

Strengthening Connections to Support Child & Family Well-Being

How Economic Supports, Inclusive of Child Support Programs, Can Work Together for a Whole Family Approach

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Research shows that economic supports - such as cash assistance, child care, housing, food, transportation, and similar supports – are critical to family well-being and prevention. Programs including child support, TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, and child care play a pivotal role. Yet, these programs intersect in complex ways impacting the lives of children and families. In particular, the intersection between child support and other programs is ripe for exploration and development.

In early 2022, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) in partnership with the National Child Support Engagement Association (NCSEA) and the National Council of Child Support Directors (NCCSD) established a forum for TANF administrators and child support directors to improve collaborative ties across programs and explore available policy and practice levers that impact shared participants. Seeing the value of this initiative, APHSA, NCSEA and NCCSD expanded this initiative by assembling a Technical Working Group of state and local administrators in child support, TANF, SNAP, child welfare, parents, and other national partners on a quarterly basis to identify foundational principles for coordination and collaboration in economic supports inclusive of child support programs.

Creating Shared Principles for Alignment

The principles below, co-created by a national body of TANF administrators and child support directors, continue to evolve as a living document, but can also serve as an example of where state and localities can begin their own system alignment journey by affirming their commitment to collaboration and coordination of economic supports inclusive of child support.

Example Principles for Alignment Across Child Support & TANF



Cross-team Communication and Collaboration: Child support and TANF programs communicate and collaborate across programs, departments, and agencies to align policies, practices, funding streams, systems, and services to maximize impact on the whole family.



Racial Equity Lens: Program alignment is executed through the lens of racial equity and acknowledges the diversity of families.



Treat Families with Respect: Aligned, whole family approaches support and treat all parents and caregivers with respect in achieving their short- and long-term social, emotional, and economic goals and enhancing the lives of their children.



Focus on Outcomes: Alignment of programs promotes goal-driven outcomes and measures, inclusive of lived experiences of families, and built on the mutual exchange of key data.



Simple and Accessible: Modernization of systems and processes prioritizes simplification, accessibility for families, and improved outcomes.



Alignment with Values: Child support and TANF align with the broader human services system to provide a cohesive set of services and supports that are trauma informed, family-centered, and recognize each person and families' individual needs and aspirations.

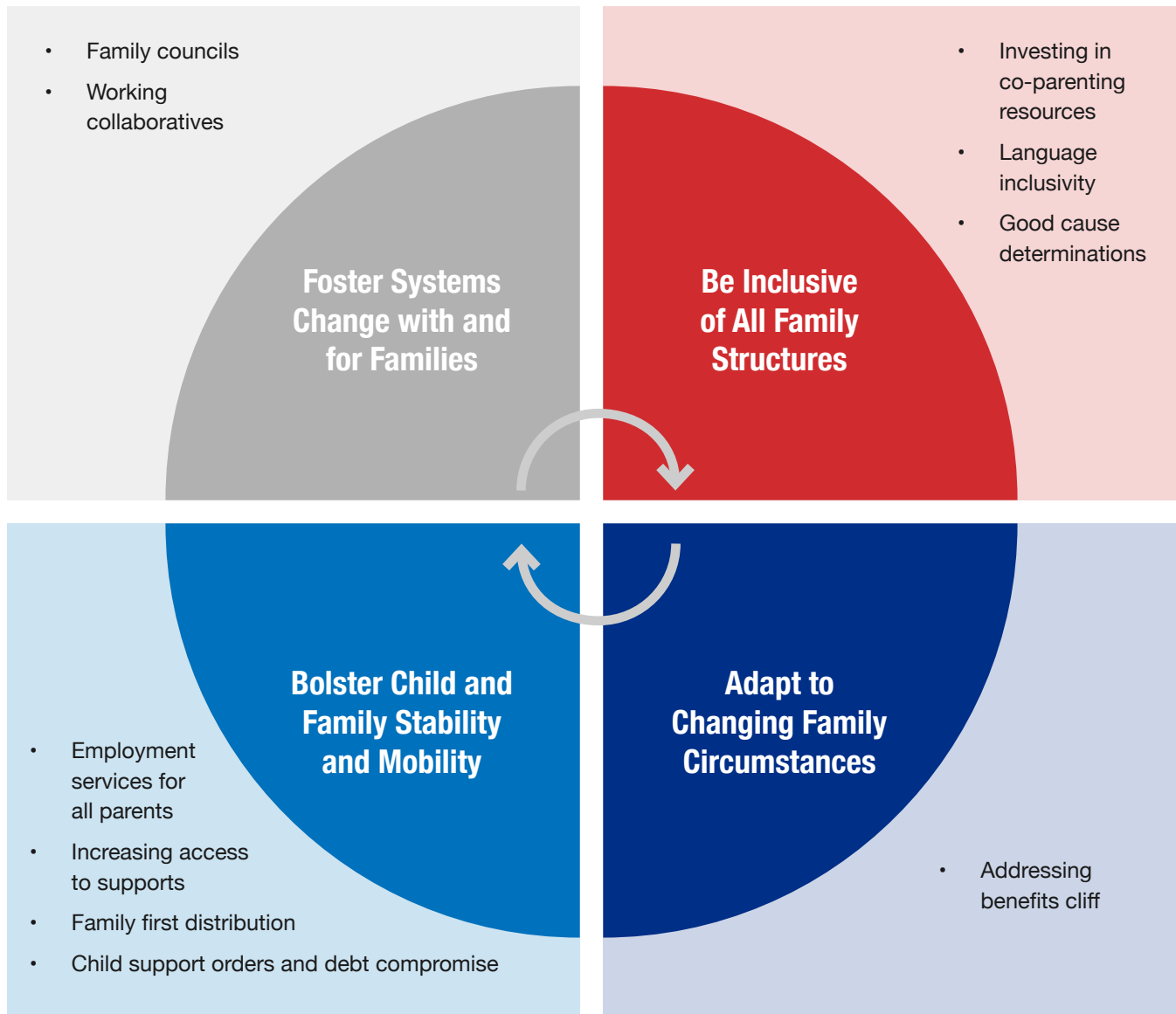
By co-creating concrete goals, values, and a shared commitment to collaborating and coordinating in support of children and families, state, and local child support, TANF, SNAP, and other programs can develop trust and understanding amongst each other. This requires gathering stakeholders at the table, forming a group understanding of significant points of improvement, and fostering buy-in of key players to move from commitment to action. Critical for any state or local community's movement to action is the voice and support of the families that programs serve.

