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Maine Community Action Partnership Supports L.D. 1995: An Act to Bolster Maine's Workforce and Economy by Increasing Assistance for Parents Pursuing Education and Employment and by Indexing Unemployment Benefits to the Unemployment Rate

January 16, 2024

Senator Baldacci, Representative Meyer, members of the Committee on Health and Human Services, I am Megan Hannan, Executive Director of the Maine Community Action Partnership and we support L.D. 1995 An Act to Bolster Maine's Workforce and Economy by Increasing Assistance for Parents Pursuing Education and Employment and by Indexing Unemployment Benefits to the Unemployment Rate.

Our state's greatest resource is our people, and our state's policies shape people's possibilities. In Community Action, we create conditions that invite children to learn and adults to apply their skills, tapping into the potential in our communities.

Community Action Agencies are united, and happily not alone, in providing a Whole Family, or multi (two)-generational, approach to our customers. Studies have proven that to improve the lives of low-income families in the present and future, we need to address the needs of the entire family – so we help the parents or caregivers with their educational and/or employment needs, while also ensuring the children have high quality early care and education. We know, the science is clear, that the first five years of brain development are foundational to human growth and development. Wrapping a family in supports during this critical time for children is a multi-level prevention strategy: it leads to better outcomes for children as they do better in school from K-12 and beyond; it supports parents to earn more to do more, lessening the stress that could lead to adverse childhood events, therefore lessening the likelihood of requiring child protection services; it supports and strengthens communities, which in turn support and strengthen families.

The approach boosts the power of our education and employment systems, working closely with communities whose connection to these resources have been frayed, at best, for too long. By reducing the steps that families are required to take in order to find and access an opportunity, we are increasing the participation in programs that unlock potential.

Launched as a TANF pilot in the summer of 2021, after one year in practice our collective programs worked with 437 families, comprised of 1,353 individuals (DHHS, OFI). You will not be surprised to hear that unstable housing is the most common issue facing these families, who are all at or below 200% of the Federal poverty level. Agency coaches, or navigators, were successful in helping the majority of families to find stable, affordable and appropriate housing, as well as accessing healthcare for themselves and/or their children, early childhood education and their own education or employment.

The support families receive through Whole Family is but one leg of the three-legged stool, which also includes putting money into the hands of families and providing education and job training, to build a family's capacity for sustained stability and economic growth. We know that when we invest in the family's well-being, when we let them drive their own story, then we have tangible success. Please see the graphic of the Six Key Components of Two-Generation Approaches on the next page.

According to *Maine's TANF-Funded Whole Family Services Programs Year 1 Report*, one-quarter of enrolled families increased their income and about a quarter of parents who were not employed enrolled in education programs to increase their skills. Eighty-eight percent of parents reported their children were in school at least 90% of the time, and 95% had access to healthcare. You can read more of these exciting statistics and stories in the attached report that the Office of Family Independence compiled with the results of the first year of this program. At the beginning of year three, more data points were added, and the tapestry of this journey will become even more rich.

The benefits of this approach are evident well beyond the reach of the TANF program. There are local and national think-tanks and funders investing in this approach. Maine Community Action Agencies have studied under and partnered with Ascend at the Aspen Institute, a "a catalyst and convener for diverse leaders working across systems and sectors to build intergenerational family prosperity and well-being by intentionally focusing on children and the adults in their lives together. We believe in the power of co-creation. We are a community of leaders — well-connected, well-prepared, and well-positioned — building the political will that transforms hearts, minds, policies, and practices." In April of 2023, we sent 10 of our coaches and managers to an Ascend Forum on Children and Families as a part of our commitment to ensuring we have the most up-to-date and accurate information about this way of working with families.

In June, we sent another group to meet with Whole Family trainers, practitioners, and evaluators so we could further embed our agencies in this approach. We work with and learn from Family Futures Downeast, an early adopter and well evaluated program, Moving Families Forward in Bangor, and others. We have worked with the John T. Gorman Foundation, also an early adopter of the Two Generation (2Gen) / Whole Family Approach, and many of my membership and our families attended an excellent 2Gen Summit in Freeport in October, which is outlined in the Portland Press Herald Op-Ed by JTG President and CEO Nicole Witherbee and Ascend Managing Director Marjorie Sims, below. I was happy to see Commissioners Lambrew and Makin, as well as other state administrators, in the audience, as well. As far as I can tell, the state believes in this approach as much as we do.

