CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Whole Family Approach to Jobs:

Helping Parents Work and Children Thrive | Lessons From The Field

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Whole Family Approach to Jobs: Helping Parents Work and Children Thrive

Lessons From The Field

The National Conference of State Legislatures is the bipartisan organization dedicated to serving the lawmakers and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories.

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- Improve the quality and effectiveness of state legislatures.
- Promote policy innovation and communication among state legislatures.
- Ensure state legislatures a strong, cohesive voice in the federal system.

The conference operates from offices in Denver, Colorado and Washington, D.C.

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Introduction

The National Conference of States Legislatures (NCSL) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' (HHS) Administration for Children and Families Region 1 Office (ACF) formed an uncommon partnership in 2017. Its goal was to help leaders in the New England states improve family well-being while also increasing economic security through employment. Two years later, the six states have identified state and regional priorities and are working independently and together to address them through legislative action, gubernatorial leadership, state agency reforms and public-private partnerships.

Throughout the Whole Family Approach to Jobs initiative, project staff developed and tested strategies and processes for engaging diverse stakeholders in complex work. It included aligning government programs and policies, removing government-imposed barriers to employment and economic security, and addressing workforce shortages. Family well-being was always at the center. This whole-family, two-generation approach now has a foothold in New England. Significant legislation has been enacted, reforms are being implemented and states are coming together, across differences, to learn best practices and policies. Two years of lessons learned from the field and summarized here are informing the next phase of the work.

Overview

A Whole Family Approach to Jobs: Helping Parents Work and Children Thrive started as a partnership between NCSL and ACF. Primary funding came from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, while regional and community foundations bolstered the effort (see back cover). Launched in September 2017, the six New England states agreed to create a learning community across interest areas, programs, agencies, geography and political landscapes.

In 2017, NCSL and ACF invited public- and private-sector leaders from the six New England state to join a regional effort with the following goals in mind:

1. Identify program and policy alignment opportunities at the local, state and federal levels that would improve employment access and economic stability for low-income families and disrupt intergenerational poverty.

2. Support state-driven policies and systems change that improve access to and success in education, training and employment for family members.

3. Create an ongoing regional learning community to develop and implement best practices and policies and systems reforms.

The initiative was conceived as an opportunity to test a whole-family approach (also known as a two-generation strategy) to breaking the cycle of poverty while also addressing state and regional workforce shortages. Multi-sector teams of stakeholders—including parents, legislators, executive branch leaders, businesses, and local philanthropic and community-based organizations—worked together to develop and implement plans to improve opportunities for families through policy and systems changes.

Whole-family approaches simultaneously address the needs of parents and children to improve outcomes for the whole family. This approach draws from research that links the well-being of parents to their children's social-emotional, physical and economic well-being. Likewise, parents' ability to succeed in the workplace is substantially affected by how well their children are doing.

As a result of the initiative:

- Significant policy and practice changes have been enacted or are underway at the state and federal levels.
- State and federal leaders are working together in uncommon ways to solve complex problems.
- Parents, business leaders, service providers and philanthropists are educating each other and informing policy and practice changes.
- Structural shifts and budget appropriations are being made to embed the values and strategies of a whole-family approach in standard practice.
- Multi-sector teams of parents, legislators, state and federal administrators, and business and community leaders are working across jurisdictions, party lines and state borders to address workforce shortages, remove barriers to employment and increase family economic security.
- Bureaucratic silos are being bridged to improve efficacy and promote more seamless practice.

The following report summarizes strategies, outcomes and lessons learned at the two-year mark of the initiative.

Framework

This work was undertaken during a period of historically low unemployment and in an era of national emphasis on economic mobility for low-income families and individuals, particularly those receiving public benefits. New federalism, or the devolution of power from the federal government to states, was also gaining traction in some quarters. In New England and across the country, employers were turning to unemployed and under-employed adults living in or near poverty to fulfill workforce needs. Governments were beginning to recognize that some of their policies and practices were creating disincentives to employment and family economic security.

