

# Designing Better Programs for Young Parents & Families

Insights from The Southeastern Cohort on Young Parents & Families<sup>1</sup>

November 2020



<sup>1</sup>Evaluating & Designing Better Programs: Insights from The Southeastern Cohort on Young Parents & Families Southeast, Phase 1 Brief\* is a collaborative effort by Third Sector and the American Public Human Services Association, partially grant funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation



Approximately 3.4 million children across America live with parents ages 18–24<sup>2</sup>. While skillfully navigating the joint responsibilities of adulthood and parenthood, young parents face unique systemic obstacles such as disruption in education and/or employment, lack of access to quality child care, inadequate or unstable housing, lack of access to comprehensive healthcare and mental health services, and a lack of parenting support<sup>3</sup>. Despite these challenges, brain science indicates that young parents are uniquely motivated by their children and exceptionally capable of adapting and persevering, including through social service systems that are not designed with their experiences in mind<sup>4</sup>. Young parents are not often identified as a distinct “population group” in human services organizations, nor is data often segmented to identify specific experiences and outcomes for this population. This results in significant gaps in effectively connecting young parent families to programs based on their needs and goals and a limited understanding of their outcomes across programs and agencies.

The Southeastern Cohort on Young Parents and Families<sup>5</sup>—an effort focused on improving economic stability and well-being outcomes for young parent families—is providing technical assistance to a cohort of state and human services agencies including the Kentucky

Department for Community Based Services (DCBS), Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS), and Waccamaw Economic Opportunity Council (WEOC) in South Carolina. The initiative aims to help agencies develop processes to better understand how young parents currently navigate public systems, identify workforce and post-secondary education barriers that young parent populations face, and ultimately close the gaps in social service support to better meet the needs of young parents.

This piece highlights lessons learned from the first phase of the cohort (January to September 2020) which has focused on interagency collaboration and community engagement to develop plans for improving policies and program practices to support young parent families. The lessons reflected below center on: understanding and engaging young parents, continuous improvement through data and feedback, collaborating and aligning services, and insights related to providing services during COVID-19. These insights can guide government agencies, service providers, or others interested in making efforts at better understanding and supporting young families in their communities through tailored programs and services.

<sup>2</sup>Kids Count, Opening The Door For Young Parents (2018), Retrieved September 21, 2020, from <https://www.aecf.org/m/resource/doc/aecf-openingdoorsforyoungparents-2018.pdf>

<sup>3</sup>Kids Count, Opening The Door For Young Parents (2018), Retrieved September 21, 2020, from <https://www.aecf.org/m/resource/doc/aecf-openingdoorsforyoungparents-2018.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Kim, P., & Watamura, S. E., Two open windows: Infant and parent neurobiologic change. Washington, DC: Ascend at the Aspen Institute (2015) Retrieved July 16, 2018, from <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/resources/two-open-wiFndows-infant-and-parent-neurobiologic-change-2>


<sup>5</sup>To read more about Third Sector and the Southeastern Cohort on Young Families, please visit: <https://www.thirdsectorcap.org/southeastern-cohort-young-parents-families/>

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# Understanding & Engaging Young Parents

Efforts to implement systemic change for young families must do so with the understanding that young parents have unique needs related to their dual responsibility of balancing the transition to adulthood and complex parental responsibilities with less experience or support than older parents and non-parent peers<sup>6</sup>. In the first phase of work, each cohort site focused on understanding their young parent and family population and began developing strategies to best engage them. In support of that work, cohort sites planned and executed a series of focus groups and surveys with young parents and the direct service providers they interact with.

