



Aligning for Prevention

Serving Young Families Better

By Meg Dygert and Mary Nelson



Millions of children in the United States live with parents aged 18–24. These young parents, jointly navigating adulthood and parenthood, face such challenges as disruption in education, unemployment, housing instability, and lack of access to quality child care. Despite these obstacles, young families are incredibly resilient. Young parents experience critical phases of development as new parents and adolescents grow alongside their children, who are also in an important phase of early-childhood development. Investing in young families during this critical time frame is a chance to maximize on two windows of opportunity, supporting parents and children in developing physical, social, emotional, and economic well-being.

Through the American Public Human Services Association's (APHSA) System Alignment for Young Families (SAYF) Learning Academy, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, six state and local cross-system human services teams, including young parent leaders, are targeting system alignment strategies to break down silos and establish human services systems that work with and for young families. Using APHSA's *Working Together—A Roadmap to Human Services System Alignment for Young Families*¹ each state and local team is working to create a System Alignment Plan that identifies systematic service gaps and establishes concrete action steps to close them.

The SAYF Learning Academy has focused primarily on deliberate planning and communication with parents and human services leaders across programs and funding streams to identify practice shifts and long-term tactical planning. Emerging projects include establishing state-level young parent advisory committees to review policies impacting young families; implementing system-wide, county-level assessments to better identify and coordinate services for young

families; and cross-training of front-line staff to inform case management and system navigation for young parents. Throughout the process, however, clear policy questions have also emerged that impact young parents and their children.

Examining policy levers that can be pulled alongside practice changes can serve to enhance cross-system efforts to support young families and ultimately prevent deeper system involvement. The emerging insights from the SAYF Learning Academy adds to the extensive body of work² focusing on better supporting young families.

Human Services Must Support All Parents' Ability as Caregivers

Young families are incredibly diverse, in varied housing arrangements and relationships. Yet, research supports that whatever the home arrangement, engagement with all caregivers promotes children's social, emotional, and physical development.³

■ **Incentivize participation of non-custodial parents in education, work activities, and supportive services that promote long-term family economic mobility.** Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training (E&T),⁴ Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF),⁵ and Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act funds can be used for high-quality employment and training services targeted to parents with support orders. States can create policies to forgive child support arrears or otherwise modify child support arrangements for parents who successfully participate in such programs. For instance, the Maryland Department of Human Services' Supporting, Training, and Employing Parents (STEP Up!) program supports noncustodial parents in Baltimore City with child support cases in overcoming employment barriers. Participants who successfully complete the STEP Up! program can earn forgiveness for child support arrears owed to the State of Maryland.

■ **Consider state flexibilities in child support cooperation requirements to promote family stability.** States have flexibility to modify or remove child support collection requirements for several federally funded programs and supports. States can utilize allowable exemptions or good cause from cooperation where it would support the social, emotional, and physical well-being of the family. 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 better support young families (see Chart 1).

■ **Invest in fathers' social and economic involvement with families, particularly in programs traditionally targeting mothers.** For example, the Connecticut Department of Public Health partnered with the organization, Real Dads Forever, to promote the inclusivity of fathers in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, including adding space for fathers' names on forms and staff training on fatherhood engagement.⁶ In Georgia, the Department of Human Services' Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) Fatherhood Program provides services to help fathers paying support to achieve self-sufficiency and improve parenting skills. DCSS also strategically partners to meet the needs of fathers who are homeless veterans and/or returning citizens.

Human Services Should Align Housing Resources to Promote Family Stability

It is estimated annually that more than one million children across the United States have a young parent that has experienced homelessness. Of the unhoused population, 44 percent of young women are mothers and 18 percent of young men are fathers.⁷ Navigating parenthood during key developmental milestones for both parent and child are difficult without stable housing. Supporting young families in accessing affordable and stable housing is critical to



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Chart 1: State Flexibilities for Child Support

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

- State option to require custodial and noncustodial parents to participate in paternity establishment and cooperation with child support.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Cash Assistance

- Federal law requires families receiving TANF cash assistance to cooperate with child support and paternity establishment, absent “good cause.” States have flexibility in defining “good cause.”
- States may opt to “pass through” all or some child support to the family, but may only waive a portion of the federal share.

Medicaid

- Federal law requires custodial and noncustodial parents to cooperate with paternity establishment and child support collection of medical support, absent “good cause.” Pregnant and postpartum women are exempt.