At the same time, an epidemic of opioid addiction was taking its toll on families, communities and the workforce. Despite low unemployment, the economic status of New England families in poverty was not improving. Cities and rural areas were home to high rates of poverty, with black and Hispanic families the most adversely affected. In New Hampshire and Rhode Island, 1 in 4 African Americans were living in poverty. In Maine, nearly 1 in 3 Native Americans were living below the poverty line. Moreover, a significant number of working poor in New England live near exceptional wealth, making despair and opportunity frequent neighbors. Child care, though expanding through federal funds, was still not accessible or affordable for many families, keeping some parents out of the workforce.

A Whole Family Approach to Jobs is a state-federal partnership grounded in a strategic framework that explicitly links two compatible goals: increasing family economic security and addressing workforce shortages. It also acknowledges that government can do better, but it can't do it alone, nor should it try.

To date, this work has engaged a diverse set of stakeholders, including parents and private-sector leaders, in system reforms and policy discussions. Rooting the initiative in the neutral context of a labor shortage helped bring these varied interests to the table.

Project Activities

With support and guidance from NCSL and ACF, the six New England states formed nontraditional teams comprised of parents, legislators, executive branch leaders, businesses, and philanthropy and community-based organizations. Low-income adults who are parents of young children, clients of public services and an often overlooked source of labor, were integrated into the project at the outset. Across the region, states prioritized sustainable employment and the family supports necessary (e.g., child care and early education, transportation, continuing adult education, social capital, housing and health policies and practices) to make it happen. This manifested in concerted work to improve family economic security by addressing benefits cliffs—the sudden and often unexpected decrease in public benefits that can occur with a small increase in earnings—and encouraging systems reform and integration.

NCSL and ACF provided technical assistance, research and data collection services, and connections to subject-matter experts. Initiative leaders promoted peer-to-peer learning, action planning and implementation, family engagement, system and culture change, innovation, and best practice and policy exchange.

The initiative also linked the New England states in ACF Region 1 with the southern states of ACF Region 4 in an information-sharing partnership—two demographically and culturally dissimilar regions reaching across jurisdictions to promote systemic reforms. Region 4 offered state examples of successful systems integration across agencies, two-generation practices embedded into state infrastructure, and data interoperability to optimize family economic mobility. The two regions exchanged findings and innovations through state presentations and peer-to-peer exchange.

As shown below, in the first two years of the initiative, NCSL and ACF hosted regional summits, state team meetings, cross-state working group meetings and webinars. Beginning at the project launch summit in September 2017, states identified benefits cliffs as a topic of interest. Because of the broad interest in that topic, NCSL and ACF hosted a webinar to learn more about this issue and how states are addressing it. From there, the state teams formed a regional working group to address benefit cliffs. The group met multiple times for cross-state learning and policy discussions and produced a policy brief on benefits cliffs. The brief offered suggestions for state and federal systems change and highlighted selected state actions. The

brief was presented by the states at the second Whole Family Approach to Jobs regional summit in December 2018. The paper influenced "Moving on Up: Helping Parents Climb the Economic Ladder by Address Benefits Cliffs," a policy brief developed by NCSL and ACF and presented by a state panel at NCSL's Legislative Summit in August 2019.

In addition to the working group on benefits cliffs, some of the project participants identified work requirements and their lack of alignment across public assistance programs as an issue. To further examine that topic, NCSL and ACF hosted a meeting for stakeholders from all six states and the federal government. Following the discussion, the state teams decided not to pursue this work through a regional working group.

