

Advancing Family Economic Mobility: Initiative Overview and Lessons Learned

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Overview

The human services sector faces significant challenges in addressing the persistent economic disparities and structural barriers that hinder families' ability to achieve financial stability and upward mobility. Agencies are often tasked with navigating complex systems, limited resources, and growing demand for services, all while seeking innovative ways to support long-term well-being for families and communities. However, within these challenges lie opportunities to develop more a more effective, holistic, and equitable human services ecosystem. By fostering collaboration, leveraging data-driven strategies, and focusing on sustainable, community-based approaches, human services organizations can drive meaningful change.

Advancing Family Economic Mobility (AFEM) was an initiative committed to creating sustainable pathways to economic mobility and well-being for all people and families. Funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Doris Duke Foundation and administered by the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) in collaboration with the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Office of Regional Operations, the AFEM network fostered new approaches to improving long-term, systemic economic mobility at all levels. Taken together, these strategies provide a national model that other state and local agencies across the country can adopt in their own practice to improve outcomes for all people and families in the United States. To achieve this, it undertook a three-pronged approach to build a vetted repository of reproducible strategies and resources to share with agencies throughout the United States. The three prongs included a National Ecosystem, National and Regional Peer Learning Communities, and Place-Based Work in Mississippi.



The Three-Pronged Approach

AFEM utilized a comprehensive three-pronged approach to foster systemic economic mobility for families across the United States. This approach facilitated open, ongoing dialogue across federal, state, and local agencies, as well as philanthropy, community-based organizations, research institutions, lived experience experts, and private sector allies. By harnessing this broad intersection of perspectives, the strategies are not only critically evaluated for feasibility on a larger scale, but also fine-tuned for coordinated, cross-sector implementation. The emphasis on collaboration across different levels of governance and sectors helps streamline efforts, enabling a cohesive approach that is built for long-term sustainability and scalable impact for families nationwide.

The first prong, the **National Ecosystem**, was guided by the National Advisory Council (NAC), which shaped the initiative's overarching strategy and ensured its alignment with the needs of agencies, families, and other stakeholders. Comprised of representatives from state, regional, and federal human services agencies alongside philanthropic leaders, technical and policy experts, and individuals with lived experience, the NAC functioned as a microcosm of the human services sector. This wide-ranging council was united by a shared commitment to whole-family economic mobility. As the initiative progressed, the National Ecosystem prong scaled several strategies identified through the peer learning communities. These strategies included the use of economic and concrete supports as a prevention framework, a national scan of lived experience perspectives of human-centered agency practices and addressing of the specific needs of refugee and immigrant families through targeted discussions with agency staff. The broad scope of the National Ecosystem provided the necessary infrastructure for integrating these strategies into national discourse and practice.

The second prong is the **Peer Learning Communities**, which fostered knowledge sharing, collaboration, and innovation among human services professionals. These learning communities brought together human services agency leaders to collaboratively address common challenges, learn from policy and technical experts, and engage in specialized professional dialogue with peers from other states and counties. In addition, participants received direct technical assistance to implement family economic mobility strategies

identified by their respective teams.

AFEM supported five learning communities, including two regional learning communities in Region I and Region IV, two national learning communities, and one community for systems leaders. The regional learning communities were open to all states in their respective regions and were conducted in collaboration with the ACF Office of Regional Operations. The national learning communities were open to APHSA member agencies, who applied by submitting proposals detailing specific strategies they were pursuing to advance family economic mobility in their jurisdictions. The Systems Leaders Community invited state agency executives to address systems-level visioning and set state-level priorities in alignment with the broader national AFEM objectives. Through these structured learning environments, AFEM created a powerful mechanism for cross-state collaboration and incubating innovation, helping to accelerate the adoption of family economic strategies at both the state and national levels.

The third prong is the **Place-Based Work in Mississippi**, where localized efforts focused on addressing economic mobility at the state level, offering a replicable model for other states. The targeted approach provided a unique opportunity to move AFEM strategies from theory to practice, enabling an in-depth exploration of the key components required for successful state-wide systems change.

To accomplish this, the AFEM team in Mississippi focused on several core initiatives. These included advancing professional development within the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) and establishing the Mississippi Action Learning Network (MALN)—a peer-to-peer partnership network of state leaders committed to improving economic mobility, and expanding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) partnerships to broaden workforce opportunities. Additionally, AFEM supported the creation of the Mississippi Workforce Hub, which connected leaders across the state's workforce development system, including human services, local workforce boards, and educational institutions.

The impact of these localized efforts was further amplified through Mississippi's participation in the Region IV Human Services Workforce Learning Community, providing additional resources and insights that strengthened the place-based work. By pursuing these interconnected strategies, MDHS not only addressed immediate community needs but also created a blueprint for sustainable, scalable solutions that can be adapted and replicated nationwide.



National Ecosystem

- National Advisory Council (NAC) to formulate strategy and steer the work
- Economic and concrete supports as a prevention strategy
- Lived experience engagement
- Programming needs of refugee and immigrant communities



Peer Learning Communities

- Whole Family Approach to Jobs Region 1 Learning Community
- Human Services Workforce Region 4 Learning Community
- Systems Navigation and Alignment National Learning Community
- Preventing Family Involvement in Child Welfare Systems through Economic and Concrete Supports National Learning Community
- Systems Leaders Community



Place-Based Work

- Mississippi Department of Human Services
- Mississippi Action Learning Network
- Mississippi Workforce Hub
- SNAP E&T



Cross-Cutting Themes

Throughout the initiative, seven cross-cutting themes emerged. These themes not only contribute to sustainable economic mobility, but also contribute to long-term systems change to create more responsive and effective agency practices.

◇ Shifting Resources Upstream to Address the Root Causes of Financial Instability

This approach prioritizes early intervention by reallocating resources toward preventing instability before it leads to deeper systems involvement, such as engagement with the child welfare system. By addressing root causes, upstream efforts can mitigate destabilization before it happens, allowing families to thrive.

