



# Prevent, Protect & Provide: How child welfare can better support low-income families

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## Introduction

Families living in poverty have a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing crises. While the majority of poor families never come to the attention of the child welfare system, poverty is still the greatest threat to child well-being and the best predictor of abuse and neglect.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly half of families (47 percent) who have their children removed from their homes have trouble paying for basic necessities.<sup>2</sup> The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect found that children living in poor and low-income households had significantly higher rates of maltreatment than children who lived in more economically secure homes. Additionally, studies have found that a contributing factor to the disproportionate representation of African American children in the child welfare system is the higher rate of this population's exposure to, and living in, poverty.<sup>3</sup>

Research also shows that stress from factors associated with poverty increases the risk of parenting difficulties and can affect a parent's ability to meet the needs of his or her children. When parents struggle to provide day-to-day necessities, they can feel anxious, depressed, fearful and overwhelmed. The daily stress of living in harsh, deprived conditions can also have a disabling effect on parenting capacities, resulting in inconsistent discipline, inability to respond to a child's emotional needs or a failure to prevent or address potential risks to safety.<sup>4</sup>

In order to safely and responsibly reduce risk to children, and to support families in doing so, it is important for child welfare systems to consider more sustainable ways to support families' concrete needs and to help set them on a long-term path of economic security and well-being. CSSP believes working closely with

parents to identify what these needs might be can also help prevent the stressors that may lead to child maltreatment.

Successful efforts to support families in achieving economic and social stability require collaboration across levels of government, multiple agencies and communities. Jurisdictions with well-integrated health and human service systems often can promote greater flexibility in meeting the needs of families at risk of child welfare involvement, including better coordination of services and access to a full menu of economic supports aimed at meeting concrete needs.

Much has been written about the myriad of factors that contribute to and perpetuate poverty and the approaches states can take to combat it. This brief, however, will focus on several critical strategies child welfare systems can use to better address the economic needs of families and reduce the number of children who are at an increased risk of maltreatment and neglect as a result of environmental circumstances. Specifically, this brief advocates for providing families with access to concrete services and other supports through strategies and preventive programs that help combat the struggles associated with living in poverty and disinvested communities.

## Poverty and Race

In designing and implementing supports and services, child welfare systems must recognize that poor families are disproportionately ones of color. African American and Hispanic children are twice as likely as White children to be a part of a family living in poverty.<sup>5</sup> Research highlights the complicated intersection of poverty, race/ethnicity and the perceived risk for maltreatment in explaining disparities at key child welfare decisions points, including the substantiation of maltreatment and the decision to remove children from their homes.

When poverty and race intersect, communities of color often face additional challenges due to historical and ongoing disinvestment in their communities and the resulting lack of access to concrete, relevant and family-specific supports. These communities frequently lack access to quality jobs, have underperforming schools and experience significant concerns with public safety.

Frequently, the multi-generational trauma experienced by families living in distressed communities and historically poor experiences with public systems can impact families' readiness to positively engage with child welfare officials. Furthermore, if services are not readily available, easily accessible and culturally relevant, families can be excluded from participating and accessing concrete supports when in crisis.

## Meeting Concrete and Family-Specific Needs

Understanding the ways in which the stress of living in poverty can increase the rate of child maltreatment is an important context for thinking about interventions that can be put in place to reduce the need for long-term child welfare involvement or the removal of a child from his or her family.

Child welfare's "go to" safety net of services for children, youth and families typically includes therapeutic supports such as individual and family counseling, parenting and anger management classes, psychological evaluations and referrals for domestic violence and substance abuse treatment.

Child welfare agencies also sometimes partner with public welfare agencies to provide one-time emergency support to families experiencing poverty who are at risk of having their children removed. This is an important service. However, for many families, financial stability will not be achieved within a short time frame and certainly cannot be addressed with one month's emergency rent or a single payment to a utility company.