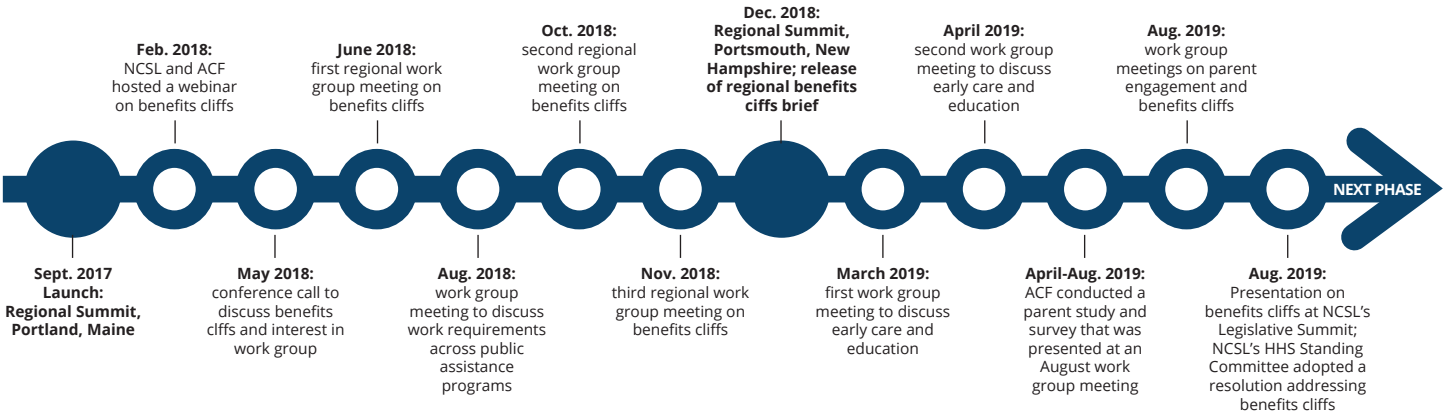
During the second regional summit in 2018, state teams learned more about benefits cliffs, early care and education, parent engagement and opioids in the workforce. Early care and education—as both a workforce and work support issue—and parent engagement emerged as high priorities for the six states. From that meeting came two more working groups, which met in 2019 and will continue to meet.

ACF Region 1 conducted interviews with state leaders in human services, philanthropy and model programs in each New England state in 2019. Participants were asked how they engage parents, the perceived risks and benefits of including parents as leaders in program or systems reform, and what technical assistance they would like around family engagement. Overall, they showed strong commitment to family engagement practices and identified the following areas for technical assistance to further their work:

- Promising practices and structures on parent engagement from states.
- Strategies for sustaining family engagement.
- Training for leadership, middle management and front-line staff.
- Training for parents in leadership, civics, policy and communication.
- Policy levers on family engagement and parent leadership.
- In August 2019, NCSL's Health and Human Services Standing Committee adopted a membership resolution recognizing the impact of benefits cliffs. This resolution signals to Congress and the Trump administration that benefits cliffs are an important topic to state legislatures and "strongly encourages federal partners to work with states to find a timely solution that would remove barriers for individuals to enter or remain in the workforce and increase their household income."

All convenings and working groups flowed from the priorities of the state teams and were organized to support their work on these issues. The momentum created by the first regional meeting in 2017, and the benefits cliffs work taken up by the states, deeply informed the second regional summit, and the establishment of additional working groups within this regional learning community.

Project Milestones



Outcomes

At the initiative's two-year mark, the six New England state teams are making steady progress toward integrating whole-family approaches in their respective states, and collaboration among family-serving systems is on the rise. The New England states are conducting research and implementing practice and policy changes that, taken together, offer a range of potential solutions. An independent evaluation completed in 2019 and discussed later in this report further confirms and clarifies outcomes and the effectiveness of the strategies employed throughout this initiative.

Each state has made significant progress on priorities of their determination.

- At least eight bills were enacted across four states, with several other bills related to whole family and employment also introduced for consideration.
- Three states—Maine, Massachusetts and New Hampshire—are directly addressing benefits cliffs, though all six states have taken steps to understand and address the cliff effect in some way. These efforts are captured more fully in a 2019 policy brief.
- NCSL's national membership of state legislatures adopted a policy resolution encouraging federal partners to work with states to remove policy and practice barriers to individuals entering or remaining in the workforce and thereby increasing their household income. More specifically, NCSL supported federal efforts, in conjunction with states, that would explore how to better align Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), child care assistance and Medicaid as work supports to mitigate benefits cliffs and increase family financial security.
- ACF Region 1 served as a policy adviser to HHS' Welfare Reform Work Group and the ReImagine HHS Aim for Independence Initiative, using state-driven solutions and recommendations to inform federal welfare initiatives and the newly established federal interagency Council on Economic Mobility. New research on benefits cliffs at HHS will test models with the states involved in the Whole Family Approach to Jobs initiative.
- ACF Region 1 provided consultation and leadership on family engagement. This influenced a new strategic partnership between the ACF and the U.S. Department of Education. That effort, Empowering Parents for School and Work Readiness and Success, is a public-private partnership with the Kresge Foundation to support a national convening focused on model approaches at the state and local levels to engage parents in governance, policymaking and redesigning service delivery. The meeting will be held in the spring of 2020 and partners will disseminate model family engagement practices across federal agencies and associations.
- Connecticut, Maine and Vermont embedded whole-family or two-generation approaches into legislation, helping ensure the longevity of this work. Connecticut passed legislation to build a two-generational plan with detailed outcome measures and goals, to be aligned with the legislature's broad-based and civically engaged Two Gen Advisory Group. Vermont passed legislation in 2018 to "align funding sources for the promotion of best practices aligned with a two-generation approach to eliminating poverty, as identified by the Vermont Work Group on Whole Family Approach to Jobs."
- States are using whole-family language, such as "helping parents work and children thrive" to foster diverse sector engagement and two-generation approaches.
- Massachusetts and Rhode Island are addressing the needs and opportunities of young parents by gathering first-hand accounts of young parents' experience with state agencies and identifying policy options to improve coordination and service delivery across agencies.
- ACF applied a whole-family approach within opportunity zones to test two-generation strategies focused on disrupting poverty and building economic mobility in Lewiston, Maine. Whole Family Approach to Jobs participants and federal partners are involved.