Key Factors Affecting the Strength of Coordination & Collaboration

Key Factors	Examples of Practices to Promote Impact
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate or champion collaborative or state-wide special initiatives • Setting a holistic vision for the agency (or across agencies with agency counterparts) • Creating, fostering relationships with state legislators and federal partners • Implementing effective communication among all staff levels of policy changes and monitoring implementation • Routine meetings among leaders within a program and across programs
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-location of staff across programs • Allocation of resources to special partnerships or collaboratives • Cross-training and routine information sharing with other program staff • Provision of individualized, joint case management
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of systems to enable routine data sharing of shared program participants • Utilizing technology to make it easier for clients to initiate and remain engaged • Tools and portals allowing clients and families to view, understand, apply, and receive information about an array of economic support services
Government Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize strategies that fit unique agency and department structures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In particular, when child support and its sister programs sit in different agencies, it can affect partnership growth • State administered vs. county administered programs require different strategies • Ease of access to available databases impacts partnering
Perception & Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand current values of economic supports inclusive of child support vs. traditional reputation as an enforcement/compliance-based program, which can negatively impact partnerships • Build knowledge of state-level policy and practice options, and dispel incorrect assumptions that current policies are set in federal law • Use social media outreach in conjunction with other partners to improve public awareness and perceptions of economic supports

Key Considerations to Promote an Aligned, Whole Family Approach to Economic Supports

As key stakeholders in this project developed shared values and concrete goals for aligning economic support systems with a whole family approach, there was a growing need to integrate the voices and priorities of parents and caregivers into the emerging work. Commentary from parents, caregivers, and program leaders alike expressed the value of child support, cash assistance, food assistance, and other supports, but additionally emphasized the need for processes to adapt to the realities of families. Additional input from the Technical Working Group resulted in the following identification of key considerations for shared decision making and potential issues to consider:



In their unique capacity, program leaders can work together across programs and agencies and in partnership with families to reach shared decisions that positively impact families served across programs.



Family serving programs and systems have an opportunity to build well-being from the ground up by coordinating and collaborating together to meet each family's unique circumstances, goals and needs so that all children and families can thrive. According to research, inclusive of the perspectives of families with low-incomes, providing cohesive economic and concrete supports directly to families, such as cash assistance, child care, housing assistance, transportation, and similar supports, is part of a critical approach to supporting the well-being of children and families. Programs including child support, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and child care all play a pivotal role in ensuring families have access to these critical supports.

