

Working Together – A Roadmap to Human Services System Alignment for Young Families

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Foreword

In April 2021 the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) established *The System Alignment Working Group for Children & Families* with a group of dedicated human services leaders and stakeholders across sectors, including parent representatives. The Working Group was tasked with identifying strengths and barriers in our current human services systems, opportunities for better system alignment, and to lay the foundations for a framework to effective human services alignment resulting in improved outcomes for young parents and their children. Members engaged in an iterative process with monthly development sessions, interactive workshops and convenings, and providing one-on-one feedback to APHSA staff. The results of these efforts lead to the production of this roadmap designed to support human services leaders at every level to facilitate meaningful systems-level changes to better serve the children and families in their communities.

We would like to thank the Working Group for their dedication and efforts in advising this project. Without their input and support, this project could not be possible. In particular, we would like to dedicate this work to the Parent Leaders participating in the Working Group. We thank our Parent Leaders for their willingness to share their lived experience and their commitment to advocating for a better system for future parents and families.

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Introduction

Millions of children across America live with parents aged 18-24. These young parents jointly navigating adulthood and parenthood face obstacles such as disruption in education, unemployment, financial instability, lack of access to child care, and lack of parenting experience or familial supports. Despite these obstacles, young families are incredibly resilient. Young adults in critical phases of development as new parents and adolescents can grow alongside their young children, also in an important phase of early-childhood development. Investing in young families during this critical time is a chance to maximize on these windows of opportunity, supporting parents and children in developing physical, social, emotional and economic well-being to their fullest potential.

Human services organizations have a unique opportunity to disrupt intergenerational poverty by targeting the particular experiences and needs of young families served across systems. Yet, too often human services system touchpoints become hyper-focused on solving for a single issue, for a parent or a child, leaving young families with needs in multiple areas to navigate across the human services spectrum.

***Working Together – A Roadmap to Human Services System Alignment for Young Families* establishes a framework to modernize health and human services agencies, realigning siloed programs and services focused on important, but segmented, aspects of community needs.**

Programs addressing needs such as food security, economic assistance, homelessness, child welfare, child care, and workforce development can work together as components of a well-oiled machine focused on shared goals and outcomes for child and family well-being and economic mobility. In doing so, human services agencies can create an aligned system where at any given touch point the emphasis for families up-front is: “How can we help you meet your basic needs and long-term economic mobility goals?” As opposed to: “Do you qualify for this specific program?”

Strategies such as “no wrong door” approaches, human centered design, and advancement of coaching models in human services lay [an important foundation for system alignment](#). These approaches have begun to shift the narrative by creating programs and processes that focus on supporting people towards long-term outcomes over short-term fixes and integrating customer input and autonomy into program design and services. Yet, more can be done to establish robust system-level improvements that lead to inter-generational economic mobility for young parents and their children. In consultation with human services leaders and program staff, stakeholders, and young parents, APHSA identified the need for overall system-level policy and practice shifts to occur to mobilize the entire human service systems to work in concert for young families. APHSA observed the need to infuse at every level of the human services system a shared understanding of the overall structure, services, and programs that it is comprised of, aligned goals and objectives, and finally, the tools and resources to support collaborative and innovative supports for young families.

In this *Roadmap* four essential components must work in tandem to create inroads to genuine system alignment to support young families:



Key Human Services Executives & Leaders Buy-in



Cross-System Data Analysis



Cross-System Coordination & Collaboration



Develop & Deploying Supportive Tools

Each of four essential components will be expanded on in the following pages, including with examples, to show how they connect to form a solid roadmap for human services systems to establish system alignment for young families. While this Roadmap explicitly calls out young families as a target population, it also provides a framework that can be duplicated to further create system alignment for all children and families.

Know Before You Go: Working With Young Families

A foundational body of [research](#) exploring the young family population serves as a starting point for this Roadmap. Informed by this research and APHSA’s conversations with human services executives, program leaders and, most importantly, young parents themselves, several important points must be acknowledged up-front to contextualize the experiences of young families and how they are served:

- 📍 All parents and families look different. Families may include young parents, single parents, co-parents, and blended families. Diversity is a strength for our communities and young families. Thus, we must acknowledge all families and design services and supports based on their individual experiences and needs.
- 📍 Research supports that whatever their home arrangement, [engagement with fathers promotes children’s social, emotional, and physical development](#). However, there is a need for programs and services that [target the unique experiences of young fathers](#) and establish foundational support through relationship building and trust.