- **Resource Spotlight:** As part of the Preventing Family Involvement in Child Welfare Systems through Economic and Concrete Supports National Learning Community, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago developed the Evidence to Impact policy tool to present an overview of peer-reviewed research related to reducing the risk of child welfare involvement, aligned with policy options that states can leverage to move economic and concrete supports upstream.

◇ Aligning Across Systems to Create Holistic Supports

Families and individuals who are engaged with one agency often qualify for services across multiple agencies. Aligning across these systems fosters a more integrated set of supports, reducing administrative redundancies and gaps in services and offering families a more seamless interaction with agencies.

- **Resource Spotlight:** The Systems Navigation and Alignment National Learning Community highlighted eight lessons learned that spanned four diverse system alignment projects. Read more about those lessons learned in [Systems Alignment Across State Government Agencies Improving Family Economic Mobility](#).

◇ Investing in Leadership Development at State and Local Agencies

Effective leadership is essential for driving systems change within and around human services. By investing in leadership development, agency leaders are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and tools they need to navigate complex systems, champion innovative solutions, and respond proactively to changes and challenges. Empowered leaders can also drive positive culture changes within agencies, creating a healthier and more energized human services workforce environment.

- **Resource Spotlight:** Leadership development through the Systems Leaders Community gave agency executives an opportunity to generate concrete action plans to advance family economic mobility at the state level. Read more about their action steps and how leadership development fostered innovation in *Systems Leaders Advancing Family Economic Mobility: A Community for Learning and Action*.

◇ Investing in Workforce Development Opportunities

Sustainable economic mobility depends on access to high-quality, stable employment and providing individuals with the skills and training necessary to secure jobs that offer living wages and career advancement. This includes building partnerships with employers and educational institutions to ensure programs are aligned with local labor markets and outlining clear pathways to long-term success.

- **Resource Spotlight:** APHSA launched the Mississippi Workforce Hub, which brought leaders from across the state's workforce development system to co-create strategies for communication and collaboration to advance career pathways for in-demand, quality jobs for Mississippi residents. Read more about the strategies leveraged to build these partnerships in [Mississippi at Work: Enhancing Job-Seeker Success Through Collaborative Supports and Services](#).

◇ Building Partnerships Between Government, Community, and Private Sector Collaborators

Strong, well-established partnerships enable holistic improvement to the human services ecosystem by leveraging diverse strengths across agencies, organizations, and sectors. These partnerships facilitate the sharing of resources, expertise, and networks that expand the reach and impact of economic mobility efforts.

◇ Intentional Racial Equity Efforts

Addressing disparities and systemic barriers that disproportionately affect BIPOC communities is necessary for economic mobility strategies to genuinely reach all people and families. By pursuing cultural responsive services, reviewing data, and actively engaging these communities, agencies can identify solutions that work for everyone.

◇ Thoughtful Power Sharing with Lived Experience Experts

Involving people with lived experience accessing the human services system is a vital component in developing policies and practices that are grounded in the functional realities of people's lives. Engaging lived experience experts not only meaningfully informs program design and implementation but also leads to more inclusive, effective, and human-centered solutions. Furthermore, when agencies authentically engage lived experience experts, they can build trust between government agencies and communities to create more open, thriving environments.

- **Resource Spotlight:** Following a survey that asked human services agencies about initiatives that engage people with lived experience, APHSA conducted a Lived Experience National Scan (LENS), which invited people with lived experience who were participating in those initiatives to provide their accounts. The LENS produced six focus areas that provide best practices for successful engagement of people with lived experience. Read more about the LENS and the best practices in the [LENS Report](#).





National Ecosystem



The Advancing Family Economic Mobility initiative officially launched in February 2021 with the inaugural meeting of its National Advisory Council (NAC). This council was comprised of a wide-ranging group of thought partners across state and regional government, federal agencies, technical and policy experts, and philanthropic organizations. Their first task was to conduct a landscape analysis to better understand the current challenges within the human services sector that families face in achieving sustainable economic mobility and create a roadmap for the work.

The NAC identified peer learning communities, conducted concurrently with place-based work in Mississippi, as promising avenues for exploring strategies and incubating new approaches at multiple levels of influence. The peer learning communities would offer cohort learning opportunities for agencies to cross-pollinate ideas and solutions among human services professionals, while the Mississippi-based efforts would provide a tangible model for implementing strategies on the ground in a way that was responsive to localized needs.

The NAC convened quarterly throughout the project to offer ongoing guidance, share relevant resources and network connections, and elevate emerging practices from their areas of expertise. These meetings served as critical touchpoints for assessing progress, refining strategies in real time, and identifying new areas of focus for deeper examination. Over the course of these discussion, three such focus areas emerged as particularly ripe for deeper investment:

1. Economic and concrete supports as a prevention framework to address financial instability, prevent deeper systems involvement, and delink poverty from child welfare;
2. The integration of lived experience perspectives at all levels of human-centered agency practices; and
3. Targeted strategies to meet the specific needs of refugee and immigrant families, who often face unique barriers to economic mobility.

By focusing on these areas, AFEM had the opportunity to deepen the sector's understanding of the complex, intersectional needs of the communities human services seeks to support while also driving comprehensive systems change.

Economic and Concrete Supports

Following the promising data and practices elevated by the Preventing Family Involvement in Child Welfare Systems through Economic and Concrete Supports National Learning Community, APHSA expanded its partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago to deepen the exploration of the use of economic and concrete supports.

In July of 2023, APHSA launched the Economic and Concrete Supports Community of Practice (ECS CoP), a collaborative space designed to advance shared learning and provide real-time support to partners in their use of economic and concrete supports as a strategy for preventing child welfare involvement. The CoP, which convenes monthly, has over 220 participants as of fall 2024 and continues to grow. Participants come from a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including state and county human services agencies, research organizations, community-based organizations, private sector partners, nonprofit policy and technical agencies, and philanthropy. The group's shared learning and discussions generated a commitment to strengthening family economic stability, a core element of child welfare system prevention, focusing on several central topics:

- Promising models for cross-agency partnerships to support the basic needs of families at risk of child welfare involvement
- Policy options and frameworks for considering child welfare prevention in decision-making across agencies and programs
- Financing and contracting strategies that promote alternative pathways to address poverty-based child welfare risk factors
- Addressing cultural and operational differences between child welfare and economic assistance programs
- Strategies to engage community partners and people with lived experience in designing multi-system approaches to child welfare prevention
- Development of shared language and framing for normalizing multi-agency strategies for delivery of economic and concrete supports through a child welfare prevention lens

The Community of Practice continues to be a generative space for shared learning, open inquiry, and coalition building across sectors. This ongoing work is aimed at creating national systems change in the way the human services ecosystem approaches child welfare involvement.