While emergency financial assistance, vouchers for furniture and clothing and short-term rental subsidies are sometimes part of the service array available to the child welfare system, studies have found that families are typically not sufficiently connected to ongoing concrete financial supports such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF),<sup>6</sup> housing, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),<sup>7</sup> the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)<sup>8</sup> and employment supports. Putting families on a path to economic stability and success, instead of only providing emergency financial assistance, is usually considered well beyond child welfare's scope and typically agencies have limited resources and capacity to respond to ongoing economic need. However, connecting child welfare with economic support efforts can become more systematic through efforts to break down organizational barriers that often prevent such linkages and by bringing together the often-isolated resources that exist within a jurisdiction. Linking housing and therapeutic supports and early intervention with WIC assistance is an example.

Implementing successful prevention strategies requires providing assistance to the entire family and focusing both on the child's safety and well-being and the parents' emotional and economic well-being. There are innovations aimed at meeting the concrete needs of families taking place across the country. The policies and practices highlighted in this brief represent just some of the pathways being pursued by child welfare systems. They offer the policy field exciting examples of effective approaches that can be adapted in other jurisdictions.

## Integrating Services and Supports: Montgomery County, Maryland

Meeting the complicated needs of families can often require going beyond the traditional forms of service provision. Though it may seem simple, taking an integrated approach that helps bring the right supports to bear and allows child welfare to collaborate across systems and engage with public-private partnerships can help meet families' concrete needs and help prevent child welfare entrance whenever possible.

Montgomery County, Maryland's Department of Health and Human Services includes departments providing aging and disability services; behavioral health and crisis services; children, youth and family services; public health services and special needs housing. In providing supports in all these areas, Montgomery County is using an integrated case practice model, built on a family-centered, "no wrong door" approach to accessing all of the supports of the department.

In its efforts to prevent or minimize child welfare involvement, Montgomery County has been particularly focused on using this approach with two specific populations: homeless families and youth transitioning into adulthood including those in foster care, who are gang involved or are receiving community-based health and/or mental health services.

**Families struggling with homelessness:** Family homelessness alone is not a reason to remove children from their families. Consequently, in Montgomery County when homeless families come into contact with the county for support, the integrated practice model brings additional services and supports provided through child welfare -- this may include supports through family preservation and assessments to identify individual child needs -- in a coordinated effort to keep families together. While having child welfare representatives at the table in some cases can be seen as heightening the potential of a child's removal from his or her family, Montgomery County strives to focus on the assets and supports that child welfare can provide to these families that can supplement the services that the housing system can offer in an effort to keep families safely together. These expanded services include financial assistance and advocacy through the Emergency Eviction Prevention and Rental Assistance Program. Montgomery County is also working to increase its ability to utilize technology to advance its integrated systems of care, focusing on ways to better serve families and share information between relevant providers working with families while maintaining a strong focus on privacy.

**Youth in transition:** Montgomery County's community health nurses who are working with transition-aged youth<sup>9</sup> frequently report young people, often pregnant or parenting, to the appropriate department due to a range of concerns including mental health issues, gang involvement and a lack of connection to work and school. Through the application of the integrated case practice model, once these young parents are referred, they are connected by a case manager to all of the supports and services available through the department, which may include mental health, housing assistance and maternal and child nurse care management services. The county is currently considering new ways to use technology in order to map out all of the services available to these young people and create individualized plans to meet their unique needs.

## Partnerships Aimed at Prevention: Fresno County, California

In order for child welfare to effectively meet family needs, partnerships with the community, schools and other public agencies should be developed. These relationships allow for child welfare workers to share expertise with community partners who can intervene earlier in a preventive effort, reducing later costs and the need to disrupt families. In addition, these relationships can also ensure a targeted approach that meets the individualized needs of families and builds trust between the agency and the community it serves.

**The use of cultural brokers:** To better connect with the community to make services more accessible, help families better navigate the child welfare system and begin to address issues of racial disparity, Fresno County, California uses cultural brokers as a part of its child welfare services.