Through this research and engagement with parents, cohort sites learned that elevating young parent voices is essential to understanding how programs and services impact their life outcomes. Cohort sites also found young families to be busy, as they are both working and improving their education to better meet the needs of themselves as young adults and their growing children. Moreover, the cohort identified a lack of services that addressed young parents' specific needs such as transportation, childcare, flexible schedules, etc. creating additional burdens. The cohort observed that in some instances, young parents may be navigating unfamiliar social situations and systems and need outreach and support to successfully participate in programs. According to survey results,



young parents valued the expertise and guidance from trusted service providers. Insight on how to fill out forms or apply for childcare, housing, or other public assistance helped to alleviate stress for the young parents. The cohort identified the following opportunities through their efforts and research on evidence-based<sup>7</sup> practices that can be leveraged in service design:

- ▶ Offering peer support groups with other young parents can build morale and encourage program participation, since young parents often lack connections for mentorship and guidance.
- ▶ Acknowledging the need to support young fathers navigating issues such as paternity, custody, and other co-parenting situations requires additional support. Engaging in narrative building around young fatherhood and non-traditional family models is key for agencies and partners.
- ▶ Encouraging trauma-informed training in order to minimize the likelihood of re-traumatizing young parents and make appropriate mental health services referrals is important for all staff interacting with young parents, especially youth involved in the child welfare systems.

## Cohort Spotlight: Georgia

To elevate young parent voices to leadership, Georgia DFCS worked with Teen Parent Connection (TPC) and the Multi-Agency Alliance for Children (MAAC) to virtually convene a group of 17 young parents with foster care experience in Dekalb County. The convenings showed that many of the young parents had long-term goals for success, which included college, starting a career, and financial stability. However, the parents cited barriers such as a lack of peer mentoring opportunities, the need for mental health support, and a general lack of understanding from case managers about their unique situations. The young parents also cited a need for more parent-to-parent connection, trauma-informed case management, and inclusive, strengths-based foster care transition meetings. Based on these insights, DFCS Dekalb developed specific action steps including rolling out trauma-informed training for all DFCS staff, reassessing transition planning meetings, and providing additional supportive services through the Office of Family Independence (OFI). DFCS Dekalb plans to seek feedback on a quarterly basis from young parents in order to regularly evaluate their impact on young parents in foster care.

<sup>6</sup> Sick, Nathan, Shayne Spaulding, and Yuju Park, *Understanding Young-Parent Families* (2018), Retrieved September 21, 2020, from [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/96691/understanding\\_young\\_parent\\_families.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/96691/understanding_young_parent_families.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Haley, Chelsea, Joel Straker, and Mary Nelson, *Insights for Designing Outcomes-Oriented Programs for Young Parent Families* (2020), online at <https://aphsa.org/APHSABlog/eii/insights-for-designing-programs-for-young-parent-families.aspx?WebsiteKey=e22cd6c9-1ee6-45cb-bd31-77c320acbdd>

In addition to efforts mentioned above, the cohort sites prioritized plans to center programming on young parent voices and to gather valuable insight on how to help young parents navigate social services, as well as employment and education opportunities. Each site embedded young family voices in service design and evaluation in order to evolve their understanding of the population and to continuously improve their services. Below are a few insights on how other agencies can center young parents in policy and practice development:

- ▶ Working with local providers to build on existing platforms (e.g. parent-focused advisory and/or advocacy groups) to engage young parents before developing agency-specific feedback loops can establish trust in the community by leveraging spaces where young parents are already comfortable.
- ▶ Developing platforms for young parents to implement service delivery plans alongside agency staff can help to align policy and practice with young families' goals, strengths, and leverageable resources.
- ▶ Ensuring programs reflect a strengths-based mindset that celebrates diversity in thinking and culture as assets can encourage young parents to engage authentically with services.

“ Real change happens when the people who need it, lead it! ”

- Candis Jones, GARYSE Chafee Director, GA

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## Continuous Improvement Through Data & Feedback

Data collection and program evaluation are essential components of successful and sustainable programming<sup>8</sup>. Unfortunately, young families are not often segmented as a target population for these efforts. Without data, unique challenges and solutions remain invisible. To address this, each cohort site began the work to establish baselines on young parent outcomes and build data sharing initiatives across relevant agencies.