In April of 2024 APHSA hosted, “Breaking the Link: Disrupting the Connection Between Poverty and Child Welfare,” a national convening on economic and concrete supports. 76 participants from federal, state, and county human services agencies, philanthropic foundations, research organizations, community organizations, and lived experience experts came together to share knowledge, generate policy solutions, and meet with Congressional staff to discuss federal policy opportunities.

Lived Experience Perspectives of Agency Practices

As agencies began sharing their efforts to engage people with lived experience, AFEM recognized the importance of gaining a deeper understanding of the engagement strategies and platforms in use, along with evaluating their effectiveness from the perspectives of those directly involved. To support this effort, APHSA partnered with the National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI) to assess its internal readiness and build organizational capacity for engaging people with lived experience accessing human services. This expanded capacity for lived experience engagement enabled APHSA to conduct the Lived Experience National Scan (LENS). LENS, co-created with lived experience consultants, gathered input from state and county agencies regarding their current engagement efforts and included interviews with individuals who had actively participated in those initiatives. The aim was to develop a cross-sectional understanding of best practices for meaningful engagement while identifying potential opportunities for further integration of lived experience at every level of agency operations.

LENS provided valuable insights into how agencies can effectively engage people with lived experience in ways that are impactful, authentic, and empowering. Six best practices emerged that are relevant to not only human services agencies, but entities across sectors that are interested in implementing high-quality human-centered design:

- Develop meaningful and impactful roles for people with lived experience to occupy in your agency’s modernization and strategy development
- Use multiple channels to recruit people with lived experience that represent the diversity of your communities served
- Pay your initiative participants as you would pay other consultants
- Make thoughtful accommodations to maximize access and provide resources and build capacity across your initiative participants
- Develop feedback loops to continuously listen to your initiative participants and inform them of how their contributions have led to concrete changes
- Continuously message the value and expertise of people with lived experience, and your agency’s culture will shift to integrate them across programs, operations, and strategy

To learn more about the LENS, read the full report, [Shifting Focus and Sharing Power](#).

Culturally Responsive Services for Immigrant and Refugee Families

As AFEM work progressed, it became evident that there were persistent, unaddressed needs across human services when it came to serving immigrant and refugee populations. These communities often faced a unique set of intersecting challenges in addition to the systemic barriers experienced by the broader population. Factors such as acute politicalization, legal nuances, cultural differences and language barriers, and the need for specialized case management related to immigration and refugee status all contribute to complexities that stretch human service agencies that often feel overburdened.

Recognizing the importance of addressing these needs to authentically pursue national systems change that advances family economic mobility, APHSA held a series of advisory meetings that convened state and local agencies. These meetings were meant to identify how these challenges manifest at the agency and local level and elevate potential strategies and solutions for addressing

these needs effectively. The resulting report outlined macro-environmental challenges that contribute to the unique barriers which agencies encounter in serving immigrant and refugee communities, a discussion of how to leverage program flexibilities to alleviate these challenges, and three discrete clusters of interrelated needs with promising mitigation strategies:

◇ **Cluster 1: Meeting Essential Needs**

This cluster focused on addressing the most basic, yet critical needs of immigrant and refugee families, including quality employment, safe housing, and food security. Strategies included cross-sector collaboration and information sharing, specialized case management and benefits navigation, and targeted outreach of housing and nutrition supports.

◇ **Cluster 2: Access to Education and Higher-Quality Employment**

This cluster addressed barriers to family advancement by examining the intersections between child care, transportation, workforce readiness, and language education. The report emphasized the role that access to quality training and opportunities has in reducing the risk of exploitation. It also outlined opportunities for braiding and blending funding and building community partnerships to connect families with culturally responsive supports that enable parents to establish themselves and thrive.

◇ **Cluster 3: Improving Quality of Life**

This cluster centered on overall quality of life factors, including access to medical care and mental health resources, and community factors such as socialization and safety. This nuanced cluster emphasized the importance of community-based solutions and elevated examples of successful initiatives.

To learn more about advancing economic mobility for immigrant and refugee communities, read the full report, [Supporting the Intergenerational Needs of Refugee & Immigrant Families](#).



