

Translating Ideas into Action

Our Three-Year Strategic Plan



**Center for the
Study of
Social Policy**
Ideas into Action

2025–2028

Dear Friends,

As I reflect on CSSP's first 45 years and the significant influence we've had on the social and human services field, I'm filled with pride and gratitude.

Through our tireless work in system transformation, community partnership, and the advancement of public policy, we've made a long-term and lasting impact on the lives of families and communities nationwide.

In 2025, our work will take on heightened importance as millions of children and families across the United States face mounting challenges to the programs, supports, and services they count on and increasing attacks on their safety and civil rights.

At CSSP, we believe in the promise of a healthy and thriving democracy. Leaning into that promise and building on our legacy, we're more focused than ever on advancing economic justice, health justice, and family autonomy, with an unwavering commitment to racial justice.

As we grow and evolve into this next stage of impact, we remain deeply rooted in the foundation and core values that have guided us thus far.

Our North Star shines brightly, illuminating the path forward—with this strategic plan as our compass. It is the product of careful consideration, collaborative input, and a shared vision for the future. While our values will remain steady, this plan allows us the flexibility to be responsive, to adapt, and to innovate in pursuit of our mission.

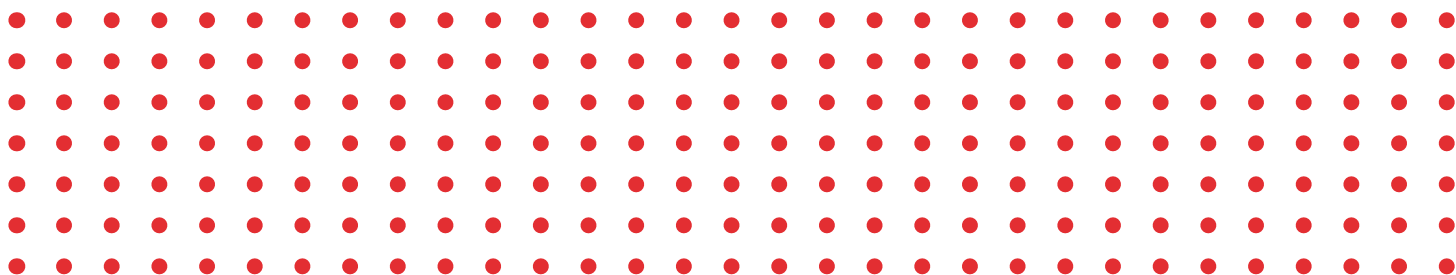
This plan is not about the next 3 years—it's about positioning us for another 45 years of impacting and shaping public policy in ways that advance meaningful progress for children and families. This plan is the framework for how we'll continue to rise to meet the evolving needs of the communities we partner with and deepen our impact.

We cannot do this work alone. It will require the support and engagement of everyone who believes in our North Star and the promise of our democracy. Together, we can move toward a future where justice is at the core of our public policy and systems and families have the supports and opportunities to be happy and healthy.

Forwards Ever, Backwards Never.



Leonard D. Burton
President and Chief Executive Officer



A Plan for the Future

For 45 years, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has worked to advance ideas, policies, and practices that center and effectively support families. **Focusing on what families want and need in their lives, and what we owe our communities, is simple in its premise. Yet in a society that continues to be racially, economically, and socially unjust, focusing on families can have radical implications.**

At CSSP, our commitment to families and communities drives the work we do every day to advance health justice, economic justice, and family autonomy. **Everyone should have the resources they need to support and spend time with their families, have opportunities for good health, and have the rights, agency, and resources to make decisions for themselves and thrive in healthy communities.** Our close partnerships with mission-aligned community-based organizations, policymakers, funders, and community members have resulted in meaningful and enduring changes that have bettered the lives of families—improving public policies and public systems and strengthening communities.

CSSP takes a unique approach to centering families. We conduct historical and qualitative research to ground the work we do in an understanding of how we have gotten to where we are and knowing what families need right now; we advance bold and innovative policy ideas and also practical policy and programmatic solutions to difficult problems; we bring together partners for collaboration and to have difficult conversations; we work closely with public systems to make meaningful changes that improve families' day-to-day lives, and we do all of this in partnership with community, parents, and young people—so that we advance the most responsive and effective solutions possible—the solutions that meet communities' and families' needs and goals.

This strategic plan is an invitation to our partners—and to those of you we have not worked with yet but who share our commitments—to join together to improve the health, happiness, and success of every young person, family, and community.