Cultural brokers in Fresno started as community representatives ten years ago. These community representatives were on hand to inform families of available resources in their community and to participate as a support person during Team Decisionmaking (TDM) meetings.<sup>10</sup> Over time, community representatives evolved into the role of cultural brokers, part of a more formalized and specialized approach to advocacy and assistance to families.<sup>11</sup> Now its own community-based organization, the Cultural Broker Program contracts with Fresno County. Cultural brokers are required to go through a training program which consists of a minimum 42 hours of in-service training covering curriculum related to the Fresno County Department of Social Services and the court system, introduction to the law, communications, boundaries and best practices in child welfare services. The training also involves child and family observations.

Cultural brokers are often recruited from communities of color, which have the highest entry rates into the child welfare system in Fresno, and are matched with families based on both demographic information as well as their expertise with the experiences and specific needs of families. Fresno’s cultural brokers come from a variety of backgrounds or have specialized knowledge and training, including substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, the Indian Child Welfare Act, LGBT issues and issues related to immigration status and undocumented families.

In Fresno today, cultural brokers participate in TDM meetings, and also join social workers when they respond to a child abuse or neglect referral in order to assist with family engagement, support culturally appropriate family assessments and support the coordination of resource information and referrals. They often remain connected to a family for up to 60 days. When families do not need long-term case management, cultural brokers meet with them and help map the family’s self-identified needs more broadly and make community referrals for the family to gain access to needed supports. The cultural brokers make subsequent visit to assess whether the services and supports the family was referred to meet its needs. According to a study conducted by the University of California, Berkley, “almost every parent stated the cultural brokers were very helpful, offering tangible help (e.g., food, transportation and clothing) and explaining the DCFS system and their processes in understandable terms. One parent stated the broker ‘made things more clear...’”<sup>12</sup>

**Partnering with the schools:** Fresno is also in a partnership with the Fresno Unified School District in a project called Project ACCESS, which aims to prevent entrance into the child welfare system when possible. Teachers, school staff and administrators interact with children and families on a daily basis and therefore have an opportunity to engage families and identify those families who are in need of additional support. In response to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001, Project ACCESS works with parents experiencing homelessness to advocate for educational opportunities and stability for their children. In addition to helping families meet educational needs and goals for their children, the Project ACCESS partnership provides automatic referrals to a wide range of concrete supports that families need through Fresno’s Department of Social Services, including support for food and clothing, and family-specific supports such as mental health and substance abuse treatment.

**Linking public welfare with child welfare:** Fresno closely links its child welfare and public welfare work, including employment services and the welfare-to-work program, to ensure that supports and services to achieve longer economic stability are better coordinated and to reduce the burdens created by the complicated, sometimes duplicative and even contradictory eligibility and participation requirements that exist between public welfare and child welfare. This partnership seeks to reduce the barriers that families experience in meeting both concrete needs and longer-term goals for economic and social stability. A by-product of this partnership is that workers in the income maintenance, employment and child welfare systems have increased knowledge about the programs and supports that are available to families across different systems, better enabling them to help families gain access to the preventive services for which they are eligible and helping to identify and link families to more intensive supports when they are needed.

## Supportive Housing: Connecticut

There is a correlation between the amount of time a family spends in a homeless shelter and child welfare involvement. In New York City, 40 percent of children who stayed in a shelter an average of 90 days or more

became child-welfare involved, compared to just 10 percent of children who had shelter stays of 90 days or less.<sup>13</sup> Nationally, lack of access to housing places children at risk for diminished health, education and developmental outcomes, and increases the likelihood of foster placement and is associated with higher service utilization and delays in family reunification.<sup>14</sup>

The Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) is collaborating with state partners, community agencies and service providers to deliver a two-tiered triage procedure that provides access to stable housing, trauma-focused assessment, interdisciplinary team-based support and evidence-based parenting and mental health services for family members. Desired long-term outcomes of this initiative include reduced child welfare system contacts, maltreatment, removal and foster care placement, and increased family housing stability and parental employment.<sup>15</sup>

The Connection, Inc., a private nonprofit organization, has for a long time worked with the Department of Children and Families through Connecticut's Supportive Housing for Families (SHF) program to serve families where housing is a barrier to family preservation or reunification. Families participating in SHF are provided permanent, subsidized housing and intensive case management services. Vouchers for subsidized housing are provided through the federal Family Unification Program (FUP), which specifically identifies Housing Choice Vouchers for families where the lack of adequate housing is a primary factor in the imminent placement of a child in out-of-home care or delay in reunification.<sup>16</sup> The Connection, Inc.'s case manager is responsible for working with the family to ensure all of their concrete and household needs are met including coordinating services provided through DCF, the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and the Connecticut Department of Social Services. These specific services include evidence-based mental health support, addiction recovery services, employment training and parenting classes.