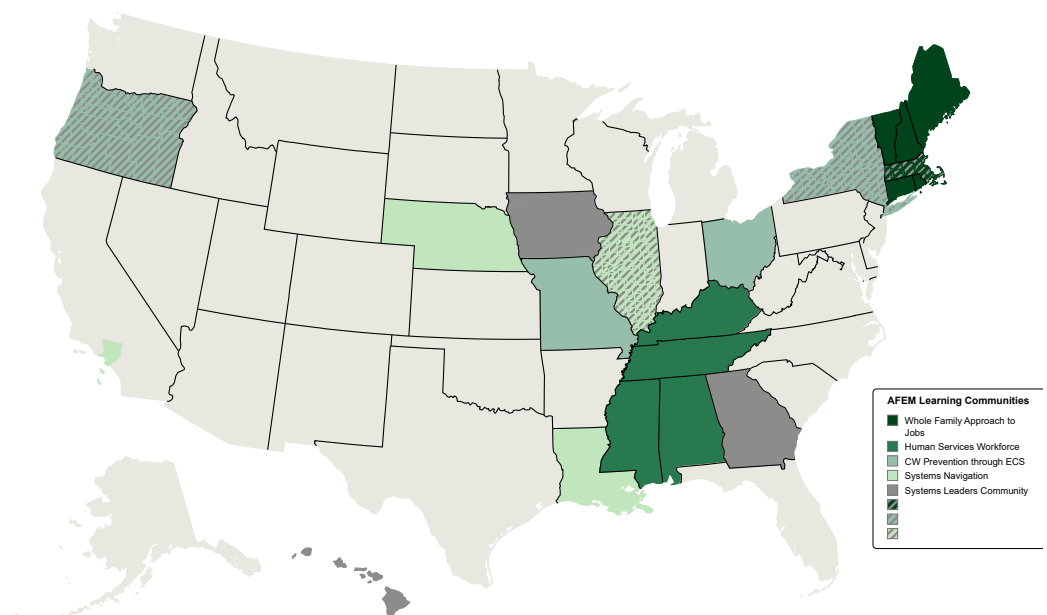
Peer Learning Communities

A core component of the AFEM initiative was the Peer Learning Communities (PLCs). The PLCs were designed to foster collaboration, innovation, and shared learning across a wide range of stakeholders in the human services sector to drive insights for national uptake. These communities provided structured space for leaders from state and local agencies and community partners to come together to explore strategies for advancing family economic mobility, reducing child welfare involvement, aligning systems to better serve families, and strengthening the human services sector. PLC participants also found the technical assistance aspect provided an opportunity to build cross-departmental and cross-agency teams that provided opportunity to step back from the minutiae of their daily activities and align efforts within their home jurisdictions. Through this initiative, 20 states and one county engaged in deep learning to address common challenges, exchange best practices, test new approaches, and build professional relationships within and between teams.

There were five distinct PLCs, including two regional and three national communities. The regional learning communities were administered in partnership with the ACF Office of Regional Operations and tailored to address specific needs within geographic areas. The Region I Whole Family Approach to Jobs learning community included states from Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont, and explored Two-generation (2Gen) strategies for advancing family economic mobility including mitigating the benefit cliff effect, engaging parents in human-centered design, and centering racial equity. The Region IV Human Services Workforce learning community sought to tackle challenges in recruiting, training, retaining, and developing the workforce to improve agency capacity and better meet the needs of their communities. By focusing regionally, these learning communities were able to identify and address broader trends and leverage local resources in a targeted, culturally responsive way.

At the national level, three PLCs were initiated by the NAC and administered by APHSA: Systems Navigation and Alignment, Preventing Family Involvement in Child Welfare Systems through Economic and Concrete Supports (often referred to as the ECS Learning Community for brevity) facilitated in partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, and the Systems Leaders Community facilitated in partnership with Ascend at the Aspen Institute. APHSA members were invited to apply for the Systems Navigation and ECS learning communities with a specific project they hoped to refine through the cohort learning model and implement with the support of technical assistance, while leaders were invited to engage with the Systems Leaders Community. By creating learning cohorts on a national scale, the participants in the national PLCs were able to contextualize their experiences and pursue systems-level solutions that addressed deeper root causes that were similar across localities.

Each PLC facilitated in-depth dialogue, provided access to technical assistance, invited technical and policy experts to share insights and advice to tackle common challenges, and met with federal agencies to coordinate efforts and share experiences from the state and local perspective. Through this collaborative and cross-sectoral approach, the PLCs played a pivotal role in driving systems change and supporting sustainable pathways for economic mobility across the country.



Whole Family Approach to Jobs Region 1 Learning Community

In partnership with the ACF Office of Regional Operations in Region 1, APHSA supported their ongoing Whole Family Approach to Jobs (WFAJ) Learning Community. Launched in 2017, the WFAJ initiative had become a longitudinal effort that unified efforts to explore whole-family, two-generation approach to improving family well-being through economic mobility. By partnering with APHSA in the AFEM initiative, the WFAJ initiative had an opportunity to expand their national reach and delve deeper into the intersectionality of their coordinated efforts. All six states in ACF Region 1 participated: Connecticut, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont. The WFAJ initiative pursued three distinct peer learning topics:

1. Benefits Cliffs
2. Parent Engagement
3. Racial Equity

Benefits Cliffs

Benefits cliffs, situations where individuals lose access to benefits as their income increases and become less economically stable as a result, were a consistent concern across all AFEM participants. The WFAJ initiative identified three primary efforts that were effective across all Region 1 states at mitigating the cliff effect:

1. **Gradual phase-out of benefits:** States implemented policies that allowed for a slower reduction in benefits, extending re-certification periods, and allowing families to retain more earned income during their transition into the workforce. This often involved using a sliding fee scale, providing a smoother financial shift as individuals advance in their careers.
2. **Raising eligibility limits:** By raising eligibility limits or altering the standards that determine when individuals lose eligibility, states were able to allow working families to remain on benefits for longer periods. This facilitated sustainable financial stabilization to prevent families from reentering the benefits system.
3. **Leveraging predictive tools and coaching:** States used tools such as those developed by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta to model how public benefits, tax credits, and expenses interact with career advancement. Additionally, states integrated coaching and resources alongside these tools to provide personalized guidance, helping families navigate the complexities of benefits cliffs more effectively.

These strategies have proven instrumental in reducing the short-term financial risks associated with career advancement, enabling families to pursue long-term economic stability without the fear of sudden financial shock. Learn more about the specific strategies used to mitigate benefits cliffs in the [Region 1 report](#).

Parent Engagement

The WFAJ initiative has been a national leader in incorporating parent leaders in decision-making, policy development, and implementation processes. As the human services sector increasingly embraces human-centered design, engaging people with lived experience expertise—particularly parents—has become an industry standard. However, as this approach continues to gain traction, there is a growing need for clear guidance on how agencies can meaningfully and equitably engage lived experience experts.

In response to this need, state leaders from the WFAJ initiative produced a comprehensive brief outlining core values, benefits, and actionable strategies for working with parents as partners in shaping human services policy and program delivery. Takeaways from the brief included:

◇ Develop Robust State Interest

Authentic parent engagement requires buy-in from agency leaders and staff that understand the full value of incorporating parent voice. This often requires agencies to thoughtfully consider their needs for staff training, funding, and operational change. When there is genuine commitment at the organization level, these shifts become manageable and have the potential to produce significant return on investment and seamless service improvements.