Across economic support programs state and federal requirements, in addition to the multi-faceted needs of families, cause programs and services to intersect in elaborate ways, including a variety of options and requirements for families to engage with child support. Families typically navigate this complex, confusing web of program requirements on their own. Yet, by bringing together program administrators, top-level health and human services leaders, community stakeholders, and most importantly, parents and caregivers, to understand and coordinate these respective touchpoints, systems can be established with and for thriving families.

This brief is a synthesis of decades of professional and lived experience among all experts that APHSA staff consulted with. The brief can function as a guide for practitioners and policy makers in family serving systems and programs, including child support programs, as they build the necessary supports and connections for families to grow and thrive. Parents and caregivers contributed significantly to the direction and underpinnings of the principles and mission outlined in this brief. In addition, leaders in child support, TANF, SNAP and other human services programs have contributed their knowledge and technical expertise to examining areas of opportunity for greater coordination and collaboration among services and programs and offering valuable examples of such partnerships in action. Altogether, this brief highlights foundational principles for coordination and collaboration that are inclusive of family voice.

Family serving programs and systems have an opportunity to build well-being from the ground up by coordinating and collaborating together to meet each family's unique circumstances, goals, and needs so that all children and families can thrive.



Background

In early 2022, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) in partnership with the National Child Support Engagement Association (NCSEA) and the National Council of Child Support Directors (NCCSD) established a forum for TANF administrators and child support directors to improve collaborative ties across programs and explore available policy and practice levers that impact shared participants. Seeing the value of this initiative, APHSA and its partners sought to expand this initiative by assembling a Technical Working Group (TWG) of state administrators in child support, TANF, SNAP, child welfare, parents with lived experience in economic support programs, and other national partners on a quarterly basis to identify foundational principles for coordination and collaboration in economic supports inclusive of child support programs. There are thirty members of the TWG, representing state and local agencies from across the country. The TWG additionally explored practice and policy levers with implications for child support and other economic support programs that can influence family stability, economic mobility, and prevent deeper system involvement. The TWG limited its exploration of policies and practices to those currently within the domain of state and local program administration. However, the emerging insights from the TWG can also serve as a lens for examining federal laws and policies and state legislation, even though these were not the explicit focus of the group's work.

In addition to quarterly TWG meetings, APHSA staff conducted twenty individual interviews with TWG members to glean from members' expertise specific examples of coordination and collaboration occurring across the country. Interviews also served as a chance to learn more about what underutilized opportunities members saw to bolster coordination and collaborations across economic support programs.

Finally, drawing on its partnerships with leading parent and caregiver-lead national organizations, APHSA held the *Parent and Caregiver Voices in Aligning Economic Supports for Family Economic Mobility Summit*, ("Family Economic Mobility Summit"). Seventeen parents and caregivers, representing experience in child support and other economic support programs from seven states and localities, attended a full-day, in-person convening to identify and discuss opportunities to better support all families participating in child support TANF, SNAP, and other programs. Participants in the Family Economic Mobility Summit developed group consensus on a set of priorities and ideas, which are woven throughout this brief.

Seeing the value of this initiative, APHSA and its partners sought to expand this initiative by assembling a Technical Working Group (TWG) of state administrators in child support, TANF, SNAP, child welfare, parents with lived experience in economic support programs, and other national partners on a quarterly basis to identify foundational principles for coordination and collaboration in economic supports inclusive of child support programs.



4 Principles for Alignment

Throughout the lifetime of this project, APHSA has held a bi-monthly Community of Practice (CoP) of child support directors and TANF administrators. As a national body, with broad representation of state TANF and child support programs, the CoP explores opportunities to partner to better support families participating across the two programs. As a foundation for this work, the CoP drafted principles for alignment to clearly express their shared values, goals, and commitment to partnering and guide their work as a community. These principles are a living document which continue to evolve but can also serve as an example of where state and localities can begin their own system alignment journey by affirming their own commitment to collaboration and coordination of economic supports inclusive of child support.