“ I understand why a lot of fathers avoid systems... because of the long-term effects systems have on us, especially if you’re a father of color or come from certain backgrounds... these systems don’t always necessary support you in the long-run.” – A Young Father

“ [My state] mandates that to get food assistance you would have to put your significant other on child support... so... how are you able to get food assistance without creating tension in your household?” – A Young Mother

- 📍 Being a young parent comes with many opportunities and benefits, such as capitalizing on [“two open windows”](#) of brain development where young parents experience developmental phases as new parents and adolescents alongside their children in early childhood development. Additionally, parents may experience youthful energy around their children, and children may enjoy otherwise impossible inter-generational relationships with grand or great-grand relatives. We must acknowledge young families’ strengths and treat them with dignity and respect.

“

I had my first child at 18 years old... It was tough to maneuver, but... there was something in me that developed immediately. The moment that my son was born, there was something that immediately kicked in... and this thing in me made me more coherent in the treatment of my son... I felt like a father...” – *A Young Father*



Help for young parents must come sooner, even before children are born. Support needs to be available before there is an issue and must be comprehensive such that parents can effectively navigate complex systems. Furthermore, young families need to know that it's okay to ask for help — everyone experiences rainy days, and everyone should feel comfortable seeking help during those time.

I didn't know about a lot of the resources that were available... I found out later on that there were all these resources that were available...” – *A Young Mother*

”



Parents are the experts in their own lives, and as such need clear pathways to achieve the goals *they set* for themselves and their children. How we support young families must be informed by input from young people on their families' needs and goals. Finally, young parents must also be adequately compensated for their time providing constituent feedback or leadership.



Parent and child mental health must be prioritized for young families. Young families have a [higher need for mental health services and supports](#). Families' access to mental health services is [impacted by](#) their access to insurance, employment, and other basic assistance.

“

If I'm going in for Medicaid or food stamps, is there some kind of resources that someone can provide me to help manage mental health?... I question, 'Am a good mom because I battle with depression sometimes?...'” – *A Young Mother*



Young parents must have meaningful access to educational and work opportunities. Black and Latinx young parents [have higher wage gains by age 30](#) when they combine work and education, and overall many [young parents combine work and education](#). Yet, they also experience high instance of joblessness and education lapses, often due to child care needs. We must acknowledge and support young parents filling multiple roles as students, workers, and parents.



They won't give you childcare because you make too much money, but you need to give your kids a place to go to make that money..." – *A Young Mother*



Children of young parents also need access to quality child care and development opportunities. About [two thirds of young parents work or attend school outside of traditional hours](#) and a third of those families utilize informal or relative care. While informal options can be an important stopgap for families, high-quality child care helps children develop important learning competencies such as focus, self-regulation, memory, flexibility, motivation, as well as social and emotional skills. Research shows that quality child care in the [first three years of a child's life](#) is critical to their life-time learning and economic mobility.



For every \$1 invested in young children and families through high quality programs like child care, home visiting programs and nutrition programs, [between \\$7 and \\$12 are saved in future interventions like child welfare involvement](#).



Young parents often interact with legal systems regarding matters such as child support, custody, child welfare involvement, and program eligibility determinations. Parents need support and resources to understand how to navigate these systems, their rights and responsibilities, and to be empowered to self-advocate.



I would like to see more support when it comes to the judicial or legal aspect of child services. So, how to prepare a parent – weather it's the father or the mother – for a custody hearing or a child support hearing, so they aren't so shocked by what the policies or the laws are."

– *A Young Mother*

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It doesn't matter how many people you have to hire... you need to have people who are dedicated to the families. Lighten the caseload so that people can focus more on certain family groups and effect real change" – *A Young Parent*



Buy-in From Key Human Services Leaders and Executives

What? Key leadership, including health and human services executives, deputies, and program leaders, acknowledge and understand the young families as a distinct population, believe that strategic system alignment can lead to improved outcomes for young families, and invest resources in further understanding and improving services for the young family population in their jurisdiction.

Why? With key leadership buy-in:

- ▼ Agency priorities are set that advance the work of system alignment for young families and set the stage for lasting change;
- ▼ Appropriate resources are allocated for programs and staff to accomplish the work, including budgeting for additional staff, investments in technology, data and evaluation, and training;
- ▼ Creates a mechanism for accountability in program leaders and staff down-stream for setting and accomplishing goals;
- ▼ Empowers program leaders and staff downstream to take action.