Building upon The Connection, Inc.'s work over the last 15 years, Connecticut's DCF is also implementing the Intensive Supportive Housing for Families Program. Specifically, this federal demonstration supportive housing initiative targets families at the front-door of child welfare and aims to provide stable housing, intensive case management, evidence-based mental health and parenting services to prevent removal or facilitate expedited reunification for children removed within the previous 60 days. This initiative includes a randomized control study of its effectiveness.

## A Child Welfare Agenda for Meeting Child and Family Needs

Extensive research and interviews with child welfare experts and administrators and the Center for the Study of Social Policy's own longstanding work with child welfare agencies across the country has resulted in a proposed child welfare agenda that promotes prevention and highlights a range of strategies aimed at addressing concrete needs. These include policy recommendations, financing options and opportunities for collaboration. The following action items are a start, but certainly not an exhaustive list of the approaches necessary to achieve a strong system of prevention.

**Define and implement “reasonable efforts” (in the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997) to include supports to promote family and youth economic stability.** At a minimum, “reasonable efforts”<sup>17</sup> to prevent placement and to promote reunification should be defined to ensure that the needs of low-income families are assessed and families are connected with the range of tangible benefits for which they are eligible. Many families are eligible for, but not receiving, benefits such as SNAP (food stamps), TANF cash assistance, earned income tax credits and Medicaid due to a lack of knowledge about their eligibility or cumbersome and

inaccessible application processes. Part of a comprehensive child welfare approach should be to determine what benefits a family is receiving, what benefits a family is eligible for and supporting the family to apply for and receive the range of benefits available to them. Online tools designed to streamline multiple benefit applications have been developed in jurisdictions throughout the country including Colorado and California, where child welfare and income support specialists are co-located to one-stop offices that have a single point of entry for accessing concrete services. Child welfare case managers, child welfare staff or co-located income support staff should be trained and expected to use these online tools.

## Reasonable Efforts Defined

Reasonable efforts refer to activities of child welfare agencies to provide the assistance and services necessary to preserve families. State statutes generally provide a broad definition of “reasonable efforts” and federal law requires that states demonstrate that reasonable effort including family support, preventive services, therapy, parenting classes and connections to concrete supports, have been made available, accessible and are culturally appropriate prior to placing a child in out-of-home care.

**Support differential response to address concrete needs.** Families are often referred to child welfare agencies as a result of poverty. That is, parents are labeled as neglecting their children in order for the family to receive child welfare services. Alternative ways of meeting the concrete needs of families through child welfare are needed that are not tied to labeling a parent as neglectful. Differential response allows for more than one method of initial response to reports of child abuse and neglect and can be used as a way of addressing a family’s needs without deeper child welfare involvement.<sup>18</sup> Also called dual track, multiple track or alternative response, this approach recognizes variation in the nature of reports and the value of responding differently to different types of cases.<sup>19</sup> Differential response can be utilized by child welfare systems to address concrete needs when they are determined to be of central concern for families that come to the attention of child welfare. Differential response protocols that are aimed at addressing concrete supports should be coordinated in a way that ensures the full menu of options to meet these needs, or at least those needs that are determined to be of greatest concern, are available. The Children’s Bureau awarded funding for five years (2008-2013) for the National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response in Child Protective Service, which included a national needs assessment and implementing and evaluating differential response in three jurisdictions: Colorado, Ohio and Illinois. In Ohio and Colorado, in particular, findings from the final cross-site evaluation suggest that a fully implemented differential response system may have deep positive impacts beyond families who come to the attention of child welfare, but to all vulnerable children and families in the community.<sup>20</sup>

## Differential Response Defined

Differential response, also referred to as “dual track,” “alternative response” or “multiple track,” is an approach that allows child welfare systems to respond in multiple ways to abuse and neglect allegations. Differential response models vary slightly across the country but generally include a traditional child protective investigative response and a family assessment response for low- and moderate-risk cases where there are no immediate safety concerns. The family assessment process includes an evaluation of the family’s strengths and needs and links to community-based services and supports to address those needs.