- ACF employed a human-centered design approach and created family vignettes that captured the experiences of New England parents confronted by poverty. These parent personas are now being used in multiple domains across the country.
- States are strengthening efforts to elevate parents' voices by involving mothers and fathers in planning, outreach and convenings.
- Structural reforms were established in several states to enable whole-family approaches. Maine created a children's cabinet with a mandate to include two-generation strategies. Rhode Island embedded whole-family work within its existing Children's Cabinet to support reform.

For more state outcomes, see page 10.

Strategy and Practice

Throughout the initiative, NCSL and ACF employed a number of strategies and practices for supporting state-directed work in this unique state-federal partnership. Both were tested and refined across the six New England states.

Strategies	Practices
1. Affirm federalism as a foundational principle for cross-sector, state-driven and outcome-focused work.	1. Leverage the expertise and experiences of all participants.
2. Use a two-generation lens to help parents work and children thrive.	2. Foster peer-to-peer learning within and across states.
3. Focus on removing government-imposed barriers to sustainable employment and family well-being.	3. Provide technical support and guidance to build and sustain progress toward state-determined goals.
4. Identify overlapping priorities in public and private sectors and engage business and community leaders in developing policy and practice solutions.	4. Identify shared policy obstacles and consider remedies.
5. Leverage the worker shortage to create economic opportunities for families in the margins.	5. Involve leaders at the state, national and local levels and across public, private and nonprofit sectors.
6. Consistently reinforce shared values to assure common purpose and alignment.	6. Ensure families are partners with a seat at the table for policy and practice discussions.
7. Cultivate a regional culture and identity that fosters innovative ideas and policy options.	7. Invite diverse stakeholders to facilitate new connections, bridge siloes and spark innovation.
8. Frame the work around economic mobility and family and community well-being.	8. Bring branches of government together to learn and problem solve.

Lessons, Insights and Evaluation

Lessons on Leadership

Knowledgeable and agile leadership played a critical role in designing, spearheading and sustaining momentum of this cross-sector, state-driven initiative. The dynamic and distinctive roles of ACF and NCSL offered strategic direction and assistance to states and insights to the federal government.

ACF's regional leadership offered strategic vision and facilitated communications and connection to federal leaders in New England and Washington, D.C. ACF Region 1 elevated models, pursued state queries and facilitated discussion with key federal leaders that led to action. The initiative influenced policy bodies through formal and informal representation, including the ReImagine HHS Aim for Independence Initiative's Policy Advisory Committee, HHS' Welfare Reform Work Group, ACF's Strategic Planning Committee and the newly established federal interagency Council on Economic Mobility. ACF Region 1 also brought in-depth knowledge of each state's context, human services, social and economic trends, and trusting relationships with state human services commissioners.

NCSL brought similar resources, as well as its convening power and relationships with legislators and legislative staff. NCSL also helped project participants navigate the sometimes fraught relationships between the legislative and executive branches, as well as state-federal relations. In addition, NCSL staff, along with an expert consultant, facilitated communication in ways that helped states achieve their goals.

The New England states also benefitted from the opportunities created by alignment of interests. By engaging partners at the state and federal levels, the Whole Family Approach to Jobs initiative created a two-way pipeline that has enabled greater understanding, faster problem-solving and tangible results.