Example Principles for Alignment Across Child Support & TANF

- **Cross-team Communication and Collaboration:** Child support and TANF programs communicate and collaborate across programs, departments and agencies to align policies, practices, funding streams, systems and services to maximize impact on the whole family.
- **Racial Equity Lens:** Program alignment is executed through the lens of racial equity and acknowledges the diversity of families.
- **Treat Families with Respect:** Aligned, whole family approaches support and treat all parents and caregivers with respect in achieving their short- and long-term social, emotional and economic goals and enhancing the lives of their children.
- **Focus on Outcomes:** Alignment of programs promotes goal-driven outcomes and measures, inclusive of lived experiences of families, and built on the mutual exchange of key data.
- **Simple and Accessible:** Modernization of systems and processes prioritizes simplification, accessibility for families, and improved outcomes.
- **Alignment with Values:** Child support and TANF align with the broader human services system to provide a cohesive set of services and supports that are trauma informed, family-centered, and recognize each person and families' individual needs and aspirations.

By co-creating concrete goals, values and a shared commitment to collaborating and coordinating in support of children and families, state and local communities' child support, TANF, SNAP, and other programs can develop trust and understanding amongst each other. Developing a shared commitment and goals requires gathering stakeholders at the table, forming a group understanding of significant points of improvement, and fostering buy-in as key players in moving that commitment to families and children into action. Critical for any state or local community's movement to action is the voice and support of the families that programs serve. This brief provides a window into how parents and caregivers can shape policy and priorities and act as key players in moving that shared commitment into action.





Key Factors Affecting the Strength of Coordination & Collaboration

Key factors and impactful practices emerged from interviews with members of the TWG. The practice examples below are a sample of the kinds of activities taking place across states in programs and services that tend to promote coordination and collaboration. While not exhaustive, these examples illustrate the multitude of factors that program and service leaders must balance when strengthening connections across programs.

Key Factors	Examples of Practices to Promote Impact
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate or champion collaborative or state-wide special initiatives • Setting a holistic vision for the agency (or across agencies with agency counterparts) • Creating, fostering relationships with state legislators and federal partners • Implementing effective communication among all staff levels of policy changes and monitoring implementation • Routine meetings among leaders within a program and across programs
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-location of staff across programs • Allocation of resources to special partnerships or collaboratives • Cross-training and routine information sharing with other program staff • Provision of individualized, joint case management
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of systems to enable routine data sharing of shared program participants • Utilizing technology to make it easier for clients to initiate and remain engaged • Tools and portals allowing clients and families to view, understand, apply, and receive information about an array of economic support services
Government Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize strategies that fit unique agency and department structures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In particular, when child support and its sister programs sit in different agencies, it can affect partnership growth • State administered vs. county administered programs require different strategies • Ease of access to available databases impacts partnering
Perception & Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand current values of economic supports inclusive of child support vs. traditional reputation as an enforcement/compliance-based program, which can negatively impact partnerships • Build knowledge of state-level policy and practice options, and dispel incorrect assumptions that current policies are set in federal law • Use social media and outreach in conjunction with other partners to improve public awareness and perceptions of economic supports