How? Tools and resources to get there:

- ▼ Easily digestible educational resources that expand on the needs of young parents;
- ▼ Model frameworks for decision making regarding programs and services for young families;
- ▼ Policy tools – like poverty simulators, specifically those that focus on an agency's specific jurisdiction;
- ▼ Cross-system data analysis to inform leadership decision and further develop buy-in;
- ▼ State and local level inter-disciplinary meetings – especially where leadership is split across several agencies;
- ▼ Regional and national learning communities that connect these leaders across jurisdictions and disciplines for peer-to-peer learning/education.

Practical Examples



IOWA — In early 2020 the Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH) and the Iowa Department of Human Services (DHS) [began efforts to align their programs](#), services and operations in order to better serve the health and human services needs of their communities. By completing an IA Health and Human Services Alignment Assessment, DHS and IDSP will work to identify opportunities both within and across agencies to identify shared goals, improve service delivery, establish a “no wrong door” policy, and improve technology systems and administrative processes. The initiative is bolstered by the support of Iowa’s Governor Kim Reynolds, stating, “This is an opportunity to increase cooperation and collaboration between these two agencies to better serve Iowans...”, as well as the support and leadership of DHS Director Kelly Garcia. Although still at its beginning stages, Iowa’s system alignment initiative is an example of how the support of leadership and allocation of resources can serve as a catalyst for system alignment work.



OKLAHOMA — In establishing the Oklahoma Department of Human Services “[True North](#)” strategy, Director Justin Brown [had a goal](#) to shift the agency to an innovative, upstream and trauma informed approach. Under Director Brown’s leadership and informed by agency data and inputs from staff, including at the county-level, OKDHS produced “True North” goals, a set of priorities to guide the work of the agency in order to focus resources and improve collaboration and communication with stakeholders. Each of OKDHS’s divisions has approximately three to five focused True North goals in addition to nine agency-wide True North goals. Director Brown also consulted with university researchers on trauma informed approaches for staff and clients and intentionally seeks both internal and public feedback. The agency’s True North goals have led to innovative partnerships that support young families, such as [Community Hope Centers](#), developed in the wake of the pandemic to provide school aged children of working parents with a safe place to learn. The Centers provide meals and snacks to children, professional mental health services, and support parents in enrolling in supportive programs including SNAP food assistance, home energy assistance and workforce programs.



MASSACHUSETTS — In 2018 Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA), in collaboration with the Executive Office of Education, the Executive Office of Technology Services and Security, and the Governor’s Strategic Innovation Department, began to focus on their Young Parent Program (YPP) as part of an initiative to advance 2Gen approaches. In 2018 YPP [went through a reprocurement](#), the first in ten years, and made several changes to re-focus the program on family success. Particularly, the program now serves custodial and non-custodial parents, expanded education services to include attainment of post-secondary education, and imposed contract requirements on providers to establish partnerships with other organizations to provide community resources for parents, children and the whole family.



OHIO — Franklin County, Ohio’s novel [Family Stabilization Unit \(FSU\)](#), a two year pilot program establishing a unit to collaborate with all health and human services agencies to provide wraparound services to families and assists them in successfully navigating the human services system. Longer-term the unit hopes to influence policies that present barriers to family success. The program includes centralized case management, specially developed staff training, a customize case management database and assessments, and individualized goal plans for families to reach self-sufficiency. The FSU was established through the leadership of Franklin County Department of Job and Family Services Director Joy Bivens, bringing the proposal before the Franklin Board of County Commissioner in June 2020. Yet, even before the FSU was conceived, the Commissioners laid the foundation with the [Franklin County Rise Together Blueprint](#). Established by the Commissioners, guided by a steering committee of community leaders, data analysis and research, and community interviews and focus groups, the report underscored the need to improve economic mobility, family stability and equal access to opportunities for Franklin County residents. Based on this initiative, the Commissioners committed to dedicating resources, staffing and continued community engagement to implementing solutions that work. The FSU was directly conceived out of this effort.



[As a part of my school organization] we were able to conduct multiple different focus groups that identify [parent’s needs and using] data analytics as well...[The parents] wanted to let us know what they’re going through and to continue speaking.” – A Young Parent



Cross-System Data Analysis

What?