Insights on Partnerships

Participants, regardless of sector, are equally valued and have contributed strategically toward the action steps. Federal leaders have supported the innovation and nontraditional approach of the initiative; and national, regional and local philanthropic leaders have contributed as thought partners and funders of the work. Addressing benefits cliffs is an example of regional work that resulted in policy changes in states and significant attention at the national level. Elevating this issue took tactical and high-level facilitation provided by project staff.

Findings from the Whole Family Approach to Jobs Evaluation

NCSL contracted with Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to evaluate the extent to which these strategies and processes helped achieve key milestones and goals of the initiative. Through interviews and surveys of participants from the six states teams, SPR established a baseline from which it evaluated progress at the end of the second year.

SPR evaluated three macro-level outcomes of the initiative: 1) increased knowledge and understanding of two-generation approaches, 2) increased collaboration among state team members, and 3) the emergence of a regional learning community. Evaluation results for all three are summarized below.

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF TWO-GENERATION APPROACHES

Survey respondents showed the greatest growth around aligning strategies and policies across local, state and federal agencies, along with a better understanding of policy barriers across multiple areas, including human services, education, health, and labor and workforce. Survey respondents also showed a substantially better understanding of the policy barriers in their state and a somewhat better understanding of their state's existing policies and goals as a result of participating in the initiative.

INCREASED COLLABORATION AMONG STATE TEAM MEMBERS

Increased coordination, collaboration and capacity among state team members is another anticipated outcome of this initiative. While state team members may have collaborated occasionally prior to this initiative, many had not formally worked together. As demonstrated in the state summaries earlier in this report, all six state teams have come a long way since 2017. Participants report having the capacity to recruit the appropriate community or systems stakeholders and are more connected with stakeholders in their state who are working on two-generation approaches. At the same time, the capacity of state teams is still very much in development, and at the two-year mark, state teams are still reporting the need for greater capacity and structures to guide their work.

EMERGENCE OF A REGIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

A third anticipated outcome of the initiative was the emergence of a regional learning community focused on whole-family approaches to employment that could be replicated in other regions of the country. NCSL and ACF were intentional about connecting states to each other through convenings, work groups and technical assistance to foster sharing of best practices and cross-state learning.

Survey respondents reported an overall increase in connectivity with other states, and those connections have been productive. As a result of this initiative, states are working across program silos and agencies to understand and address benefits cliffs**.** In addition, Maine is learning from Massachusetts' TANF income-disregard policy**.** Massachusetts visited Rhode Island as part of its research into apprenticeship programs in early childhood education. States continue to learn from each other on early childhood education and workforce, parent engagement and employment.

ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK FROM STATE TEAMS

ACF and NCSL supported state teams by coordinating and facilitating state and regional convenings and work groups and providing technical assistance. At the outset, participants found these supports valuable, and two years in, the majority of interview and survey responses pointed to these supports as critical to the state teams' ability to sustain their efforts. States valued the knowledge and expertise and independent perspectives NCSL and ACF brought to the table, as well as their ability to connect state teams to each other and to subject-matter experts. In addition, state team members reported that NCSL and ACF helped elevate the importance of the work and created momentum that helped drive the work forward.

Participants in New England's Whole Family Approach to Jobs initiative offered the following guidance for others considering similar work:

- **Center parents in the work.** Participants spoke of the importance of partnering with parents and including them in every step of the process. One participant noted, "Families know what they need—remember to ask and not make assumptions." State teams recommended scheduling meetings at times that fit parents' schedules, providing travel reimbursements for parents to attend meetings, offering child care at meetings, and findings ways to pay parents to be consultants to the state teams.

- **Define the problem.** In the words of one participant, "Get clear on the problem you are trying to solve." Getting state team members on the same page about the root cause and issue to be solved helps create a shared foundation of understanding from which states can begin to develop strategies for policy and systems change.

- **Level the playing field.** If done right, state team members should come from diverse backgrounds, many of them far from the machinations of state and federal government. Participants recommended taking time to learn from each other and be patient with each other's learning curves.

- **Identify and engage key players early.** Several New England teams struggled to identify the best mix of stakeholders for their team, and from what agencies they needed buy-in to move their work forward. Interview respondents spoke about the challenges of changing course once the right stakeholders were involved. "Part of the first steps is what is the strategy to get these folks to the table so that they're not coming in halfway through your work and saying yes and no to different ideas," offered one participant. Another spoke about "the value of identifying all the stakeholders necessary to educate and ensure a successful outcome … early buy-in is key."