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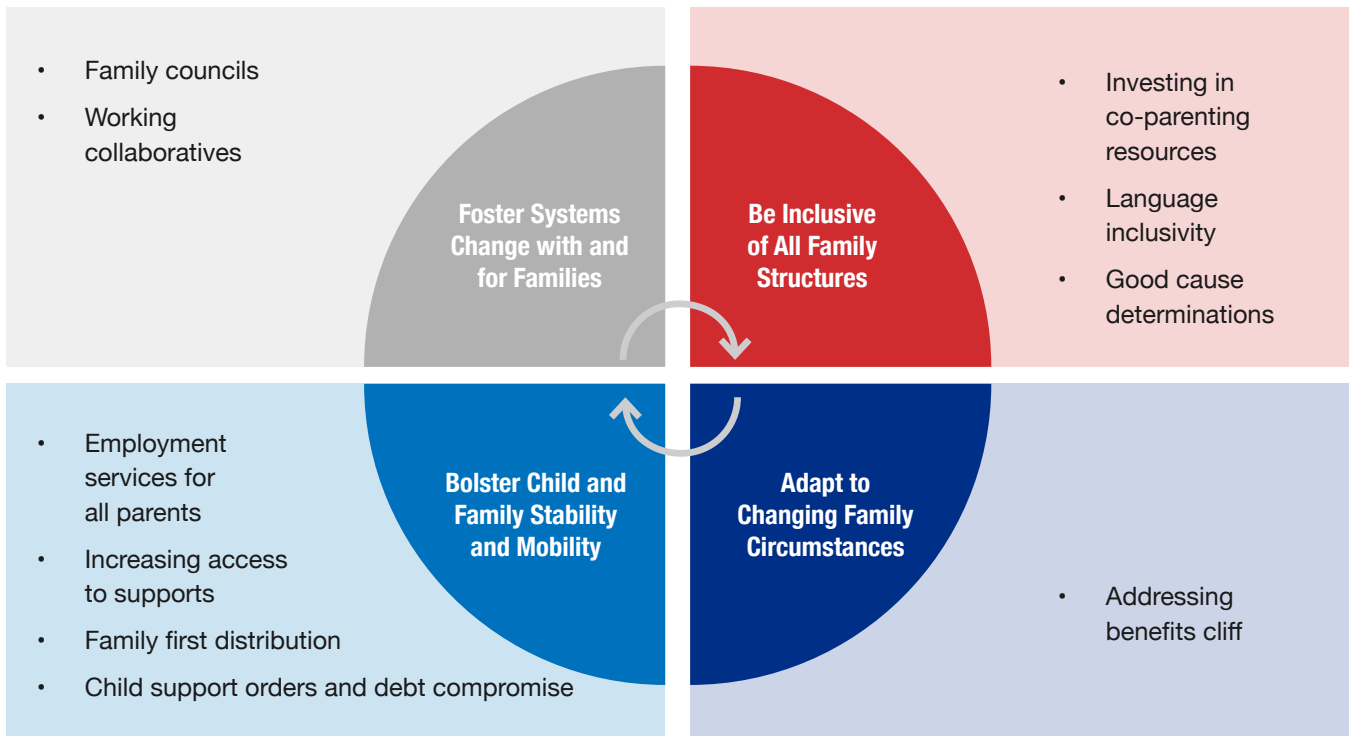
Key Considerations to Promote an Aligned, Whole Family Approach to Economic Supports

As key stakeholders in this project developed shared values and concrete goals for aligning economic support systems with a whole family approach, there was a growing need to integrate the voices and priorities of parents and caregivers into the emerging work. Commentary from parents, caregivers, and program leaders alike expressed the value of child support, cash assistance, food assistance, and other supports, but additionally emphasized the need for processes to adapt to the realities of families. In their unique capacity as leaders in economic and concrete supports, program leaders can work together to reach shared decisions and positively impact families that are currently being served across programs.

Parents and caregivers at the Family Economic Mobility Summit developed consensus on priorities and ideas that illustrated how family serving systems could deliver on their shared commitment to serving families and children. Participants viewed continuous family and participant input into the development of policy and process in family serving systems as essential for co-creating accessible, respectful, and impactful programs. Parents and caregivers identified inclusivity of all caregivers as necessary for programs to reach and serve children and families. Another key lesson from the Family Economic Mobility Summit was that while systems leaders may envision long-term economic mobility as the ultimate goal for families, parents and caregivers are in great need of stability and security in the short term. In addition, there were significant concerns raised about how responsive and adaptable services were to the evolving needs of families and children over time. There were calls to action around communicating and enacting policies that supported families throughout the lifetime of their engagement with services.

Commentary from parents, caregivers, and program leaders alike expressed the value of child support, cash assistance, food assistance, and other supports, but additionally emphasized the need for processes to adapt to the realities of families.

These key lessons and ideas formed the foundation and structure for this brief's key considerations:



One of the strongest themes to emerge from the Family Economic Mobility Summit was a call to action to increase transparency and communication with families. The integration of family voice into state and local policy and decision-making processes is paramount to making effective, sustainable changes to service delivery. Additionally, parents and caregivers have a strong desire to better understand how a program or service could tangibly impact their lives, including their family relationships, financial security, and eligibility for other services. Aligning economic supports for a whole family approach must not only involve program leaders from child support, TANF, SNAP and other economic supports, but must also be informed by the direct perspectives and experiences of the parents, caregivers and families that receive economic supports. Included below are two emerging issues related to fostering systems change with and for families.

Family Councils

Systems leaders engaging directly with parents and caregivers can integrate the lived experience of families into program structures and co-design more responsive and trusted services for their communities. A few states have created family advisory boards or councils that significantly contribute input on projects and policy on a continuous basis. For example, Michigan's Child Support Community Advisory Council was created in 2021 to involve parents and caregivers in the child support program's decision-making processes¹. With logistical support from staff in the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support, the Council has provided significant input on improving the program's public communications – switching the publicly used term from 'customers' to 'participants' to better reflect how the program interacts with families. The Council also spurred the department to revamp its processes and training for how support case managers respond to participant complaints.