The cohort sites began to re-evaluate their data collection to specifically target data points related to young parents. When the data points were expanded for young parents, the cohort sites found it created a fuller picture of the young parents' experiences in programs and services. The following are strategies the cohort sites used to leverage data and evaluation to support better programming for young parents:

- ▶ Using a wide variety of indicators to assess how the young parent and families are engaging with programs and how programs are impacting outcomes. For example, expanding workforce and education outcome indicators beyond program enrollment to other, more holistic measures, such as job retention, wage increases, employment placement rates in high-demand career pathways, or completion of apprenticeships, allows for a broader understanding of young parent success over time.
- ▶ Understanding your population through the data and applying research to identify available evidence-based approaches that are known can encourage a holistic view of young family wellbeing and improve outcomes.
- ▶ Contextualizing data and outcomes through a lens of race equity, geography, and other demographic factors can enable agencies to better understand where disparities exist. This information can be used to direct resources equitably to young families with the greatest barriers to economic opportunity

<sup>8</sup> National Crittenton, Young Parents Speak Out: Barriers, Biases, and Broken Systems (2020), Retrieved September 21, 2020, from <https://www.dropbox.com/s/9ofxbynltsefw89/Young%20Parents%20Speak%20Out%20-%20Final%20Report%20LR.pdf?dl=0>

## Cohort Spotlight: Kentucky

In Kentucky, the Division of Family Support (DFS) had limited insight into the outcomes of young parents in the Kentucky Works Program (KWP), a program to assist young adults in finding competitive employment, due to only having access to ad-hoc data. To establish better data collection and evaluation practices to support better outcomes for young parents and families, DFS deployed a state-wide survey to frontline staff. Based on the survey, DFS identified initial themes and organized regional focus groups to identify areas of improvement in policy and case management. Based on these efforts, DFS found rural resources, particularly transportation, for young families to be limited. DFS found that while nearly 90% of participants were utilizing transportation payments and 50% were utilizing child care services, less than 25% were utilizing lesser known services such as car repair/insurance payments, school and work supplies, and education payments. DFS continues to work with the Kentucky Center for Statistics (KYSTATS) to document historical and current education and employment outcome data for KWP participants, disaggregated by race, gender, and geographic region over various years. DFS leadership strives to make data-informed decisions by understanding current outcomes and disparities across different subpopulations of young parents. The in-depth insights from the focus groups and surveys equipped DFS to begin identifying ways to better address disparities and improve existing support services.

“Seek feedback - quantitative and qualitative - from participants and staff on how to improve services on an ongoing basis.”

- Jason Dunn, DFS Director, KY

## Cohort Spotlight: South Carolina

In South Carolina, Waccamaw EOC found the Results-Oriented Management Approach (ROMA) model, a performance management model mandated for use by community action agencies by the Community Services Block Grant (CSBG)<sup>9</sup>, to be an effective tool for program evaluation and improvement. Waccamaw EOC has been using ROMA, in addition to its established network of National Performance Indicators (NPIs) and its tracking database, to evaluate their entire suite of services. With young parents in mind, Waccamaw began incorporating a two-generation lens in selecting which outcome goals to focus on (reaching age-appropriate

developmental milestones, maintaining child custody, opening a savings account, creating a balanced household budget, maintaining the capacity to meet basic needs for 90 days, etc.) and requesting to use the ROMA tracking software to identify, disaggregate, and track young parents and their outcomes across service offerings. To shift towards parent-centered evaluation and continuous improvement, Waccamaw EOC began planning quarterly qualitative feedback loops for young parents to share their vision of success, level of satisfaction with their services, and suggestions for improved programming.

- ▶ Coordinating data sharing across government and community partnerships is necessary to ensure robust data collection on young families across systems. In part, this information allows agencies to establish stronger referral networks with effective partners.
- ▶ Collecting quantitative and qualitative feedback directly from front-line staff, case managers, and the young parents themselves is key to understanding what is working and what could be improved.
- ▶ Framing data and feedback around shared outcomes both during and after program completion can enable agencies to establish a more complete understanding of actual impact.

<sup>9</sup> See, National Association of State Community Service Programs, ROMA: Results Oriented Management and Accountability, <https://nascsp.org/csbg/csbg-resources/roma/>

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## Collaborating & Aligning Services

Cross- and inter-agency collaboration is instrumental in aligning services and increasing capacity to serve young parent families effectively. Agencies serving young parents and families often include child welfare, child care, workforce programs, economic assistance programs, and many others. Often these supports are siloed—operating under different agencies and funded by discrete funding streams, creating coordination and integration challenges. The cohort sites focused on identifying areas where improved alignment and coordination between programs could lead to better outcomes for young parent families and have focused on building policies and practices that bridge silos and capitalize on collaboration.