- **Find dedicated team leaders to champion the work.** Interview respondents pointed to dedicated and passionate initiative leaders in their states. Successful leaders have been able to execute short-term wins while staying committed to a long-term vision. One participant reflected, "I could see another state not being nearly as successful without a strong leader who knows state government, who knows both the practical needs for more [interagency] work, and who also just truly believes in the resilience of [families]."

- **Attend to how you frame and communicate the work.** In the six New England states, bipartisan support was needed to achieve the policy outcomes described in the following section. In the words of one participant, states considering undertaking similar work should "build … legislative support across the aisles so that the work does not slow down during elections and changes in administration." According to SPR, taking a two-generation approach that linked promoting economic mobility to meeting labor market demands helped keep state teams above the political fray.

State Outcomes

Connecticut

The Connecticut General Assembly passed HB 5335 in 2018, aligning Connecticut's statewide reading plan with the state's two-generation initiative. As a result, a pilot program for adult education programs providing high-quality on-site early childhood education services is being tested.

SB 1080, signed into law in 2019, requires the Governor's Office of Policy and Management to develop an interagency plan that coordinates and aligns service delivery for families to overcome barriers to economic success. The plan is being developed in collaboration with the newly authorized Two-Generational Advisory Board. The plan will include: 1) developing an infrastructure for data-sharing across agencies, 2) coordinating and leveraging existing resources to help move families toward economic success, 3) gaining parent and community input on innovative approaches, and 4) developing shared indicators and goals for interagency collaboration to achieve quantifiable and verifiable systems change that disrupts cycles of intergenerational poverty. Indicators may include improvements to coordinating and delivering services and resources across one or more programs for early learning, adult education, child care, housing, job training, transportation, financial literacy, health and mental health, and pathways to work.

In addition, the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood is now promoting two-generation practices. Home visiting programs are now monetarily incentivized through their contracts with the state, using an outcomes rate card, to link families to employment and/or education and training. The early childhood and state housing offices are partnering to provide incentive payments to social service providers to support homelessness diversion.

"Connecticut has been an interesting example because it has gone through such a budget crisis and this work has sustained. Two-gen aligned so much with a lot of social innovation [and cutting edge] work in the past few years."

—Connecticut State Team Member

Maine

Maine's Whole Families Working Group engaged Stepwise Research in 2018 to assess the prevalence and impact of benefits cliffs. The study examined the interplay among 13 state and federal programs. Child care and health benefits had the most extreme cliffs. In other instances, the group found downward slopes across the benefit programs, negatively impacting parents' financial security and capacity to work outside the home. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) at the state and federal levels was shown to be an effective policy lever to ease the cliff effect.

Maine enacted a bipartisan package of bills, referred to as the Invest in Tomorrow package (LD 1772, LD 1774), in 2019. The new laws are intended to address in significant ways the state's benefits cliffs. Together, the package eliminates the gross income test for TANF, invests $2 million in whole-family pilot programs and increases the income disregard in TANF to support parents' transition to work. It also authorizes an increase in TANF funds for transitional food assistance and establishes a working group to align programs and improve accountability for better outcomes for families. In addition, the Legislature enacted LD 765, which requires the Maine Department of Health and Human Services to convene a stakeholder group to study asset limits in various state social service programs, including TANF and SNAP.

The Maine Department of Health and Human Services increased its monthly food supplement for working families from $15 per month to $50 per month, with authorization to reach $100, by using $7 million in TANF funds annually to supplement SNAP benefits. Maine will also increase access to transitional Medicaid for families entering the workforce. Both policy changes are intended to smooth the

"Those [legislative] reforms get right at the heart of this Whole Family Approach to Jobs thinking. At the same time, it is addressing the critical workforce shortage that we have in Maine, which is why it was really an area where Republicans and Democrats were able to come together and work together in a session."

—Maine State Team Member

path to work for low-income parents by helping them make ends meet while transitioning to employment.

Maine's Opportunity Zone in Lewiston is partnering with the Maine and regional Whole Family Approach to Jobs teams to optimize coordinated federal and state policy levers on employment, two-generational practice and parent leadership.