Working Collaboratives

Statewide, or local-based, cross-agency collaboratives provide significant opportunities for a wide-range of stakeholders to contribute and shape the vision and direction of key pieces of policy and process. Centering the experiences and voices of those with lived experience can act as a strong rudder for navigating and understanding the important pain points and impactful solutions to complex issues and systems. For example, Washington state created the **Poverty Reduction Workgroup (PRWG)**, which developed a comprehensive 10-year plan to reduce poverty and inequality in the state. In addition to participation from government agencies, including the child support program, community-based organizations, philanthropy, think tanks, and other stakeholders, PRWG included a 22-member steering committee composed of individuals with lived experience and determined the priorities of the full PRWG meetings. PRWG additionally held over fifty briefings with the public and organizations representing people experiencing poverty.



All families are unique, making up a colorful tapestry of family compositions, and every family should have the tools they need to grow and thrive. Because the picture of “family” has evolved over time, economic support programs must adapt to acknowledge all families and keep their experiences central in service delivery and design. Co-parenting, meaning that both parents are jointly engaged in the upbringing of their children and the activities they are a part of, necessitates that both parents are acknowledged and supported across systems. According to research, father’s and mother’s roles equally impact childhood development, and parents that support one another socially, emotionally and financially promote better outcomes for their children.²

Moreover, according to the National Center on Grandfamilies, an organization dedicated to enacting policies inclusive of kinship caregivers, there are 2.6 million children who live with extended family³, including “fictive kin” – primary caregivers who are not biologically related to children in their care. Caregivers provide necessary care for giving a child a safe, stable, and loving home, but are not always able to access the same supports as parents. Limiting access to child-only TANF is particularly challenging.⁴ Included below are three emerging issues related to inclusivity of all families.



Investing in Co-Parenting Resources

Building strong family supports for children should include providing resources to both parents paying support and receiving support. Resources supporting co-parenting, such as parenting classes or coaching, child care resources for both parents, or family counseling to promote co-parenting, provide essential tools for healthy communication and emotional stability. Developing father-specific resources, especially for fathers with low-income who are disproportionately of a racial minority, are needed to address the underlying barriers that fathers specifically face.

Language Inclusivity

Considering how parents and caregivers are addressed in program materials and policies, from marketing materials to staff trainings to program names, can create a more welcoming environment that is conducive to advancing whole-family approaches. For some, the term “non-custodial parent” may be perceived as “absentee parent,” causing a sense that parents paying support are not prioritized as parents or welcomed by systems. Another commonly cited example is the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Although the program has services available for fathers, materials that are mother-centric can mask the breadth of services. The WIC program in Connecticut partnered with Real Dads Forever, a fatherhood strategies development organization, to establish more inclusive training and materials to encourage participation of dads and moms alike.⁵ Similarly, the recent name change of the federal Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) from the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) reflects a commitment, “to serve the whole family and provide services that promote family self-sufficiency so children receive reliable support from both parents.”⁶

Good Cause

While evidence supports that child support payments promote child well-being, in instances where child support collection would be harmful to a family, such as for safety reasons related to domestic violence or abuse, states have flexibility to modify or remove child support requirements in place for some federally funded programs such as TANF. States can also consider where child support requirements could discourage families from applying for necessary supports and services, such as SNAP or child care. States have wide latitude to define qualification for good cause, the process by which parents can be exempted from child support requirements, and determine which agencies are best positioned to make good cause determinations. For many states some or all of these flexibilities are already in use, however, it is worth evaluating where there is potential for policy change to support children and family well-being.

Table 1: Child Support Cooperation & Federal Requirements

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)	State option to require either or both parents to participate in paternity establishment and cooperation with child support. (FNS-GD-2019-0043)
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Cash Assistance	Federal law requires single parents receiving TANF cash assistance to cooperate with child support and paternity establishment, absent “good cause”. Cash assistance must be reduced by 25% when families do not cooperate with child support. States may opt to reduce cash assistance as much as 100%. States have flexibility in defining “good cause” and determining which program, child support or TANF, makes the determination. (Title III, The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996)
Medicaid	Referrals to child support should be made “where appropriate”. In such instance, federal law requires both parents to cooperate with paternity establishment and child support collection of medical support. Inappropriate referrals include cases with a poverty-level pregnant women, Transitional Medicaid Assistance (TMA), child-only Medicaid, and where “good cause” is found. (IM-08-03 ; IM-14-01)
Child Care Subsidy	State option to require either or both parents to participate in paternity establishment and cooperation with child support. ⁷
Child Welfare	Referrals to child support should be made “where appropriate” for children receiving title IV-E foster care maintenance. However, federal guidance indicates that cases should be “thoroughly reviewed” and only referred to child support when it will “not disrupt the reunification process”. Referrals should not be made when it is not in the best interest of the child. (DCL-22-06)