◇ Provide Training for Parents

Just as agency staff may require training to integrate parent voice into their work, parents often also need support to ensure their contributions are impactful. Offering training and leadership development can equip parent leaders with the civic tools they need to effectively engage in policy discussions, ensuring their insights are actionable and aligned with agency goals.

◇ Create True Feedback Loops

Agencies must establish mechanisms to inform parent leaders and lived experience experts about how their contributions have been used. This not only demonstrates respect and builds trust but provides them with insights into the realities and challenges of implementation. Transparent and consistent feedback loops foster higher-quality engagement between parent leaders and agencies, as these feedback loops can generate open dialogue over time.

◇ Conduct Inclusive Outreach

Agencies should get creative in how they reach out to parents to ensure the voices they have are representative of the community. Partnering with community-based organizations, conducting community mapping, and using various recruitment channels are effective ways to connect with parents.

◇ Build Social Capital

Social capital is the informal relational network within communities that contributes to social cohesion, access to information and opportunities, and resource sharing among neighbors. By strengthening social capital, agencies not only expand social support networks for families, but augment parents' ability to be advocates for collective needs rather than just individual needs.

◇ Compensate Parents Equitably

Equitable compensation for parent leaders is essential to creating a sustainable engagement model. Agencies must recognize the value of lived experience expertise and ensure they are compensated for their time just as they would any other consultant.

Learn more about Region I's parent engagement strategies and lessons learned in the [full report](#).

Racial Equity

As AFEM learning communities explored strategies to improve economic mobility, they were confronted with the persistent disparities in wealth-building resources and opportunities for BIPOC communities. These systemic inequities pose a significant barrier to achieving true family economic mobility, prompting the WFAJ initiative to conduct a landscape scan across the six Region I states. From this they drew insights to improve racial equity across programs.

Partnering with O&G Racial Equity Collaborative, they used the Government Alliance for Race Equity (GARE) framework to approach this work. This framework involved **visualizing** shared race equity goals, **normalizing** racial equity as a shared value, **organizing** staff and organizational ability to support the work, and **operationalizing** the new strategies. From this process, they identified the following key insights in implementing racial equity strategies:

◇ Vision is Critical

Intentionally communicating a north star vision for the state's racial equity goals allows for the organization to anchor into a shared outcome and enables staff to work proactively rather than reactively. This fosters cohesion and a sense of purpose across departments.

◇ Establish Leadership and Roles in Fostering Change

Enthusiastic leadership buy-in at the highest level is crucial for ongoing messaging and building capacity and infrastructure. However, sustainable change requires empowering champions at every level of the organization. This creates a sense of ownership and responsibility throughout the agency, which builds long-term commitment to equity.

◇ Set Solid Infrastructure and Processes

Using the GARE framework facilitates states' understanding of their current status and identifies actionable next steps for

moving toward their shared vision. This reflective process encourages agency leaders to take a step back to assess the organizational environment in which the racial equity work is happening. Leaders can then identify gaps and dismantle existing barriers to create a more inclusive and equitable system.

The WFAJ initiative's work demonstrates the importance of a structured, intentional approach to advancing racial equity within human services. Read more about the GARE framework and the strategies each of the Region I states pursued to achieve their racial equity vision in the [full brief](#).

Human Services Workforce Region 4 Learning Community

In partnership with the ACF Office of Regional Operations in Region 4, APHSA and MDC invited state health and human services agencies to join the Human Services Workforce Learning Community to identify and implement innovative solutions to shared workforce challenges. Agencies in Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee participated in in-depth peer learning, both in-person and virtually, to achieve three goals:

1. Explore solutions and approaches to share promising and effective practices from across the country to recruit, train, retain, and develop the human service agency workforce.
2. Identify areas of opportunity and develop state-specific learning and work plans.
3. Develop state, regional, and federal recommendations for recruiting, training, retaining, and developing the human service workforce.

States

Alabama: Represented by members of the Department of Human Resources

Kentucky: Represented by members of the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Department for Community Based Services, and the Commissioner's Office

Mississippi: Represented by members of the Department of Human Services

Tennessee: Represented by members of the Department of Human Services and the Department of Human Resources



Key takeaways:

◇ Equitable Pay and Compensation

Many states recognize the importance of offering competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain qualified professionals. Compensating people fairly and paying people a living wage boosts recruitment and retention efforts and improves the quality of life for employees, making them more effective advocates for children and families.

◇ Skill-Based Hiring Initiatives

Skill-based hiring practices ensure a competent workforce from a wide range of backgrounds. Shifting the focus from credentials and licenses to assessing candidates based on their skills allows states to tap into a wider talent pool and encourages a more inclusive approach to addressing workforce shortages.

◇ Investment in Education and Training

Throughout 2024, many states invested in education and training programs to equip their workforces with essential skills and knowledge. These included initiatives like competency-based learning, professional development opportunities, and partnerships with universities and educational institutions.

◇ Leadership and Growth Opportunities

Every state highlighted the importance of fostering a supportive work environment with opportunities for leadership development and career growth. This took the form of mentorship programs, internship opportunities, and training initiatives to nurture the next generation of leaders.

◇ Work-Life Balance and Staff Well-Being

Recognizing the demands and stress faced by their employees, several states prioritized work-life balance and staff well-being. This included implementing self-care programs, mental health support, and initiatives to address burnout.

◇ Innovative Recruitment Strategies

Many states explored innovative recruitment strategies to attract diverse talent and skilled professionals. This included media campaigns, targeted outreach to underrepresented communities, testimonials from legacy staff, partnerships with universities, and collaborations with recruitment agencies.

◇ Technology and Digital Transformation

States leveraged new technology and digital transformation to streamline processes, enhance service delivery, and improve efficiency.

◇ Community Collaboration and Partnerships

States recognized the value of collaborating with community organizations, non-profits, universities, and private sector partners to address complex issues creatively. Partnerships and collaborations allowed for a more holistic approach to problem-solving.