Child Care Subsidy

- State option to require custodial and noncustodial parents to participate in paternity establishment and cooperation with child support.

family well-being and preventing further, more costly, interventions downstream.

■ **Align rental assistance and local homeless services with eviction proceedings.** For example, a 2021 report by The Pittsburgh Foundation⁸ highlighted how Allegheny County, PA could provide a wrap-around, mixed delivery of homelessness prevention and mitigation services. The mixed-delivery method emphasizes the importance of utilizing community-based access points and better aligning court-based eviction diversion programs and local homeless service providers. Agencies can further support pregnant or parenting youth at risk of homelessness by increasing communication between housing agencies and court systems to coordinate and craft policies that delay evictions in favor of deploying preventive services before evictions become a reality.

■ **Identify young families as a special population to keep the whole family together and prioritize their needs.** While there is a robust system aimed to eliminate homelessness, services often focus on housing mother and child, excluding co-parents. Additionally, availability of services can be dependent on if the parent is identified

as an “adult” or “youth,” causing confusion and forcing families into systems that do not meet the unique needs of pregnant or parenting youth. Local jurisdictions can list young families as a special population within their Continuum of Care Coordinated Community Plan and identify population-based needs, service gaps, and benchmarks for pregnant and parenting youth populations. For example, both King County, WA, and the Santa Cruz County, CA, Youth Homelessness Demonstration Program Coordinated Community Plan identify young parents as a special population. In doing so, these jurisdictions hold themselves accountable for serving young families and create a clear pathway for providers to serve the population more effectively.

■ **Co-locate economic and supportive services with housing agencies.** To reduce burden on young families seeking services and actualize access to the myriad programs offered within a community, agencies should coordinate to co-locate economic support services with housing and community-based agencies. For example, in Alabama, the Housing Authority of the Birmingham District partnered with

the Department of Human Resources and 30 organizations, establishing formal data-sharing agreements and a joint case management/enrollment system, to create the Campus of Hope. Campus of Hope is a one-stop shop where families can access a variety of resources throughout the community that are geared toward both parents and their children. By co-locating services, agencies reduce administrative burden for their staff while allowing for comprehensive screening, resource navigation, case management, and service delivery aimed at the needs of young families.

Human Services Can Promote Employment Opportunities that Align with Young Parents’ Goals

Young people’s employment goals and priorities reflect a growing interest in entrepreneurship and comfort with technology. Thirty-eight percent of the gig economy, including self-employment contract arrangements like Uber or Rover, is made up of young people ages 18–34.⁹ At the same time, young people are increasingly adept at using technology, a trend that will enhance opportunities for young parents in the workplace and could serve to reduce barriers to employment.¹⁰

■ **Support self-employment as a work participation option for parents.** Federal law allows for self-employment to count toward TANF work requirements. States should ensure that young parents are aware that self-employment counts toward work requirements and accurately capture hours. States also can support parents’ entrepreneurial interests by excluding business start-up loans from income determinations for TANF, child care, and other public benefits, and by providing training and education related to business ownership.¹¹ The Mississippi Community Education Center Entrepreneurship Education Program, which helps young people grow through hands-on entrepreneurship education, is an example of one such program.¹²

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■ **Support digital skills development and access to technology.**

States can ensure that young parents have access to technology, virtual services, and digital skills development that support their own and their children's digital literacy, education, and enhanced communication with their support network. SNAP E&T (through qualified participant reimbursements), TANF, Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration workforce grants, Title IV-E or IV-B funding, the Affordable Connectivity Fund, or philanthropic funds can be used to support technology purchases for parents and families participating in services. Services and programs can be tailored to emphasize virtual services and digital skills development, as is the case with United Way of Greater Austin's 2-gen young families pilot program with the Expanding Opportunities for Young Families pilot program.¹³

Building Child Well-Being Through Alignment

Childhood is a critical developmental period that determines the trajectory of a person's life and their ability to contribute to community and social well-being. For children to thrive, their parents must be given the tools to build well-being in a way that represents their unique family structures, belief systems, and cultures. By aligning services, reducing stigma, and actualizing access to resources for young families, agencies are investing in the next generation, breaking cycles of trauma that limit generational well-being and family stability. **P**

Reference Notes

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