**Allow child welfare case plan activities to fulfill TANF work participation requirements or suspend the work participation requirements until the case plan is completed.** Families involved with multiple agencies often encounter conflicting program requirements. Systems often focus exclusively on their own agency requirements and rarely coordinate efforts across systems in developing plans that can help families move toward self-sufficiency. To receive TANF benefits, families are required to engage in work, work training or work-seeking activities, along with addressing barriers to work. On the other hand, the child welfare case plan is the guiding document for families to reunify with their children and/or end agency and court supervision. There are often numerous requirements for therapy appointments, substance abuse treatment, parenting and anger management classes and evaluations. In some places, like Washington, DC, and California, these activities if fulfilled are counted as meeting the TANF work participation requirements. In others, these activities are categorized as barriers to work and the TANF clock is stopped while the barriers are resolved and sanctions are not imposed.

**Invest in early intervention with families.** It is important to balance the investments made early for preventive services and supports and the often more costly interventions required when families are more deeply involved in the child welfare system. However, to meet families’ concrete needs and to prevent child welfare’s deeper involvement, it is important to invest in early interventions. Ensuring that there are dedicated funds available that can target the needs of families that are at risk of having their children removed from their care is the best way to keep families together whenever it is safe and possible. In implementing these programs, better outcomes for young children cannot be achieved without acknowledging the primary influence of parents and emphasizing the importance of supporting children within the context of their families. Specifically, investments should be made in quality early child care programs, housing with built-in supports and in-home mental health services that emphasize the role and inclusion of parents as important contributors to successful solutions. Intervening in families in a meaningful way that provides concrete services and puts the role of the family at the forefront of the intervention by emphasizing that protective and promotive factors<sup>21</sup> can reduce the need for more costly interventions often utilized when families are further involved with the child welfare system.

## Protective & Promotive Factors

Across the country, people and programs are focusing on protective factors in their work with families. Protective factors are attributes of families that help them to succeed and thrive, even in the face of risk and challenges. A protective factors framework summarizes scientific research and outlines a course of action to help families and youth reduce stress, address risk factors and promote healthy development. The overarching goal of a protective factors framework is the promotion of child, youth and family well-being.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy leads two initiatives based on parallel and linked frameworks of protective factors: Strengthening Families (for families of young children) and [Youth Thrive](#) (for youth and their families and caregivers). Strengthening Families is about protecting and nurturing young children while promoting their development. It is also about providing support to parents so that they can build their protective factors and be the best parents they can be, even in times of stress.

The factors are:

- Resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child/adolescent development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Social-emotional competence

**Promote supportive housing policies and programs.** Child welfare agencies and their partners should expand utilization of the FUP and the Family Self-Sufficiency program, in which child welfare participants can receive priority access to subsidized and supported housing. Supportive housing programs and housing programs that have on-site services for residents can help clients manage the stress of living with mental health challenges, young children and in poverty. Having case managers to coordinate the delivery of these services and support parents before they become overwhelmed and mitigate a crisis is critical to keeping families out of child welfare. Furthermore, supportive housing services can be specialized and targeted to meet the needs of specific populations in the community including parents who are young, cognitively limited or experiencing mental health challenges. Understanding the needs of parents in the community can help agencies target investment to supportive housing or on-site services that are most needed. In Connecticut, the Connection, Inc. utilizes FUP vouchers to provide supportive housing and is well situated to provide intensive case management and coordinate supports provided by multiple public agencies to the families living in supportive housing.