Cross-system data analysis is an understanding of how young families utilize programs and services across systems. Particularly, understanding where programs and services are serving the same families, either concurrently or at different points in time. Cross-system data analysis must include not only quantitative data around utilization and outcomes, but also qualitative data, including stakeholder input and engagement. Moreover, it is important to understand not only where families are utilizing services or programs, but also where eligible families are not utilizing services or programs and understanding why.

Why?

Cross-system data analysis allows human services to:

- ▼ Better understand the needs of young parents and their children by identifying which systems and programs they are touching and how frequently.
- ▼ Better understand through longitudinal data if young families are achieving economic mobility.
- ▼ Identify where system structures and misalignments create service gaps, barriers for young families and opportunities to improve young families’ experiences. This, in-turn, will drive leadership buy-in.
- ▼ Collect data directly from young families on their needs and goals to inform service design and delivery.
- ▼ Confirm or dispel assumptions about young families with sound data, evidence, and constituent feedback.

How?

Tools and resources to get there:

- ▼ Local constituent feedback and input—constituent surveys; constituent leadership opportunities;
 - ▼ Integrate young people into the design of programs.
- ▼ Data collection disaggregated for young families and their children from all systems—where possible tracking families across systems.
 - ▼ What programs or are young parents and their children accessing? Where are they engaging with multiple programs at once? At different points in time?
 - ▼ What programs are young parents and their children not accessing, but are eligible for?
- ▼ Collect longitudinal data to identify long-term outcomes for young families that indicate economic mobility.
- ▼ Analysis of data to identify gaps in services; duplications; and opportunities to improve user experience.
- ▼ Develop dashboards that allows for easily digestible information for practitioners and policy makers.

Practical Examples



GEORGIA — During the pandemic Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DCFS) conducted virtual focus groups with young parents transitioning from foster care. DCFS used young-parent facilitators and incorporated front-line staff working directly with parents in the planning, creating a pathway to deep and meaningful feedback from the young parent participants. DCFS is also working to develop a data roadmap outlining priority outputs and outcomes that can be used to inform service delivery and improve the transition from foster care for young parents.



KENTUCKY — In on-going efforts to establish a continuum of care for young parents in the Department for Community Based Services (DCBS), Kentucky Works Program (KWP), DCBS established a collaboration with the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS) to connect program activities to long-term education and workforce outcomes data. Additionally, DCBS issued a state-wide survey to frontline staff working with young parents as well as regional focus groups. Using a data driven approach, DCBS is continuing to work towards programming centered on long-term family outcomes, building capacity for staff at all levels to access, manage and use data that measures long-term outcomes for young families, and integrating staff and participant feedback into program and policy decisions that enable meaningful engagement with families. DCBS is also considering bolstering these efforts by advancing strategic partnerships and building complementary program requirements into contracting.



WASHINGTON DC — In 2016 DC [formed a Working Group](#), including eleven TANF customers and other stakeholders, to make recommendations on DC's hardship extension policy. The Working group leveraged feedback from the 2016 Family by Family Survey of customers receiving TANF longer than 48 months, in addition to utilizing existing information from the Customer Assessment, Tracking and Case History (CATCH) Database (DHS's TANF customer information management system), and TANF Comprehensive Assessment (TCA) findings. Although this particular example is not of cross-system data analysis, it does show the breadth of data sources that can be utilized to inform decision making. Ultimately this committee's recommendation and further data analysis did drive a redesign of the TANF program prioritizing 2Gen approaches and has informed development of programs like the proposed [Mobility Action Plan pilot \(MAP\)](#). If approved, MAP will support 300 families experiencing homelessness to identify and map potential benefits cliffs, focus on career pathways for parents, coordinate planning across the programs and services the families receive, and augment assistance to mitigate cliffs.



FLORIDA — [Florida's State Advisory Council \(SAC\)](#) for the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five developed a unified Early Childhood Strategic Plan in 2019. Integration of human services programs, including WIC, SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and the workforce development system, is established as a priority throughout. However, the need for data system coordination is especially highlighted. A partnership with the University of Florida the Office of Early Learning (OEL) at the Florida Department of Education (DOE) establishes a foundation for cross-system data analysis with the Florida Early Care and Education Needs Assessment (ECENA) data dashboard, including data from DOE, the Florida Department of Health, the Agency for Health Care Administration, the American Community Survey from the US Census Bureau, and the Environmental Sciences Research Institute. Aggregated by zip code, the dashboard reports on early childhood socio-demographic characteristics, health and safety risk factors, and educational attainment. Similarly, the Early Childhood Data Repository includes child and family-level data from programs that support family self-sufficiency and positive child developmental outcomes. In 2019 most major state agencies and programs committed to continuing to provide child and family data to the repository to better track child and family outcomes and improve programs and services. Cross-system dashboards and data collectives like these examples can serve as a solid starting point for drilling down on data regarding young families to inform program planning and collaboration.