◇ Resilience and Adaptability During Challenges

States demonstrated resilience and adaptability, especially during times of crisis like natural disasters and the pandemic. They implemented contingency plans, supported their workforce, and innovated to continue providing essential services.

Learn more about this [learning community's work](#).



Systems Navigation and Alignment National Learning Community

As part of its work to create opportunities for peer learning, the NAC invited APHSA members to apply for the Systems Navigation and Alignment National Learning Community to streamline eligibility and application processes, integrate case management, and develop collaborative bridges across agencies with common clients.

States

Illinois: Represented by the Department of Human Services and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

Illinois' goal centered around aligning approaches to working with service participants across several programs and to build awareness of the range of programs for which they are eligible. Specifically, to increase alignment of SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and programs for Illinoisans with disabilities with a focus on workforce services through vocational rehabilitation programs.

Los Angeles County: Represented by teams across their Department of Social Services

Los Angeles County's goal centered around streamlining eligibility and application processes across multiple programs, with a specific focus on families experiencing housing instability. The team sought to explore ways to align housing services with TANF families to prevent housing instability by moving supports upstream.

Louisiana: Represented by the Department of Child and Family Services

Louisiana's goal centered around scaling their successful No Wrong Door integrated eligibility program to address disproportionalities in underutilization among Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian populations, individuals with disabilities, women, veterans, LGBTQ+ communities, out-of-school youth who are also parents, and parents returning from prison.

Nebraska: Represented by members of the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield.

Nebraska's goal centered around increasing alignment for workforce programs across human services and labor programs to ensure participants receive all services for which they are eligible, with a focus on increasing self-sufficiency for families. The programs to align included SNAP E&T, TANF, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds, and child care. Through creating career pathways in key sectors, Nebraska planned to align funding to enable participants to move ahead and to prepare for, and avoid, benefit cliffs.

Key takeaways:

◇ **Aligning State Systems Takes Significant Time and Effort**

The states completed various stages of their strategy, each continuing their alignment journey. The work required staff to dialogue and understand each other's systems and approaches to move the system alignment work forward. In addition, undoing the silos of programs takes significant time.

◇ **Recognizing That Within and Across Departments and Systems, Operations and Organizational Culture Differ**

State agencies employ thousands of workers and provide dozens of services. Often the work of systems alignment requires culture change within divisions to optimize collaborative and aligned approaches. Lasting integration of services and systems requires culture change across agencies and departments, including creating common norms, language, and being transparent in approach to the work. The road to systems alignment means bringing an intentionality to cross-system work and a recognition that culture change and alignment take time and effort.

◇ Leadership Buy-in Is Critical

States where the leadership of agencies were either engaged, or were signaling the importance of the work, moved their agenda forward, and were able to overcome some of the typical bureaucratic challenges within state government. In states where leadership changed or had less engagement, the work was more challenging to execute.

◇ Aligning the Work with Existing Initiatives Can Build Momentum for a Project

In some of the states, work on alignment was underway but may have stalled. Departments sometimes have different priorities for alignment or are not sure how to move ahead collectively. Bringing in outside technical assistance and implementing a project adjacent to the existing work can inform and bolster those efforts.

◇ Bringing Lived Experience to the Table Helps to Shape Work

Focus groups in one state across multiple programs helped to illuminate where customers were experiencing support and opportunity, and how programs might be better aligned. The focus group results had a hand in shaping the final work of the agencies.

Preventing Family Involvement in Child Welfare Systems through Economic and Concrete Supports National Learning Community

In partnership with Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, the NAC invited APHSA members to apply for the Preventing Family Involvement in Child Welfare Systems through the Economic and Concrete Supports (ECS) National Learning Community to explore policy levers agencies can act on to operationalize lessons from emerging research on the role economic and concrete supports play as a primary prevention strategy. Agencies in Missouri, New York, Ohio, and Oregon participated in in-depth peer learning, both in-person and virtually, to develop theories of change and logic models to operationalize their goals.

States

Missouri

Represented by the Department of Social Services, Family and Community Trust, Visions for Children at Risk, New Madrid County Family Resource Center, Community Partnership in Pemiscot County, and the University of Missouri

New York

Represented by the Office of Children and Family Services, Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, Department of Labor, Division on Financial Services, Division of Housing and Community Renewal, and the Division of Human Rights

Ohio

Represented by the Ohio Children's Trust Fund, Ohio Department of Jobs and Family Services, Office of Families and Children, University of Michigan, and the Ohio State University

Oregon

Represented by the Department of Health Services, Self-Sufficiency Programs, and Child Welfare

Throughout their work supporting the states in implementing their plans, Chapin Hall facilitators developed the “Evidence to Impact” policy tool to provide agency leaders with an overview of state policy options for increasing access to economic and concrete supports, aligned with peer-reviewed research supporting their use as a primary prevention strategy. The tool identified three domains of opportunity:

- **Macroeconomic Supports** are policies that would enable families to access more cash resources directly. They included expanding the state-level Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, increasing the state minimum wage, implementation of a state paid family leave program, and investing in employment and job creation.
- **Concrete Supports** are policies that provide non-cash assistance to families based on eligibility criteria. These include expansion of child care assistance, investment in housing resources, broadening access to health care programs, leveraging flexible state funding, and establishing direct cash transfer programs. D
- **Public Assistance Programs** are policies that relate to federal programs like TANF, SNAP, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). Additionally, there is evidence to support the efficacy of state investment in these programs, as well as state investment in aligning between these programs to reduce administrative burden, streamline access, and integrate data and automation across systems.





Systems Leaders Community

Insights regarding the importance of leadership vision and buy-in were apparent early in the AFEM initiative, inspiring the creation of the Systems Leaders Community (SLC). In February of 2023, APHSA partnered with Ascend at the Aspen Institute to convene a group of six state-level systems leaders tasked with developing executive-level strategies for advancing family economic mobility using a two-generation approach. The SLC aimed to empower state leaders to align their agencies' strategic priorities with broader efforts to support families, while encouraging local managers and staff to drive impactful change on the ground.