With aligned, purposeful, and collaborative action, together we can make a profound and lasting difference in the lives of families—this is our singular, simple, and imperative goal.

Everyone should have the resources they need to support and spend time with their families, have opportunities for good health, and have the rights, agency, and resources to make decisions for themselves and thrive in healthy communities.

CSSP's North Star

Our strategic plan is organized around our North Star. Everything we do, every action we take, works to advance the promise of economic justice, health justice, and family autonomy—with an unwavering commitment to racial justice.



Racial justice is the throughline of all of our work.

Racism has shaped existing policies and systems—historically and in the present—to systematically disadvantage people based on their race and other intersecting identities, including sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, immigration status, and caregiving status.

CSSP takes an anti-racist approach that recognizes and seeks to both proactively reimagine existing systems and redress the harm created by those systems. We collaborate with leaders, public systems, and the people and communities impacted by those systems to conduct research and develop public policy ideas that are foundational to achieving a racially, economically, and socially just society.



Economic Justice

Every family should have the resources they need. Our economic justice work strives to ensure that all children, youth, and families have the economic resources to afford the necessities, spend time with their families and loved ones, fully participate in their communities, and achieve their visions for their futures.

Health Justice

Every family should have opportunities for good health. Our health justice work strives to ensure that all children, youth, and families have access to options for high-quality, culturally affirming services that support their health and well-being. We also support communities in creating conditions that promote and prioritize health.

Family Autonomy

Every family should have the rights, agency, and resources needed to make decisions for themselves. Our family autonomy and justice work strives to ensure that people can thrive in their families and communities and that every child is surrounded and supported by loving and nurturing adults.

Our Mission Vision, Theory of Change and Theory of Action

For 45 years, the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has worked to advance antiracist, human-centered policy and practices to support those who face the greatest barriers to well-being and self-determination in a society that is all too often racially, socially, and economically unjust. Our unwavering commitment to children, youth, and families has resulted in an enduring impact on policy and practice and meaningfully improved the lives of children, youth, and families in communities across the country.

As part of our strategic planning process, we refined our vision, theory of change, mission, and theory of action to illuminate the North Star more vividly.

Our Mission

To advance anti-racist and just policies and practices in family autonomy, economic justice, and health justice.

Our Vision

One day, all children and their families will thrive in a racially, socially, and economically just society.

Our Theory of Change

When children and families have

- the economic resources they need,
- opportunities to support and affirm their health and well-being, and
- agency and choice within the context of strong and supportive communities,

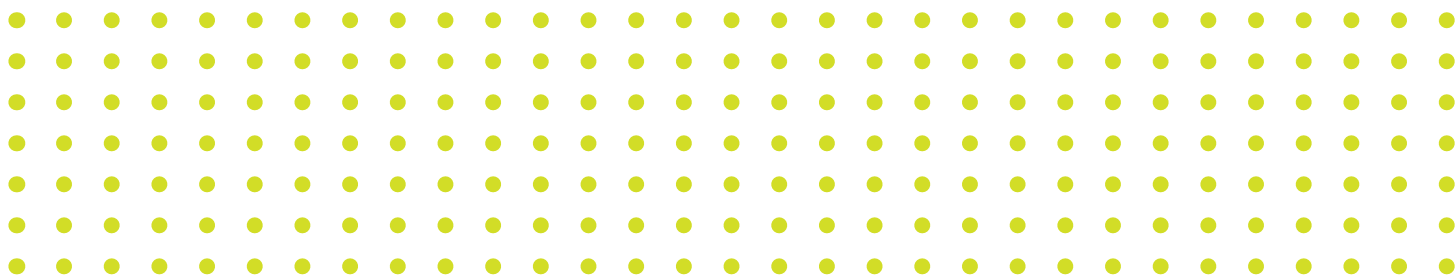
they will thrive in a racially, socially, and economically just society.

Our Theory of Action

When we work at the nexus of family autonomy, economic justice, and health justice to advance anti-racist policies and practices, then children and their families will thrive in a racially, socially, and economically just society.

To carry out this work, we

- develop big ideas and advance them through practical policy solutions;
- partner with young people and families to build capacity, identify solutions, and advance those solutions;
- partner with public systems to ensure that program implementation is effective and equitable; and
- generate a shared commitment to change by clearly communicating the ways that policies impact families.