The cohort sites completed resource mapping to identify services and resources available to young parents and identified gaps in coordination between them, which potentially creates challenges of access for young parents. Additionally, cohort sites discovered that even when a variety of supportive services were available, the young parents in their communities were not always aware of the services or how to take advantage of them. Additionally, even where there was awareness of the services array, intentional efforts had not been made at the program or agency level to identify overlaps in the populations served or to streamline services and prevent duplication. The following strategies are takeaways from cohort sites' efforts to improve the service continuum and continuity:

### Cohort Spotlight: Georgia

In Georgia, Child Welfare and the Office of Family Independence (OFI) are both housed under DFCS. Despite this, Child Welfare and OFI had not previously collaborated to ensure that young parents transitioning from Child Welfare to OFI seamlessly maintained the supports they needed. For example, in Georgia, young parents transitioning out of foster care need to reapply for Medicaid but often were not aware of this and lost healthcare covered upon transition. To better support transitioning young parents, DFCS implemented policies and procedures to bolster strategic coordination between Child Welfare and OFI. This includes increased data sharing and partnerships between Child Welfare and other offices young parents are likely to engage upon transition, such as Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF. Additionally, staff from OFI are now present during transition planning to assist youth in navigating systems that may be new or unfamiliar. Finally, staff from OFI are also being trained to ask benefits applicants if an individual is a former foster youth, which initiates case management from trauma trained staff and other specific supports and interventions. Ultimately, DFCS hopes these changes will lead to more successful transitions for young parents aging out of foster care, with youth maintaining important supports.

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- ▶ Resource mapping is an important step in identifying the array of services available to young parents and in educating program staff on supporting young parents with information and referrals to tap into needed services and resources.
  - ▶ Young parent families are an advantageous population for piloting strategies for cross- and inter-agency collaboration and service alignment given their involvement across numerous agencies. This requires relationship building between direct providers, in addition to a willingness among agency and program leaders to engage in inter-agency coordination and strategy.
  - ▶ Intentional coordination and partnering can mitigate drops in services during transition periods by using strategies such as co-locating program staff between agencies and facilitating warm handoffs when program transitions occur. This also requires careful consideration of issues such as client privacy and security.

*"It's important to develop a comprehensive strategy to support young parents...it's about coordination between providers and services"*  
**- Laura Beggs, TANF Program Manager, GA**

## Cohort Spotlight: Kentucky

Kentucky DFS saw an opportunity through the Southeastern Cohort to restructure its ways of engagement with staff across all levels of the agency. To better inform changes to KWP, DFS solicited feedback from frontline staff across the state. For many staff, this was the first time they had been asked to provide feedback on policy and practice decisions or changes being made at the state level. As previously noted, based on this feedback, DFS identified opportunities to strengthen supports for young parents and frontline staff. This intentional effort to engage the staff that daily interact with young parents and families allowed DFS to gain insights that were otherwise imperceptible to leadership and led to concrete changes in staff training and support. To further these efforts, DFS is seeking to create continuous feedback loops with participants, community partners, and staff to regularly evaluate policy and program delivery and long-term outcomes for young parents.

## Cohort Spotlight: South Carolina

Through the Southeastern Cohort, WEOC is focused on implementing the STEP UP pilot program targeting young parents by providing individualized case management. To facilitate a strong array of services and coordinated care, WEOC has begun to supplement their in-house services by establishing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with other community-based service providers with similar parent populations and outcome goals. These MOUs include level-setting on outcome expectations and indicators, as well as data sharing agreements across agencies, in order to create a complete picture of how wrap-around services are supporting young parents and families. Going forward, partners will participate in focus groups that explore how to collaborate better. WEOC will also collect data on young parents' level of satisfaction with referral services. This information will be used to continue improving coordinated services with high-performing providers that parents approve of.

“Having relationships with other providers is really important, because we can collect data that is otherwise missed. Without these partnerships we can only look back to see how participants drifted from their path or thrived – all of that is important to understand in real time.”