The SLC served as a reflective and collaborative space where participants could step back from the daily demands of their roles and think deeply about their long-term vision. This environment stimulated conversation that enabled leaders to exchange innovative ideas, identify actionable strategies for systemic reform, and foster a supportive community of peers committed to advancing family well-being. Discussions centered on how to align leadership vision across agencies and create pathways for meaningful, sustainable change that would ripple down through all levels of state system.

Systems Leaders Community Members

- Cathy Betts, Director, Hawaii Department of Human Services
- Erin Drinnin, Director, Iowa Department of Health and Human Services
- Gail Geohagen-Pratt, Acting Deputy Commissioner for the Division of Child Welfare and Community Services, New York State
- Amy Jacobs, Commissioner, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning
- Amy Kershaw, Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance
- Fariborz Pakseresht, Director, Oregon Department of Human Services

Key takeaways:

SLC leaders elevated strategies in their states they used to advance family economic mobility. These strategies generally fell within five domains:

◇ Structural Alignment

Five states shared strategies that involved aligning across agencies to deliver more holistic support for families. These efforts aimed to dismantle wealth-stripping practices, enhance service delivery, and improve the overall experience of families interacting with state systems.

◇ Workforce Resilience

Three states emphasized strategies to shift away from rigid oversight toward more personalized, relationship-centered supports for both families and frontline staff. These initiatives sought to foster resilience and adaptability to meet families' needs.

◇ Messaging and Framing

Three states shared strategies that honored the importance of shifting agency narratives around interacting with families. By reframing the way agencies communicate about their work with children and families, states promoted cultural shifts that positioned families as empowered partners in their economic mobility journey, rather than passive recipients.

◇ Cross-State Support

Collaboration among SLC participants enabled rapid, cross-state assistance in times of need. For example, Oregon offered emergency response support to Hawaii following the 2023 Maui fires. Additionally, Georgia's 2Gen Academy provided a model for other states seeking to align systems.

◇ Strategic Investments to Spark Innovation

Two states highlighted innovative investments that extended beyond typical agency operations to explore new approaches for meeting families' evolving needs. These investments both met families' evolving needs and provided community-based organizations the capacity they needed to try new methods for reaching families where they are.

The SLC offered a powerful platform for state leaders to not only envision systems-level change but to make plans for concrete action. By combining vision with practical strategies, the SLC enabled states to pursue meaningful, collaborative actions in support of families' long-term economic well-being. Learn more about the insight and takeaways from the SLC in [this report](#).

When the Advancing Family Economic Mobility initiative launched, APHSA was nearly a year into a partnership with the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS), supported by the Kellogg Foundation, to provide technical assistance and facilitate collaborative efforts. As the NAC shaped its national agenda, MDHS and APHSA recognized a unique opportunity to explore and adapt whole-family wellbeing strategies within a focused, place-based context.

Together with the APHSA Organizational Effectiveness team, MDHS undertook several initiatives to achieve this: **MDHS Organizational Effectiveness and Organizational Culture Work**, the creation of the **Mississippi Action Learning Network**, launching the **Mississippi Workforce Hub**, and partnering with the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) to create resources for **SNAP E&T Partnership Development**. These four efforts, which also collectively contributed to the Human Services Workforce Region 4 Learning Community, were essential components of MDHS's strategy to foster economic opportunity and sustainable advancement for all Mississippians.

MDHS Organizational Effectiveness and Organizational Culture Work

To lay a strong foundation to build family economic mobility strategies, MDHS partnered with APHSA's Organizational Effectiveness (OE) team to enhance internal operations, practices, and outcomes for Mississippians. This collaboration aimed to foster a proactive, empowered, and responsive work culture. A series of surveys and focus groups identified five key themes that were ripe opportunities for development:

- **Communication:** Improve clarity and effectiveness in transferring information between MDHS and both internal and external stakeholders
- **Service delivery:** Strengthen the quality and efficiency of services provided
- **Client engagement and customer service:** Enhance interactions and relationships with clients
- **Staff operations:** Address resource availability, technology, and workplace processes
- **Workplace onboarding and professional development:** Focus on employee orientation, growth opportunities, and overall morale

While the explicit focus on these five themes was unique to MDHS, they represent common challenges within human services agencies nationwide. The MDHS and OE team developed and operationalized five strategic recommendations to mitigate these challenges and develop strong organizational work culture to enable agencies to achieve their missions of providing families with sustainable pathways for economic stability and advancement:

1. Establish Clear, Consistent Communication Channels

Proactively sharing information with staff, stakeholders, and clients fosters a culture of trust and transparency. Effective communication enhances internal morale, strengthens external partnerships, and leads to a more positive client experience, which builds more collaborative and productive relationships with the agency.

2. Create Clear and Consistent Onboarding and Ongoing Training Plans

Clear, structured training programs equip employees with the knowledge and resources needed to perform their roles confidently and efficiently. When staff operates from shared expectations, agencies experience smoother operations, increased staff morale, greater retention, and opportunities for career advancement.

3. Equip Staff for Positive Client Engagement

Providing resources that support constructive client interactions benefits both staff and the community members they work with. Human services professionals are often driven by a commitment to helping others and giving them the right tools fosters a sense of purpose and satisfaction. For clients, these improved interactions build trust and positive relationships between the agency and the community.

4. Leverage Technology to Improve Service Delivery

Investing in updated, reliable technology is essential for effective service delivery. Access to functional, efficient systems allows staff to focus on delivering high-quality service and enhances client experience. Prioritizing well-maintained, user-friendly technology also minimizes disruptions and reduces frustration for both employees and clients.

5. Focus on Staff Recruitment and Retention

Developing a competitive, supportive work environment with fair compensation, manageable workloads, and positive culture helps agencies attract and retain skilled staff. Offering clear pathways for career advancement and recognizing contributions boosts morale and allows for more consistent, higher-quality service experience across all levels of the agency.