Massachusetts is one example of a state adapting good cause to meet the needs of their communities. Massachusetts developed an explicit definition for good cause consideration for kinship caregivers applying for TANF.⁸ The change stemmed from feedback from Massachusetts’s [The Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#), frontline staff, and from caregivers. The change was operationalized through a collaboration between the MA Department of Transitional Assistance, which houses the TANF program, and the MA Department of Revenue, which houses the state child support program.

Stability and security are necessary first steps for families to successfully participate in wealth-building activities. Economic support programs have a unique set of tools for developing the building blocks to establish a family's economic stability. Research shows that cash assistance is a meaningful resource to provide stability for children and families in times of need and promote prevention.⁹ Child support payments reaching families directly have a positive impact on the family's economic stability and the relationships among coparents and children¹⁰. Additionally, when consistent, timely child support payments are paired with a parent's income, children are less likely to experience neglect and abuse¹¹. Additionally, ensuring that all parents, including those paying support, and caregivers have access to education and work opportunities can improve overall child and family well-being. Research from previous child support-led employment programs for parents paying support shows that parents had increased satisfaction with the child support program and had positive impacts on employment and parenting outcomes¹². But perhaps more importantly, employment and training programs that take a two-gen approach, focused not simply on parents' access to jobs, but rather access to quality jobs and supportive services, such as quality child care, take into account the multitude of needs of working parents and their children.¹³ Included below are four emerging issues related to bolstering child and family stability and mobility.

Employment Services for All Parents

States can use a variety of funding streams to establish employment and training programs to promote quality jobs for parents and caregivers paying and receiving support. One example, the Maryland Department of Human Services [Supporting, Training, and Employing Parents \(STEP Up!\) program](#), supports parents paying child support in Baltimore City with free job training and support services. Participants who successfully complete the STEP Up! program can earn forgiveness for child support arrears owed to the State of Maryland.

Table 2: Funding Employment & Training Programs

TANF	States may use TANF funds to support child support-led employment programs created by their state child support agencies or allow parents to participate in existing TANF funded programs.
SNAP E&T	Parents and caregivers receiving SNAP may participate in SNAP Employment & Training (E&T) services , typically funded with SNAP 50/50 reimbursement funds. 50/50 funds can also be used to provide supportive services such as child care.
WIOA	Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) Youth Programs can serve single parents ages 24 and under, including parents paying support (TEGL 21-16). Other WIOA programs do not prioritize single parents, but parents may be otherwise eligible. Co-enrollment in WIOA and other E&T programs ensures parents have access to all available services.
Section 1115 Waivers	Section 1115 of the Social Security Act demonstration waivers can be used to fund employment and training demonstrations or pilots. The Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) funded the National Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration Program Grants (CSPED) .
Child Support Incentive Payments	State child support agencies may request to use incentive payments to fund child support-led employment programs for parents paying support. Section 458(f) of the Social Security Act allows states to use their incentive payments for any activity approved by the secretary.
CSBG	Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) can be used to provide services and activities addressing employment, education, better use of available income, housing, nutrition, emergency services and/or health.

Increasing Access to Supports

In pursuit of a comprehensive no-wrong-door policy, many economic support systems have created referral networks across programs. In some instances, child support programs have not been included in the design and implementation of such networks. Yet, there is value in ensuring parents and caregivers engaging with child support are well connected to the suite of eligible services and supports to promote strong parenting, economic growth and child well-being. Child support programs can serve as another entry point for clients in a robust referral network. For example, Rhode Island's [Project Restore](#) provides intake referral services to parents who pay child support and experienced a job loss. Parents are connected to services and programs such as SNAP, housing, job training resources, and parenting classes.