[Seeking assistance should be] something that's a little more personalized. I think that with it being more personalized it makes the parent or the person seeking assistance more confident in being successful.” – A Young Parent



Cross-System Coordination & Collaboration

What?

Equipped with the support of leadership and information from data collection – leaders across programs bring staff together to lay the groundwork through collaboration and coordination to effectuate organization, establish shared goals and strategize in support of young families. Cross-system coordination and collaboration is truly about bringing staff together across departments, programs and services to begin to communicate and learn from one another. In doing so, natural relationships will form that cultivate innovation, partnering to support shared customers, and awareness of ways to leverage each other as resources and programs to fully meet the needs of young parents and their children.

Why?

Cross-System coordination and collaboration allows agencies to:

- ▼ Involve and create leadership at every level, leading to effective organizational change.
- ▼ Enable staff across agencies and programs to establish an aligned set of goals and outcomes together.
- ▼ Develop understanding and awareness at every level of:
 - ▼ Programs and services available to young families across the human services system;
 - ▼ The various federal and state funding streams input into programs and how they could be braided and blended;
 - ▼ Meaningful contact points and mechanisms for communication and relationship building across programs and agencies.
- ▼ Engage in strategic planning across systems to develop and deploy.
- ▼ Empower staff on the front-line to think critically about serving young families.

How?

Tools and resources to get there:

- ▼ Interdisciplinary committees, that include young parents, front-line staff, and other key stakeholders (education, workforce, etc.) engage in innovation and strategic planning.
 - ▼ Parents should be adequately compensated for their time.
 - ▼ Conscientious planning to include representation from marginalized communities and all human services programs and departments.
 - ▼ Planning should be informed by data and evidence (see above).
 - ▼ Identify and prioritize development of supports where there are gaps in services for young families.
- ▼ Resource mapping of current state and federal funding streams and identified current or future opportunities to braid and blend.

- ▼ Regularly updated training and educational resources for staff on human services programs and services throughout the system, including eligibility requirements, application processes:
 - ▼ Recurring staff trainings.
 - ▼ Networking opportunities.
 - ▼ Printed materials.
- ▼ Co-location of staff and program offices.
- ▼ Establish staff positions within programs to solely focus on identifying ways to align systems – for example several states have 2Gen Officers.
- ▼ Develop a plan to clearly and consistently communicate information on initiatives across staff at all levels and all programs/departments.

Practical Examples



SOUTH CAROLINA — The South Carolina [Early Childhood Advisory Council \(ECAC\)](#) is a collaborative body representing eight state agencies and government entities providing state and federally funded services to young children. The ECAC, a statutorily established body, is leveraged by South Carolina’s early childhood system to drive collaboration on inter-agency projects that support early childhood and family development. In collaboration with its partners, the ECAC [established a map representing the flow of state and federal dollars](#) into the early childhood system, organized by the receiving agency. This system funding map is used not only by system leaders to better understand the existing flow of funding and opportunities to braid and blend funding, but also as a resource to law and policy makers attempting to understand the landscape of the early childhood system. While this initiative specifically supports early childhood programs, similar mapping could be done to understand the full spectrum of programs and services, and the funding streams that support young parents and their children.



KANSAS — In Kansas, the State Department of Children and Families (DCF) launched a “Get To Know Your DCF” lunch and learn initiative. Spearheaded by Regional and Assistant Regional Directors, each program administrator within DCF was asked to put together presentations, including contact information, descriptions of their programs and services, and supplemental material. Several presentations were held to accommodate all staff in the department, and all staff were required to attend at least one presentation. The results led to a greater awareness among all staff of not only the spectrum of services and programs within the department, but also the ability to better identify shared service populations. Anecdotally, staff members report actively reaching out to agency counterparts to establish relationships across programs and coordinate services and planning where there are shared customers. Additionally, DCF expanded the initiative to include presentations to community partners resulting in greater awareness of the programs and services DCF offers and encouraging strategic partnerships.