Massachusetts

Since 2017, Massachusetts has advanced significant policy reforms to simplify and streamline program rules and requirements for working families, better incentivize and support employment, and ease the cliff effect during transitions to economic self-sufficiency.

Through its FY 2019 budget (Section 55), Massachusetts implemented a 100% earnings disregard for newly working TANF participants for up to six months. This change is intended to help families cover employment-related expenses (e.g., clothing and transportation), increase hours, gain additional work experience and build an asset cushion before losing the benefits and supports of TANF. For FY 2020 (Section 62), the state continued this focus by eliminating one vehicle per household from the asset test for TANF, recognizing the critical role an automobile plays in getting and keeping a job. Through the state's Learn to Earn initiative, Massachusetts is developing a new tool, CommonCalc, which is being used by case managers across several public benefit programs to help consumers understand the impact of work on their benefits and plan for longer-term economic independence.

In addition, the Massachusetts General Court approved HB 3594, eliminating the "family cap" (aka child exclusion policy) for TANF families and ending the practice of denying additional TANF benefits for children born while a family is already receiving TANF. This not only increased the monthly resources of families, it significantly simplified the system rules, allowing both consumers and TANF staff more time to prioritize economic mobility opportunities over compliance-related activities.

The Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance, the state's TANF and SNAP agency, and the Department of Public Health convened a young parent policy roundtable in 2018. Participants included stakeholders from six state agencies, including workforce and housing. The group conducted focus groups and interviews with young parents and social service providers to identify policy and practice barriers to family well-being. The group also mapped young parent programs across the state and analyzed health indicators for young parents. With this information, the group is now considering two-generation approaches to improving support for young parents and their children.

> "I think we in Massachusetts were on these issues [two-gen approaches] early. That said, we have learned from other states, and we have gotten better in internal/external communications. Also, we have commenced enhanced family voice in policy development and practice critique."
>
> —Massachusetts State Team Member

New Hampshire

In May 2019, Governor Christopher Sununu and the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services released "Helping Business Thrive and Families Prosper," a policy paper on the cliff effect. The paper examines workforce challenges that result from benefits cliffs and outlines steps policymakers, employers and other stakeholders can take to eliminate benefits cliffs or at least mitigate their negative effect on employers and families.

As a result, state leaders are analyzing state and federal benefit programs and how they interact with family earnings. Based on this research, agency leaders and lawmakers will consider policy changes to address benefits cliffs.

New Hampshire's Division of Housing and Economic Stability is developing an online benefits cliff calculator to help families and case workers understand the interplay between changes in earnings and benefits. Ultimately, the calculator will help families make informed decisions on their path to self-sufficiency. It will also help employers understand how wages interact with public assistance programs.

In addition, the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services is developing a charter to embed the Whole Family Approach to Jobs framework in its operations. The draft charter calls on the agency to collaborate with other state agencies, other branches of government, and business and philanthropic leaders.

"I think our key success has be creating a well-established structure, vision and intentionality around the work. We've been able to get multi-level, multi-stakeholder investment, and maintain that relatively well."

—New Hampshire State Team Member

Rhode Island

The work of Rhode Island's Whole Family Approach to Jobs team is led by the state's Department of Human Services in collaboration with other state agencies. The team has elevated the importance of supporting cross-agency collaboration, as demonstrated by helping the Department of Children, Youth and Families with support and training for relatives caring for children in foster care. The team is also helping create a resources brochure for young adults participating in Rhode Island's Voluntary Extension of Care Program, which helps eligible 18- to 21-year-olds transition out of foster care. In addition, the team is working with Rhode Island's Hunger Elimination Task Force to promote its work-support and training programs and craft new statewide marketing materials.

Legislation was introduced in 2019 to provide child care for parents while in college, establish universal prekindergarten, increase tiered reimbursement rates for child care providers and invest in family home visiting. Although those bills did not pass, some of the provisions were included in the governor's budget (HB 5151, Articles 4 and 13), with input from the Department of Human Services. Passage of the budget by the General Assembly authorized tiered reimbursement rates for family child care sites and 340 new seats for prekindergarten. It also transferred the child care licensing team from the Department of Children, Youth and Families to the Department of Human Services to improve the quality of child care services for Rhode Islanders and better support the early care and education workforce. HB 5151 also eliminates a 24-month time limit for participation in the Rhode Island Works program. Beginning Jan. 1, 2020, participants will receive 48 months of con-

"I think the biggest success is that state leaders, including representatives from the Department of Labor and Training, are finally listening to practitioners, providers and business owners about the workforce crisis in the early childhood education field. I feel optimistic that some positive changes are on the horizon."