Translating Ideas into Action

CSSP will follow and reach our North Star through our seven internal and external 3-year strategic goals that we've carefully and consciously developed in our new strategic plan.

Internally, we are:

- Creating an inclusive and connected culture at CSSP that promotes collaboration and an open environment for learning and thinking together.
- Ensuring we are a financially healthy institution with well-aligned funding that has the flexibility required to support our work, balancing our programmatic initiatives and our general operating needs, and that our administrative processes allow us to operate effectively and efficiently.
- Amplifying CSSP's mission and work, and deepen CSSP's credibility, through public-facing strategic communications work and significant media engagement.

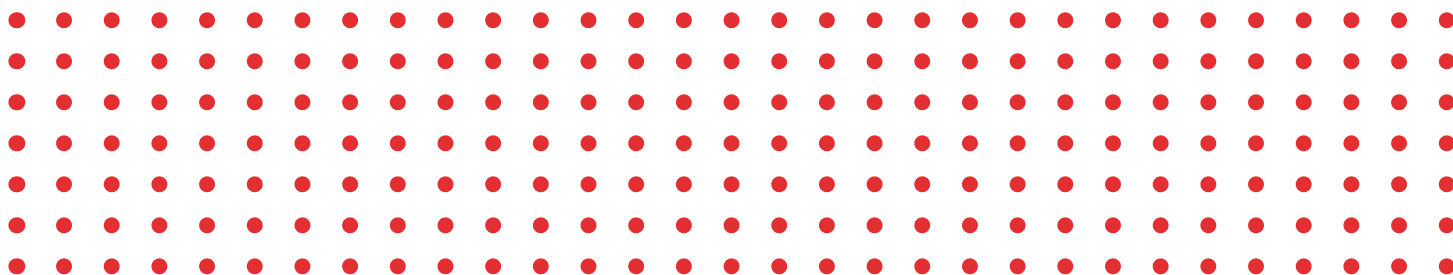
Externally, we are:

- Advancing policy and programmatic ideas to enhance access to unrestricted benefits, specifically cash benefits so families can meet their goals without restrictions and achieve their vision for their futures.
- Developing and advancing a continuum of supports, services, and resources in communities so that families have support in ways that meet their needs, while we work to ensure that the families involved in child welfare systems today are supported and their rights and humanity are respected at all times.
- Developing and advancing strategies to humanize the way we support the health and well-being of children, youth, and families—centering the research on development, identity, and culture inside and outside of health care systems.
- Promoting racial justice by continuing to build the capacity of public systems, community partners, policymakers and others to center an anti-racist approach in their work.

CSSP's North Star is a new way of articulating our longstanding commitments and core beliefs. Since our founding, CSSP has worked to develop and advance ideas, policies, practices, and partnerships that improve people's lives—our economic security, our health and well-being, and our ability to thrive in our communities.

We have long recognized that to do this work well we must center justice—grounded in the core belief that we should make sure that opportunity is available to every family, and that to be successful as a country, policy must be designed and administered with a focus on fairness.

Our body of work brings our theory of action to life. CSSP's work today builds on the work we've done over the past 45 years—as we bring to bear the lessons we've learned and relationships we've built in ways that meet families' needs right now.



From Our Past to Our Future

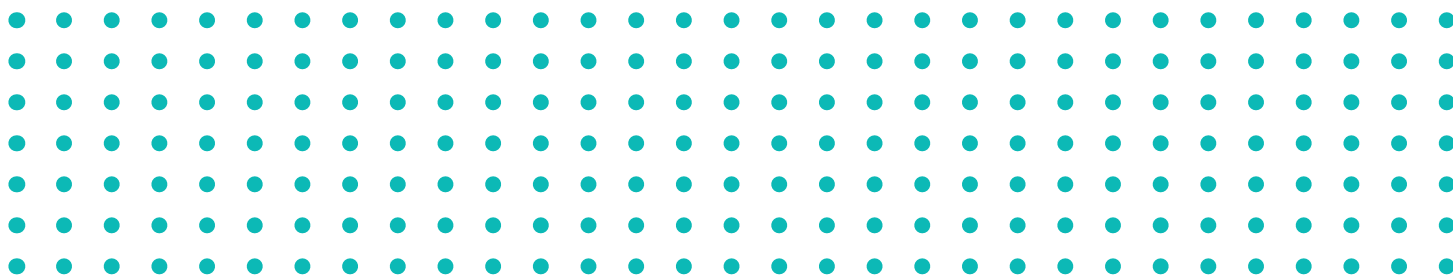
The early history of CSSP is marked by an emphasis on reducing poverty and developing income security policies that improve families' lives without creating unnecessary barriers to economic success. This focus grew in part from CSSP founder Tom Joe's seminal role in the creation of the federal Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance (SSI/SSDI) program, which CSSP staff carried on through work to expand the Earned Income Tax Credit in the 1990s. This work laid a strong foundation for CSSP's current thought leadership in eliminating [work requirements](#) in federal and state programs, [supporting unpaid caregiving](#), eliminating labor discrimination for women of color, and advancing a [child allowance](#) through mechanisms like the Child Tax Credit.