TWO-GEN COORDINATORS — [Several states](#), including Colorado, Tennessee, Maryland, Washington, Connecticut, and Hawaii, have established specific positions to support development of a 2Gen approach within state systems. Within their role 2Gen Coordinators work across programs to build relationships, optimize and link funding streams, and establish a model for 2Gen approaches across services and programs.



ILLINOIS — Effective coordination and collaboration that supports young families should also integrate community partners and systems that young families utilize outside of human services. A prominent example of this is collaborations between Head Start programs and community colleges. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research [highlights the potential impact of such partnerships](#), and in particular give examples of a partnership between Truman College and Chicago Commons, a head start grantee. Chicago commons offers high quality child care, parental supports, and other services such as digital literacy. At the same time, parents attend classes at Truman College and receive tuition assistance. Partnerships like this can be cultivated by human services agencies to support young parents who are also students.



I went to one person in my school, on my campus, who had access to all of these systems and she was able to get me the help in everything... ‘Do you need food stamps? Do you have a phone services? Look, I have free internet for your kids to go to school...’ All those things were available by having one person...” – A Young Parent



Develop and Deploy Tools and Strategies

What?

With leadership support, informed by data and evidence, and robust planning, agencies can begin to design and deploy tools and strategies that change the way human services systems interact with young parents and their children. Tools and strategies can take on many different forms, but ultimately, they will translate into a seamless system of service delivery for young parents and their children. These could be written materials that inform parents of available resources; technology tools such as combined customer dashboards or apps that help parents identify availability, apply for and track benefits and services; or actual human supports such as parent navigators, case managers or coaches that assist parents in smoothly navigating the human services system to meet their needs.

Why?

When tools and strategies are specifically designed and deployed with young families in mind:

- ▼ Young parents and their children begin to see human services as a supportive network, rather than a set of disconnected programs and services;
- ▼ Young parents and their children experience a seamless system of service delivery;
- ▼ Increased access to meaningful services that allow young parents and their children to achieve their goals;
- ▼ Overall, outcomes are improved for young families because of improved service delivery and access to programs.

How?

Tools and resources to get there:

- ▼ Establish a no-wrong door approach for young families including:
 - ▼ Processes teaming across systems when families are identified as touching multiple programs/services;
 - ▼ Formal MOUs; information sharing agreements.
 - ▼ Comprehensive case management models that emphasize human centered design.
 - ▼ Protocols at any entry-point to identify programs and services young families are eligible for and referral/warm hand-off procedures.

- ▼ Leverage technology and update data information systems to support ease of access to information for young families. Examples include:
 - ▼ Aligning information systems for ease of data sharing and cross-system referrals;
 - ▼ Build in procedures to inform parents of how their data is being used and shared to establish trust.
 - ▼ Creating combined applications accessible online or through app-based services.
 - ▼ Create universal call-centers and chat apps.
- ▼ Invest in staffing resources to support young parents in navigating the human services system, such as parent navigators, coaches, or peer mentors;
- ▼ Invest in communications and information sharing tools to inform young parents of comprehensive resources available and how to access them;
 - ▼ Public facing online search tools or comprehensive directories; social media communications; print materials; apps.
 - ▼ Consult young parents on language as well as where to post or deploy information.

Practical Examples



KANSAS — Kansas State Department of Children and Families (DCF) initially established staff positions of Regional Resource Coordinators, filling the role of engaging with community organizations, services and other resources to establish strategic partnerships and share pertinent information with Employment Services staff regarding available resources and opportunities. Regional Resource Coordinators also cross pollinate resources sharing across departments where relevant. Based on the success of this initiative, DCF established the role of Regional Resource Agents. Used in four major jurisdictions, including Topeka, Kansas City, Wichita, and Emporia, Regional Resource Agents serve as a welcoming presence in the lobbies of DCF agency buildings. Regional Resource Agents have a goal to ensure anyone entering the building is supported, served, and leaves with meaningful access to a service or support that meets the person’s need. When approaching individuals, Resource Agents can provide needs assessments, discuss all available resources and eligibility criteria, prepare individuals who have come to the building for a specific activity, and facilitate warm hand-offs to program or service leads. In many regards, this approach not only allows for holistic services, but also increases the capacity of staff working on specific programs or services by creating a landing strip of sorts for individuals and families seeking services. By the time families reach the individual programs, they have already had their overall needs assessed and been given the information and resources to support successful access to necessary services, programs and supports. This kind of service can be particularly impactful for young families attempting to find services for parents and children and learning how to navigate systems.



