to taking concrete steps toward action, as regions and state partners sustain their communities of practice, and present popup learning opportunities to states and other partners on newly identified issues.