**- Bradley Phillips, Community Service Specialist, WEOC, SC**



Although cross-agency collaboration and alignment starts with agency leadership, there is also a broader reimagining of stakeholder engagement and partnership required to effectively support young parents. In addition to young parent engagement, cohort sites also gathered feedback from those working directly with young parents. Additionally, local providers were brought into the conversation via community engagement to identify improvements that could be made and to promote community-led change. Here are a few examples for how agencies could engage stakeholders with similar goals in mind:

- ▶ Create space for young parents to shape policies and practices within programs and agencies. Use tools such as youth leadership initiatives, dedicated spots for young parents on steering or planning committees, or other opportunities for young parents to have a direct impact.
- ▶ Involve staff at every level of programming and policy to ensure their valuable feedback and suggestions are considered and that policy translates to good practice.
- ▶ Align agency goals, including outcomes for young parent families, in partnership with service providers and share outcome data so that there is a cohesive understanding of impact.

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## Adapting to COVID-19

For the cohort sites COVID-19 has presented unique challenges to service provision and program implementation. It also has presented an opportunity to re-evaluate traditional expectations around service delivery, communication, and support. Work on implementing new practices was delayed for the cohort sites, due to the need to meet immediate needs of community members, including young families. In doing so, the cohort sites also had an opportunity to make some meaningful observations of young parents and families that may well impact policies and practices in the long-term. Two cohort sites observed that engagement with young parents has even increased throughout the pandemic. Below is a list of the ways in which cohort sites have adapted to the realities of the pandemic:

- ▶ Leveraging technology to remotely engage young parents and exploring options to assist young parents with securing necessary technology, while also managing concerns such as client confidentiality and appropriate digital boundaries.
- ▶ Ensuring that government-issued devices are equipped with cameras and are authorized for secure communication with staff and program participants.
- ▶ Using collaborative platforms, such as G Suite, Teams, or Zoom, have been instrumental in establishing a shared culture of brainstorming and decision-making for program staff.
- ▶ Shifting policies and practices to provide meaningful opportunities for young parent connections remotely, such as establishing online or virtual communities, peer support groups, and mentorship. Cohort site focus groups were also convened virtually.
- ▶ Embracing remote services as a way to reduce the burden of location and time costs of services, particularly when reflecting on equitable service provision within rural communities and communities of color.

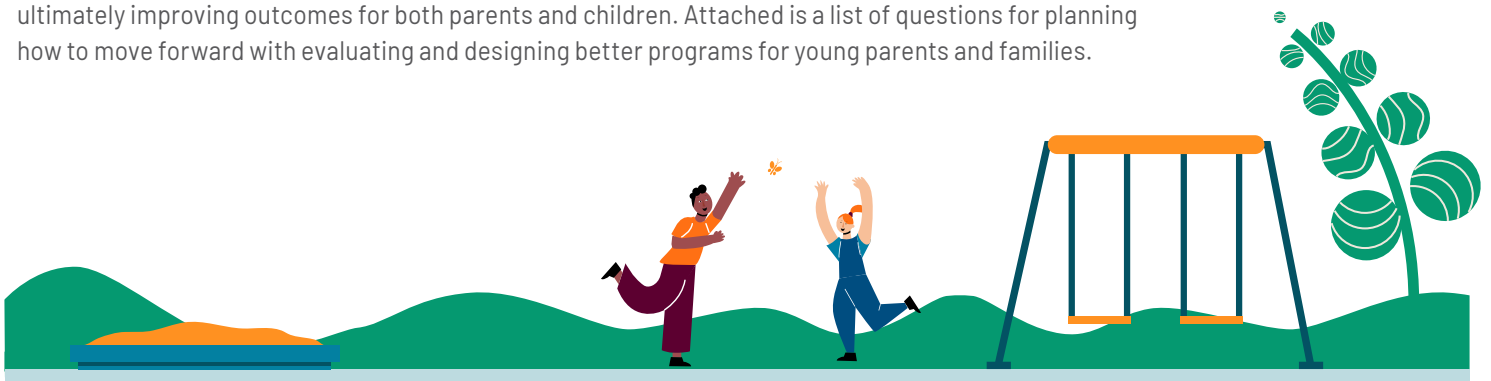


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## Looking Ahead for the Southeastern Cohort

In the next phase of work (through 2021), the three sites in the Southeastern Cohort for Young Parents and Families will build on the work they have started to implement changes to policies, programs, and practices to advance improved support for young parent families in more intentional and effective ways.