—Rhode Island State Team Member

tinuous benefits. The legislation is intended to help more families become self-sufficient through additional work-related training.

In addition, two agencies with representatives on the state team, the West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation and the Rhode Island Department of Health, were awarded a two-year $1.75 million Pregnancy Assistance Fund grant from HHS. The grant will be used to establish the Dunamis Synergy initiative to help expectant and parenting teens and college students ages 15 to 25 access and persist in high school and post-secondary settings. Dunamis Synergy uses a family coaching model to deliver comprehensive two-generation services and additional wrap-around supports to improve educational, health and social outcomes among young families participating in the initiative. In 2019, Dunamis Synergy provided funding to train the initiative's family coaches and front-line staff at the Department of Human Services and other agencies to provide effective family-centered coaching for young parents. Leaders from the initiative sit on the Whole Family Young Parent Working Group and consider the group's efforts to improve the systems that support young parents to be critically important to their success.

Rhode Island's Department of Human Services and the Department of Public Health are working with specific communities to coordinate the efforts of front-line workers and agencies. These efforts are expected to inform a multi-agency memorandum of understanding to enable cross training for community and state agencies on young parent policies.

Vermont

The Vermont General Assembly passed two bills in 2019 that align with the work of the Vermont team. SB 280 created an advisory council on child poverty and strengthening families. The council is charged with advancing policy solutions that promote family financial stability and asset building. SB 919 requires the state's recently constituted workforce development board to make recommendations to "align funding sources for the promotion of best practices aligned with a two-generation approach to eliminating poverty, as identified by the Vermont Work Group on Whole Family Approach to Jobs." The legislation directs the board, in cooperation with Vermont's Department of Labor and agencies of commerce and community development, education, human services, agriculture, food and markets, natural resources and transportation, to conduct a stakeholder alignment, coordination and engagement process.

The team has begun drafting a toolkit to help state agencies becoming more family-friendly and are discussing how to use it to increase collaboration across agencies and promote support whole-family approaches.

"Getting people who would normally not be at the same table all in one room is a really, really important step."

—Vermont State Team Member

Conclusion

The Whole Family Approach to Jobs initiative was born from a mutual interest among state and federal leaders in New England to develop a learning community to help disrupt poverty. ACF's relationships with the six states and other federal agencies provided the foundation from which the project grew. With funding from WKKF, NCSL was able to bring together cross-sector stakeholders to identify problems and potential solutions to improve employment equity and economic stability for low-income parents and parents of color, and eliminate intergenerational poverty. A culture of learning and innovation soon developed.

The partnership between NCSL with ACF offered an unexpected cohesion of legislative and executive interests, which enabled states to do the same. Along with its convening power, NCSL brought relationships and a view of legislative activity across the 50 states. ACF performed a similar role on the executive branch side, and a consultant with extensive experience in the region provided technical assistance and fundraising support to the state teams.

With a vision and capacity for change, other organizations joined the initiative. Community-based organizations brought important perspectives, and parents grounded the work in the realities of day-to-day engagement with government systems. Local philanthropic organizations, not burdened by government bureaucracy, provided insights and financial support. Employers voiced their concerns about government unintentionally disincentivizing work and offered potential solutions.

Strategic messaging emphasizing multi-generational success and economic growth helped coalesce diverse interests. Social safety nets were recognized as necessary to support families with children so parents could enter or remain in the workforce.

At the two-year point of this initiative, New England states are applying whole-family approaches to simultaneously increase family economic security and well-being, while also addressing a regional workforce shortage. States are developing innovative policies, engaging across sectors, promoting organizational culture changes, and sharing strategies and outcomes across states and regions. Their accomplishments to date offer momentum as this regional approach to helping parents work and children thrive continues.

Resources

- A Whole Family Approach to Jobs project resources, National Conference of State Legislatures
- "Moving on Up: Helping Parents Climb the Economic Ladder by Addressing Benefits Cliffs," National Conference of State Legislatures

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