Additionally, the one-stop shop model convenes multiple providers under one roof, physically or digitally, to increase access to vital services. One-stop shops can increase a participant's awareness of the variety of services available to them and make cross-agency referrals easier to initiate and complete. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (ECBI) Public Health & Human Services agency has established a one-stop shop in their community in western North Carolina, bringing together TANF, SNAP, child support, public health, and workforce development, among other services. For ECBI, working relationships across program staff under one roof facilitates connections supporting a whole family approach.

Referral networks and one-stop shops rely upon building working relationships and functional data sharing. TWG members noted that in response to COVID-19 the use of virtual platforms also promoted opportunities for cross-agency teams to convene and for participants to interact with program staff. Virtual platforms can serve as a significant tool for information sharing across program staff and between staff and participants.

Family First Distribution

When child support is paid on behalf of a child receiving TANF cash assistance, states may opt to partially or fully pass through child support payments directly to the family. This practice is also known as “family first distribution.” Otherwise, child support payments in these circumstances are retained by the state to recoup the cost of public assistance first before any child support is distributed to the family. Regardless of the amount passed through or distributed to families first, states are still responsible for paying the “federal share” – the amount of collections owed to the federal government – for amounts distributed first to a family over \$100 for families with one child or \$200 for families with two or more children.¹⁴ While not all states have the budgetary means or political landscape to create or expand family first distribution policies in child support programs, it is worth considering since research supports that receiving child support funds tends to result in reduced childhood poverty, improved educational and behavioral outcomes, and overall family well-being.¹⁵

States and federal partners should continue exploring the impact of family first distribution for families currently and formerly receiving TANF cash assistance, especially as many states shift policies embracing family first distribution. In 2015, Colorado became the first state to enact a full child support family first distribution, ensuring that 100% of child support collected on behalf of families receiving TANF goes directly to the family and is disregarded from income for eligibility purposes.¹⁶ About half of all states have implemented some form of family first distribution and disregard policy to ensure more funds end up directly in the hands of families that need them.¹⁷

Child Support Orders and Debt Compromise

Participants in the Technical Working Group identified right-sizing child support orders and debt compromise policies as potential areas for further exploration to ensure parents paying support are not put at risk of becoming low-income or driven further into poverty. A 2019 evaluation of a pilot program in San Francisco showed that reducing state-owed debt to zero resulted in parents paying more consistently and on time, a reduction in barriers to employment, and improved relationships among the parent paying support, the coparent, and the child¹⁸. Additionally, research suggests that modifying or suspending child support orders for parents who are incarcerated can result in less debt accrual and more consistent child support payments after leaving incarceration¹⁹. While parents paying support who are incarcerated are just one specific population, there is great potential and multiple examples of child support agencies and criminal justice organizations working together with parents to establish financial stability. Similarly, [research compiled by OCSS in August 2022](#) outlines several debt compromise strategies states can implement to reduce hardship for families.



10 Adapt to Changing Family Circumstances

As a family establishes the foundations of economic stability, the income of parents and caregivers may rise and create greater opportunities for families to achieve their long-term goals. Economic supports must remain adaptable and adjust the available support according to a family's changing circumstances. Participants at the Family Economic Mobility Summit, however, expressed frustration when discussing navigating program rules and changing benefit levels as their personal family situations evolved. Participants expressed confusion with how program requirements are structured and how programs are not always responsive to swiftly changing family circumstances.

Addressing Benefits Cliff

Participants at the Family Economic Mobility Summit called upon program and service leaders to work together to understand and communicate to families the net effect of overlapping policies on their individual family's situation, and particularly advancement along career pathways. Without this type of cross-collaborative work and communication, families may experience unexpected, sudden drops in services, such as food assistance, that can derail a parent or caregiver's progress. Benefits calculators and assessment tools, such as the Atlanta Federal Reserve's [Career Ladder Identifier and Financial Forecaster \(CLIFF\)](#) and the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) [Basic Needs Budget Calculator](#), can help families understand and plan for changing circumstances with case managers and front-line staff, in addition to fostering understanding of the impacts of cliffs on families to build effective off-ramps at a systems level that account for changes in income, time-limited benefits, and career advancement.

11 Conclusion

Through meaningful partnerships with community and families, leaders across family serving systems have the ability to coordinate policy, practice, and system design in ways that foster a shared commitment to social, emotional, and physical well-being for families. APHSA and its partners will continue to bring these critical conversations to our members to build off the incredible work being done and to influence modern policy and practice, build the sector's capacity, and connect agency leaders across programs to maximize impact on the children and families in our communities.

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