We also have a long history of partnering closely with public systems to support the effective and equitable development and implementation of policies and practices and reduce the harm that systems can cause families and communities. Through our close partnerships with child welfare, behavioral health, and juvenile justice systems over the course of decades, we collect and analyze data—including through use of a structured qualitative methodology called the Institutional Analysis—to identify how these systems can redress inequities and work better with and produce positive outcomes for children and families. We have served as independent court-appointed monitors or neutrals, promoting public accountability and supporting non-adversarial problem solving so that court-ordered agreements can promote lasting systemic change that result in positive outcomes for children and families. We have developed and advanced protective and promotive factors, essential elements that research tells us help [young people](#) and [families](#) with young children thrive, even in the face of adversity.

The lessons we have learned from our close partnerships with child welfare systems have informed our current idea and policy development to expand [culturally-responsive supports](#) supports to families that respect their autonomy and are upstream and rooted in their communities. Our family autonomy and justice work strives to ensure that people can thrive in their families and communities and that every child is surrounded and supported by loving and nurturing adults. To achieve this requires that we develop and advance a continuum of supports, services, and resources in communities so that families have support in ways that meet their needs outside of intervening systems, while we work to ensure that the children and families involved in child welfare systems today are supported and their rights and humanity are respected at all times.

CSSP's approach across our work in public policy and systems is defined by our commitment to continuously learn from and partner closely with young people, families, and communities. We do this because we understand that to develop responsive and effective policy and systems, partnership with the families, young people, and communities these policies and systems are intended to serve is imperative. Ideas and policies are better when designed together with families and young people, and we value building community capacity and opportunity. A brief look back shows how partnership with families, young people, and community has shaped CSSP's work over the years.

In the early 2000s, our pathbreaking [Customer Satisfaction Project](#) created a new model for holding local agencies accountable to communities, as CSSP worked with community members in places as distinct as Atlanta, Georgia and Montgomery County, MD to engage and educate residents as consumers, develop neighborhood consumer advocacy groups to capture consumer feedback, and share this customer feedback with public and private agencies to improve services. During the Obama administration, we built on this model, bringing community members together to ensure the policies and programs of the administration's place-based initiatives—including



Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, and the Building Neighborhood Capacity Program—were administered with a focus on achieving results for families and communities.

Our commitment to partnering with young people, families, and communities can clearly be seen across CSSP's current efforts, from [Project DULCE](#) where we support a pediatric intervention centered on partnering with parents to improve infants' outcomes, to our [CARES](#) initiative where we develop meaningful policy agendas with young people who have exited the foster care system, to our parent advisory board where we advocate for a child allowance that benefits all families who need it, to the critical work we do with community leaders to understand the impact of culture on health and service provision. Today, CSSP's [Parent Leader Network](#) (PLN) serves as the gold standard in family partnership, providing a space for parents in communities across the country that are a part of CSSP's [EC-LINC](#) initiative to collaborate with and support each other, develop ideas and solutions that are responsive to the needs of parents, and advocate for parent voice and leadership in early childhood policy.

As we look ahead, we are excited about taking on new opportunities to partner with young people, families, and communities and advance our vision of a society that truly has health justice, economic justice, and family autonomy, so that all families can lead happy and healthy lives.

Join Us

Our North Star is bold. It requires re-imagining the ways we support and care for each other, building on our strengths, and working together.

It requires addressing and dismantling systems of oppression that have caused deep, generational harm to families.

To realize that North Star, our vision has to be big and our commitment unwavering. We must be practical and strategic in developing and advancing meaningful solutions.

And, we cannot do this work alone. It will require the support and engagement of everyone who shares our commitments and the promise of our democracy.

As our team, partners, champions, and friends, we invite you to join us on this journey.



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