OKLAHOMA — Oklahoma Human Services (OKDHS) created the [ECC Connect app](#) to establish an easier way for parents with children in subsidized child care to check their children in and out of child care without the use of a benefits card. The time and attendance app reduces wait time in providers’ businesses, gives parents fewer cards to carry and offers a faster process for parents and providers. Establishing easy to use technology tools can be appealing to young parents, particularly those that use phones as multifunctional technology and communication tools. Establishing apps that integrate multiple program functions, including applications, ability to check benefits status, search for resources or providers, communicate with case managers, schedule appointments, and deliver documents can establish a one-stop resource that facilitates ease of access to services.



KENTUCKY & OREGON — Kentucky and Oregon have both established online portals for individuals and families to access resources in one central place. [Kynect](#), Kentucky’s online service portal allows individuals and families to pre-screen for eligibility and apply for SNAP, Medicaid, Child Care Assistance Program, TANF cash assistance and other programs and services all in one place. Kynect also offers a range of resource information on services including housing assistance, child care, unemployment assistance, and many others. The portal uses inviting graphics of people and families and informational videos to explain available services and direct users seamlessly through the portal.

In 2015 Oregon began the [ONE Project](#) to unify the eligibility process for SNAP, TANF, employment related daycare, medical assistance and other programs. In part, this effort was started because 65% of the people served by the Oregon Department of Human Services are served by multiple programs, and a unified process would translate to less applications and reporting requirements for individuals and families.



VIRGINIA — Virginia’s Department of Social Services (DSS) are offering opportunities to youth in foster care and formerly in foster care to consult on communications. Youth write language for social media posts and other communication and are consulted on graphics and posting locations. The initiative not only allows for consumer input on how language is crafted and interpreted by the intended audience, but also incorporates youth in a meaningful way that shows their input is valued and trusted. DSS has also been thinking critically about where best to deploy information regarding services and supports that reach the community, including social media platforms, at sports games, community centers, and other community events. Incorporating young parents in the development and deployment of communication can ensure that more parents receive quality information on available supports and services in ways that resonate with them.

Conclusion: The On-Ramp To System Alignment

Program and system alignment will not happen overnight, it will take time and investments. However, state and local agencies can start by making a few key investments at a time, setting the stage for long-term transformation. Included in this section are a few suggested starting points for human services agencies interested in advancing system alignment for young families. Individual state and local agencies will establish their own unique pathway to system alignment, but these suggestions can serve as inspiration for beginning the journey.

Lead with Equity and Inclusion

Assess the historic and current drivers of health and social inequalities through stakeholder engagement and data analysis to inform a system alignment plan that targets and reduce those inequalities for young families.

Convene Key Leadership

To advance system alignment agencies need key leaders to be firm in their commitments and active agents of the change. Key leaders can be convened early and often to lead the work and manage any barriers that might arise. Leadership buy in sets the agency culture and will help ensure that staff feel supported and equally committed to making the change.

Conduct Stakeholder Mapping

Stakeholder engagement is a critical step to aligning systems to better serve young families. Agencies can first identify key stakeholders, including community organizations, current and former young family constituents, providers, staff at all levels, and other relevant stakeholders. Once key stakeholders are identified, agencies can begin to plan an engagement strategy that integrates stakeholder input and guidance in programmatic and policy efforts impacting young families.

Begin Program/Funding Mapping

Understanding funding streams at an agency and program level can lead to more effective braiding and blending of funds. A good first step is to simply map family-serving programs and services young families are likely to engage in. From there agency leaders can work together to map funding streams, explore innovative uses of funding streams, and identify new opportunities for funding.

Create a Strategy to Identify Shared Cross-agency Populations

Identifying shared service populations supports the ability to streamline and improve service delivery for young families. Creating cross-agency data sharing agreements and matching family data across programs and services, targeting both parent and child services, can support this. However, a good first step can also be assessing eligibility criteria across programs to identify where cross-over may be likely.

Leverage Federal and National Partners

States and localities can seek partnerships with the federal government and work in tandem to create a better more aligned system. National and regional organizations can also be instrumental in providing funding, technical assistance and resources, in addition to supporting a national narrative that advances system alignment in other states and services to families.