Today, three years in, this is still a pilot program, and we are ready to launch this as a fully proven program to meet TANF outcomes with additional funding. The text of the bill says "at least \$5 million"; that is certainly negotiable, but know that the better funded the program is, the more families that can access these life changing supports.

Thank you for your time and attention today, I am happy to answer any questions that I can.

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Portland Press Herald, January 6, 2024

Opinion: A brighter future for Maine children starts with a whole-family approach

Children thrive when their parents have what they need to succeed. Likewise, if kids are doing well, it's easier for the adults in their lives to make things work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole Witherbee is president and chief executive officer of the John T. Gorman Foundation. **Marjorie Sims** is managing director of Ascend at the Aspen Institute.

As we start a new year, there are unequivocal signs that we need to do better by Maine's children. In the Pine Tree State, children experience abuse, anxiety, and economic insecurity at some of the highest rates in the nation. It doesn't have to be this way.

In Maine and across the nation, a growing number of nonprofit organizations and states are taking a two-generation (2Gen) approach – which serves children and their caregivers simultaneously – and is proving to be uniquely effective in building a brighter future for families.

First developed in the 1980s, 2Gen approaches have gained national momentum over the last 10 years. They're founded on a fundamental truth: the lives of kids and their caregivers are interdependent. Children thrive when their parents have what they need to succeed. Likewise, if kids are doing well, then it's easier for the adults in their lives to tackle their family's challenges and capitalize on opportunities – whether that means pursuing higher-paying careers, going back to school, creating stability at home, or attending to their own social, emotional or mental-health needs.

The John T. Gorman Foundation has seen the 2Gen approach's effectiveness in improving whole families' well-being in Maine and would like to see it strengthened and expanded across the state. That is why the foundation recently hosted a Maine 2Gen Summit with Ascend at the Aspen Institute, a national leader in 2Gen approaches. More than 130 community leaders, parents, and policymakers gathered to discuss the principles that have made the approach so successful in Maine, explore opportunities for collaboration and identify changes that need to be made on a practice and policy level to help more families thrive.

Three themes were evident throughout the day.

1. Collaboration is essential. No single organization can do the work on its own. To be effective, you need partnerships. In a program called Moving Families Forward, for example, Bangor Housing Authority is partnering with Boys & Girls Club of Bangor and others to provide workforce training opportunities for parents, quality early-childhood education for their kids and a myriad of support services that help strengthen the bonds both within the family units and in the community. In Portland, Northern Light Health Mercy Hospital, which provides housing and support for mothers in recovery at the McAuley Residence, is partnering with Southern Maine Community College and The Opportunity Alliance to offer education pathways for the moms and their kids at the same time. None of these organizations could provide these offerings on their own. Together, they can do so much more.

2. Partner with parents and caregivers to design and evaluate programs. In order for strategies to be effective, parent perspectives have to inform the direction. One of the first and most successful 2Gen initiatives in the state, Family Futures Downeast, grew out of focus groups with parents in Washington County. The program assists parents with low incomes in earning college credit while delivering quality early-learning opportunities to their children, along with wraparound supports like family coaching, tutoring, and workforce support. Family voice has remained at the center of their work since the program's launch in 2016.

3. Measurement has to be meaningful. Measurement is important because families deserve to know if the programs they participate in are effective. But it's not enough to look at single variables in isolation – programs must be evaluated by how successful they are in achieving positive results for all members of the family. This might include a combination of outcomes, such as changes in a parent's income, a child's progress toward developmental milestones or decreased stress in the home.

We're excited about the 2Gen successes we're seeing in Maine. The John T. Gorman Foundation, in partnership with Ascend at the Aspen Institute and others, will continue to support, test, and evaluate 2Gen initiatives, identifying best practices so that they can be shared broadly.