The themes and examples outlined above can help agencies and organizations to identify specific areas where efforts can be focused to adjust policies and practices impacting young parents and families, ultimately improving outcomes for both parents and children. Attached is a list of questions for planning how to move forward with evaluating and designing better programs for young parents and families.





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## Reflection Questions to Help Identify Next Steps in Evaluating & Designing Better Programs for Young Parents & Families

### Understanding and Engaging Young Parents

- ▶ Does your agency or organization have a knowledge or understanding of the young parents you serve? How are young parents and families engaged in program design and development? How many young parents and families are enrolled in your programs (i.e. parents ages 18-24)?
- ▶ How do you currently identify the strengths, assets, and needs of young families? How do services include and celebrate different cultural identities? How could focus groups, surveys, or other efforts further your efforts?
- ▶ How might you improve the design of programs and services to center young parent families? How might you begin to think about incorporating more human-centered design into your program and service design? How will you capture and use ongoing feedback from young parents to ensure their needs are met in ways that best support their development?

### Continuous Improvement Through Outcomes Data & Stakeholder Feedback

- ▶ Are you currently collecting data and evaluating outcomes specifically for young families? What is your current state of young parent outcomes achievement? How can efforts be created or improved to collect data?
- ▶ What formal data-sharing relationships already exist (e.g. MOUs, shared-data systems, etc.) or should be established to gain a fuller picture of the young parent population and how they access or navigate services?
- ▶ What do data collection and evaluation efforts tell you about existing gaps in services and opportunities for improved supports? Are there gaps based on race, gender, or other demographic factors?
- ▶ How might you use staff and community feedback to manage programs and to better achieve outcome goals? How can you show young parents and frontline workers that their unique perspectives are valued and considered?
- ▶ Do you have a plan for continuous feedback and evaluation that supports positive, ethical, and helpful information sharing across stakeholders?

### Collaborating and Aligning Services Across Organizations

- ▶ What partnerships currently exist to support young parents and families who are enrolled in programs across services, sectors, and agencies? What partnerships could be created?
- ▶ Have you engaged in resource mapping to identify the full array of services available to young parents and how those services could align across sectors to support better referrals and fewer drops in services? Have you explored whether funding streams can be braided and blended to better support young families?
- ▶ Do your policies and practices support parents, families, community members, and service providers/case managers as meaningful stakeholders? Do you honor and leverage feedback from young parents and families in service delivery? Do you compensate young parents for their engagement in feedback gathering?

## Adapting Services for Young Parents as a Result of COVID-19

- ▶ What changes to case management practices and norms have you made during the pandemic that might better support efforts to engage young parents in the long-term?
- ▶ What are some of the benefits to the remote services format that may provide improved support to some young parent families? Which young parent families are being left behind?

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**About APHSA:** The American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) is a bipartisan, nonprofit membership organization representing state and local health and human service agencies through their top-level leadership. APHSA seeks to influence modern policies and practices that support the health and well-being of all children and families and that lead to stronger communities.

**About Third Sector:** Third Sector is transforming the way communities connect people with vital services. We use funding, data, and incentives as levers to impact how governments, service providers, and community stakeholders work together. This process leads to quantifiable improvements in people's lives by creating new incentives to inspire sustainable operational changes within an organization. We work alongside communities to help realize a thriving future of educational opportunity, economic mobility, housing stability, and physical and mental health. We seek out and elevate diverse local perspectives and foster an inclusive environment where these voices are centered in the decision-making process. When Third Sector's work is complete, organizations entrusted to use public funds will have the systems, tools, and data to do more and do better for the people they serve. Since 2011, we have supported more than 40 agencies and shifted over \$805 million in contracts to measurably improve outcomes for people in areas such as education, health, and economic mobility. Third Sector, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, is supported by its work for governments and service providers as well as philanthropic and government grants. To learn more, visit [thirdsectorcap.org](http://thirdsectorcap.org).

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