Mississippi Action Learning Network

The surveys and focus groups conducted during the OE and culture-building initiatives underscored a need for improved statewide systems alignment to provide high-quality human services across Mississippi. In response, APHSA and MDHS established the Mississippi Action Learning Network (MALN), a statewide peer-to-peer partnership designed to foster collaboration among leaders across sectors. Through this network, state leaders convene every six weeks to share best practices, discuss innovations, and implement systems-change strategies focused on advancing whole-family solutions for economic mobility. The network includes 11 dedicated partners committed to continuous learning and adaptive solutions, centering their work on the following focus areas:

◇ Generative Leadership

Leaders across Mississippi's human services sectors work collaboratively to unify their missions, understand the array of services available, and optimize funding sources. This coordination allows resources to be leveraged efficiently and agencies to reduce duplications, which in turn provides clients with a streamlined and supportive system that improves both individual and generational health and wealth outcomes.

◇ Innovative Programming

Programs are designed with community input at every stage, ensuring that they are data-informed and address needs directly identified by the community. By fostering co-creation and responsiveness, these programs are primed to drive meaningful innovation and improve outcomes for those most affected by the services provided.

◇ Customer-Centered Experience

Human services interactions are intentionally designed to be accessible, user-friendly, and responsive to the unique strengths of each community. This customer-centered approach ensures that clients experience human services as cohesive and positive, which builds trust and resilient relationships between agencies and communities.

◇ Community-Focused Education

MALN emphasizes the importance of informed communities by partnering with local hubs to share clear, accessible information about programs and services available. This proactive outreach increases program visibility and empowers communities to access necessary resources.

To learn more about the strategies and successes that have come out of the MALN, read the full [MALN Roadmap](#).

Mississippi Workforce Hub

One of the central themes throughout the AFEM initiative was the importance of workforce investment and the availability of quality jobs. In 2022, APHSA launched the Mississippi Workforce Hub, a resource meant to co-create strategies between core stakeholders to develop career pathways to high-quality jobs for Mississippians. Over the course of two years, the Workforce Hub engaged representatives from 16 organizations across human services, local workforce boards, education, and the private sector to develop innovative, community-based solutions to common challenges.

Through their work together the Workforce Hub participants developed recommendations within three core workforce investment strategies:

- Leveraging Partnerships
 - Leveraging partnerships with AmeriCorps VISTA for qualifying community-based organizations builds organizational capacity and support employment opportunities for those in a transitional time in their careers.

- Expanding Single Stop centers in community colleges connects career and technical education students to relevant supports.
- Investing in child care serves a dual purpose of developing career opportunities in early childhood education and creating better community access to child care services for working parents.
- Connecting Job-Seekers to Opportunities
 - Workforce partners had success when they expanded outreach strategies to inform Mississippi residents of resources and opportunities. They also emphasized the importance of leveraging channels for reaching early and mid-career adults who are looking to develop skills to meet the needs of high-demand sectors and industries with sustainable, high-quality jobs.
 - There is also opportunity in targeted efforts to connect reentry populations with workforce opportunities in their local communities. Integrating mental health support into reentry efforts can smooth the transition into the workforce.
- Developing Career Pathways
 - There was a specific need to invest in services to support child care providers and early childhood education to improve pay, access to higher education, and support home-based child care centers.
 - Employers can be incentivized through tax credits to mitigate the most common needs that prevent sustainable employment. These needs include child care and transportation support, as well as benefits that provide access to health care and mental health services.

The Mississippi Workforce Hub also elevated several case studies of successful practices from their partners that pursued actionable strategies to support long-term workforce development. Read more about those successes in the [Mississippi at Work report](#).

SNAP Employment and Training Partnership Development

As part of the workforce development strategy, APHSA partnered with the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) to strengthen Mississippi's SNAP E&T partnerships with third-party providers to improve sustainable economic mobility outcomes for individuals and families. Following two site visits to establish deep, holistic understanding between stakeholders of program operations from all sides, APHSA and SJI developed three resources to facilitate ongoing partnership success.

- [Budgeting Best Practices for Community College SNAP E&T Programs](#): Because SNAP E&T is a reimbursement program, it requires different budgeting and reporting processes from providers than other grant programs. This guide provides clear best practices to assist community college providers with the tools they need to effectively budget and hire for SNAP E&T programs.
- [Time and Effort Guidelines for SNAP E&T Budgeting](#): Onboarding high-quality third-party SNAP E&T providers requires that those providers are equipped with the knowledge and capacity to meet federal time and effort reporting guidelines. This guide provides a clear overview for community college SNAP E&T program providers to accurately report their time and effort records to ensure compliance and timely reimbursement.
- [Designing an Effective Participant-Focused SNAP E&T Program](#): By incorporating human-centered design elements, providers can ensure programming is responsive to participant needs, is accessible to potential participants, and is achieving long-term outcomes to support families in fostering stable economic mobility. This guide offers a brief overview of the advantages of human-centered design and a checklist for supporting implementation of human-centered design principles into program design and outreach strategies.

About **Advancing Family and Economic Mobility (AFEM)** is an initiative of the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), committed to creating sustainable pathways to economic mobility and well-being for all people and families. The AFEM network fosters new approaches to improving long-term, systemic economic mobility at all levels. To achieve this, it has undertaken a three-pronged approach to build a vetted repository of reproducible strategies and resources to share with agencies throughout the United States. For more information, visit www.familyeconomicmobility.com

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Foundation is based in Battle Creek, MI, and works throughout the United States and internationally, as well as with sovereign tribes. Special attention is paid to priority places where there are high concentrations of poverty and where children face significant barriers to success. WKKF priority places in the United States are in Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, and New Orleans; and internationally, are in Mexico and Haiti. For more information, visit www.wkkf.org.



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AFEM through its Child Well-being Program, which aims to strengthen and expand the capacity of social service systems that are collaborative and provide culturally appropriate, evidence-based, and context-specific prevention and treatment programs for parents and children. By strengthening the ability of existing social service systems to better serve those in places contending with sizeable inequities, more children and families can receive the essential supports and resources that help them to pursue full, healthy, and happy lives. Services such as these, when well-coordinated, can make a significant impact in responding to the effects of generations of inequities and exposure to trauma, violence, abuse, and neglect to help give families a fairer shot at achieving healthy and happy futures. For more information, visit www.dorisduke.org.