However, just like our partners, we can't do it alone. Building a brighter future for our state's children – by ensuring practice and policy reflect the interdependence of families – will take many hands.

THE SIX KEY COMPONENTS OF TWO-GENERATION APPROACHES

Two-generation approaches (2Gen) build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives together.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

- Head Start
- Early Head Start
- child care partnerships
- preK
- home visiting
- Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care (FFN)

K-12

- kindergarten ready
- 3rd grade reading skills
- parent engagement
- graduation and postsecondary prep

POSTSECONDARY & EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS

- community college
- training and credentials
- workforce partnerships
- employer partnerships

SOCIAL CAPITAL

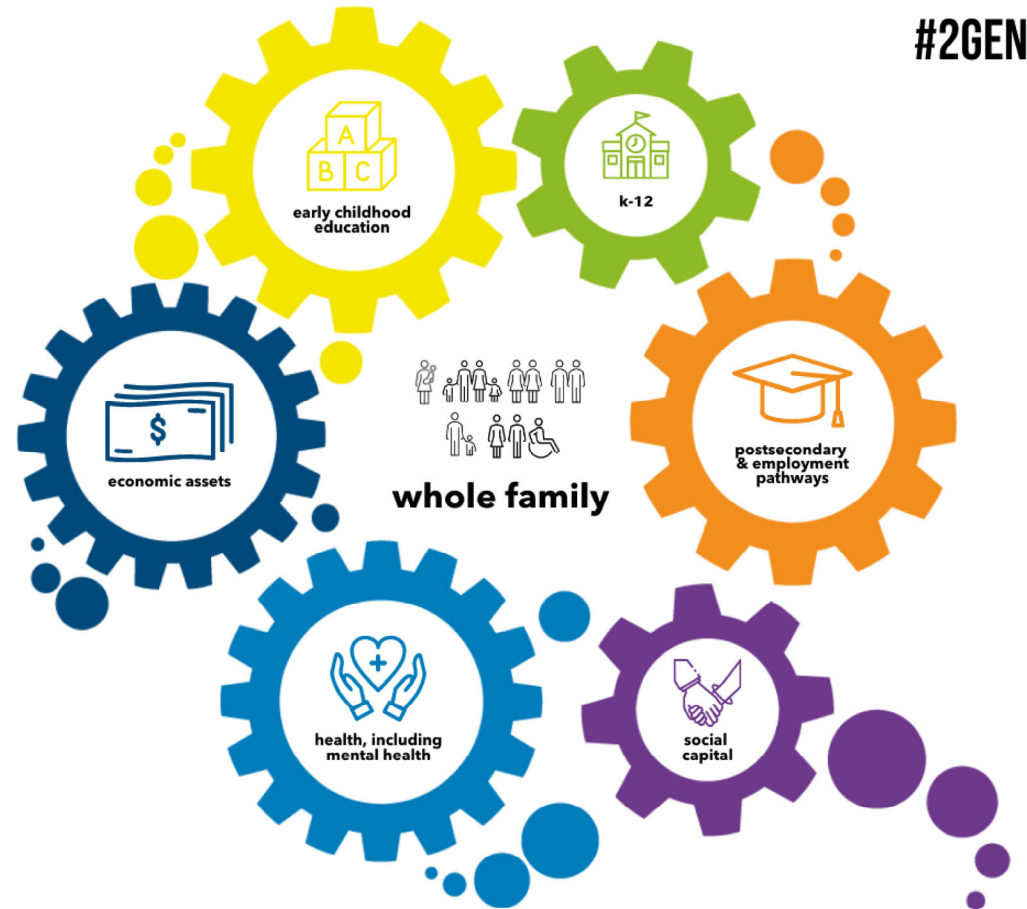
- peer and family networks
- coaching
- cohort strategies

HEALTH, INCLUDING MENTAL HEALTH

- mental, physical, and behavioral health
- coverage and access to care
- adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress

ECONOMIC ASSETS

- asset building
- housing and public supports
- financial capacity
- transportation



#2GEN