**Develop robust, accountable partnerships that result in streamlined supports for families.** In order for child welfare agencies to have a meaningful role in prevention, strong relationships with other public and private entities are essential. Child welfare agencies should partner with other public agencies, including mental health, substance abuse and social services to connect families with appropriate supports that may not be directly provided through child welfare. Additionally, private partners often have the flexibility and expertise to provide support to families with complex, cross-system needs. In Fresno, the partnership between the county and the community to provide cultural brokers represents an intentional effort to use the expertise and role of community members as key a strategy in efforts to prevent families from coming under the oversight of child welfare. In Washington, state legislation allocates funding for Parent Representation Programs and in Michigan the Detroit Center for Family Advocacy leverages state and city funding to provide

advocacy both in and out of court to help families navigate systems and obtain the supports and services necessary to keep children at home when possible and promote faster and more stable reunification when temporary out-of-home placement is necessary.<sup>22</sup>

**Develop strategies that are cognizant of, and focused on, reducing inequities and improving outcomes for children and families of color.** In responding to the needs of families of color, it is essential that concrete services are available, culturally-responsive and relevant, accessible and affordable for families. This requires acknowledging that there is no one-size fits all approach to working with families, and that intentional reinvestment in low-income communities that disproportionately home to families of color is critical to ensuring the availability of affordable and accessible community-based supports and services. Further, child welfare systems must monitor their contracted services and providers to ensure they consistently and effectively serve communities of color and that interventions result in positive change for families of color. For example, Texas implemented legislation directing the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to place priority on programs that focus on children whose race or ethnicity is disproportionately represented in children welfare and continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of such programs. Prevention efforts must recognize intricate family connections and family systems, rather than undermine them by focusing solely on work with the biological parents and their children and maybe a single relative who is a placement resource. At the same time, there must be a focus on addressing the systemic barriers created and perpetuated by structural racism. Disinvestment in communities and the way systems are organized exemplify how structural racism has impacted the availability and delivery of effective preventive and treatment services to families of color.

**Use data to inform targeted investments to specific communities and neighborhoods.** Policies and programs are often created and administered within particular family-serving agencies. While this is the traditional approach to providing supports and services in public welfare and in child welfare, an alternative approach is to target resources to particular places and to work cross-agency to provide prevention services to families in their communities. Mapping data of areas within states with high poverty and involvement with child welfare can then be used to identify and target investments and preventive services to specific neighborhoods. Data mapping can inform strategic investments to combat historical disinvestment in communities of color and improve the availability of prevention supports for families. Furthermore, including information regarding race and ethnicity in community-based strategies can highlight the importance of investing in culturally appropriate services within these neighborhoods.

**Enroll infants, toddlers and young children of families involved with the child welfare system in quality early childhood programs.** Child welfare systems should ensure all children with open child protection cases are enrolled, when appropriate, in quality early childhood programs. At a minimum, child welfare should prioritize families for whom child care is a necessary component of safety plans for preventing children from entering care. Specifically, child welfare should work with quality early childhood programs to prioritize children involved with child welfare when there is a waitlist for enrollment. Washington, DC, has developed an initiative within the child welfare system to ensure all children in out-of-home placement have access to quality early childhood care. This is an important first step, but states should also consider expanding this effort to those being served through in-home and community-based assistance as a support available through prevention services. Quality early childhood programs offer several benefits to families. They provide child care that can allow parents to pursue education, skill development and/or employment. They also have a positive impact on the healthy development and school success of children. In accomplishing both of these things, they are part of a true multi-generational approach to economic security for child welfare families: high quality early care and education has a long-range benefit of contributing to future educational success and even economic outcomes.

**Invest in home visiting and medical legal partnerships.** Home visiting programs exist in every state and the Washington, DC, and can be particularly beneficial for young, first-time parents.<sup>23</sup> Utilizing home visiting can help to both assess the supports and services that a family might need to prevent entry into child welfare, and help to identify unmet needs and link families to services and supports. An evaluation of the Nurse-Family Partnership home visiting program, which currently operates in 46 states and Washington, DC, documented a 48 percent decline in rates of child abuse and neglect among low-income families at follow-up.<sup>24</sup> The California Home Visiting Program updated state plan includes criteria for priority access to services, which includes previous or current involvement with child welfare services.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, current initiatives have implemented cross-system training and collaboration to ensure that nurse practitioners are able to identify and work with families involved with child welfare. Medical legal partnerships (MLPs) integrate the expertise of health and legal professionals to address family's needs related to social determinants of health, such as poverty, housing and the stress of child welfare involvement, in an effort to improve health and well-being outcomes. Operating in more than 200 healthcare institutions in 34 states, MLPs have been endorsed by the American Medical Association and American Bar Association as a means to meet the complex needs of families and improving health outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

**Implement multi-generational Approaches.** Multi-generational approaches that aim to increase family economic stability, improve the child-caregiver relationship and build the caregiver's support of their child's healthy early development can help address significant social challenges that may hinder family well-being and lead to involvement with child welfare.<sup>27,28,29</sup> In Oklahoma, CAP Tulsa, an anti-poverty organization, employs this strategy through its CareerAdvance program, a work-readiness initiative that offers coaching, education, training and job opportunities for CAP Tulsa, Educare and TANF parents with a focus on young families. The objective is for all participants to secure a good job with a family supporting wage and to help fill a critical workforce gap in the Tulsa economy.<sup>30</sup>

**Recognize that some families face extraordinary barriers due to immigration status, language barriers and/or intellectual disabilities.** There are populations that face multiple barriers that go beyond the overlap of poverty and child welfare involvement. Parents with developmental and intellectual disabilities may struggle with a range of issues that prevent them from successfully applying for programs, maintaining employment and/or meeting program requirements. Families with undocumented members may be difficult to engage due to concerns that potential child welfare involvement could lead to deportation. English-language learners may struggle with completing forms, participating in meetings and understanding program guidelines without additional support. In order to successfully meet the needs of families who are experiencing exceptional barriers, and ensure that the supports and services provided are adequately meeting the needs of children, child welfare systems need to be able to provide targeted and readily available supports to help meet the concrete needs of specific populations.

## Conclusion

There is an important role for policymakers, state leaders, advocates, caseworkers and others to play in ensuring that families do not come under the oversight of child welfare agencies for the wrong reasons and that children are not removed from their families solely due to poverty. Concrete needs must be identified and met in ways that build a family's future opportunities for success. While child welfare advocates and those working within systems always talk about the need for prevention, meeting these goals has proved elusive thus far.

In response to acknowledging and understanding the stress poverty can have on a family, it is important to broaden the safety net to regularly include services and supports that increase financial stability. This is an

important first step in addressing the underlying contributors of child abuse and neglect. Keeping families safe and together is more likely if families have the resources necessary to meet their basic needs. Along with consistent attention to economic and employment needs over time, a package of services and supports should be organized in ways that can prevent the need for increased child welfare involvement and help families start out on a path toward greater financial stability; all of which help lead to positive outcomes and fulfill child welfare's mandate of safety, permanence and well-being.



*The First Focus State Policy Advocacy and Reform Center (SPARC), an initiative funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and Walter S. Johnson Foundations, aims to improve outcomes for children and families involved with the child welfare system by building the capacity of and connections between state child welfare advocates. You can visit us online at [www.childwelfaresparc.org](http://www.childwelfaresparc.org) or on Twitter at [@ChildWelfareHub](https://twitter.com/ChildWelfareHub).*

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## Notes

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<sup>6</sup> Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

- <sup>7</sup> Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.
- <sup>8</sup> The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.
- <sup>9</sup> These transition-aged youth are not necessarily involved with the child welfare system at the point in time when they may be referred to the county due to a present risk-factor. The work taking place with these young people, who are about to be on their own and are often pregnant or parenting, is almost exclusively preventative.
- <sup>10</sup> Team Decisionmaking meetings include birth families and community members, resources, service providers and agency staff to ensure a network of support for the child, family and caregivers.
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