

System Alignment for Young Families: Shifting Human Services to Improve Well-Being for Parents Under 24 and their Children

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Families thrive when children and parents are empowered to succeed. The earlier families attain stability, the better overall outcomes are for communities and individual families, and that is why investing in parents under the age of 24 and their children is key to building thriving communities. Approximately 3.4 million children across the United States live with parents **ages 18-24**. Brain science research indicates that parents under the age of 24 are uniquely motivated by their children and are exceptionally capable of adapting and persevering. Yet, as young parents navigate the joint responsibilities of parenthood and the transition to adulthood, they often face unique systemic obstacles that include lack of access to quality child care, inadequate or unstable housing, lack of access to mental health services, disruption in education and/or employment, and a lack of parenting support.

For every \$1 invested in young children and families through high-quality systems like child care programs, home visiting programs, employment and training opportunities, and nutrition programs, **between \$7 and \$12 are saved** in future interventions like child welfare involvement. That said, in the current landscape, human services systems are often not designed with the experiences of young families in mind.

Building on previous work to develop a **roadmap for system-level change** to better support young families, done with generous funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) established the System Alignment for Young Families Learning Academy (SAYF). This program set out to support cross-systems teams from state and local human services agencies in establishing a System Alignment Plan (SAP) to support young families.

Throughout this project, human services leaders, APHSA staff, and parent leaders learned about the challenges and opportunities around co-designing human services with people with lived experience and aligning the often-siloed human services programs. This brief highlights key takeaways from APHSA's work on young families, starting with an overview of the young families work and its early years, followed by key takeaways and highlights from its final year, ending with opportunities for future work in the young families space.



SAYF Over the Years

In April 2021, APHSA established the System Alignment Working Group for Children and Families with a group of dedicated human services leaders and stakeholders across sectors, including parent representatives. The working group was tasked with identifying strengths and barriers in our current human services systems, seeking opportunities for better system alignment, and laying the foundations for a framework of effective human services alignment, resulting in improved outcomes for parents under the age of 24 and their children. Members engaged in an iterative process with monthly development sessions, interactive workshops and convenings, and providing one-on-one feedback to APHSA staff. The results of these efforts led to the production of a roadmap, designed to support human services leaders at every level to facilitate meaningful, systems-level changes that better serves the children and families in their communities.

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Using **The Roadmap to Human Services System Alignment for Young Families** as a guide, APHSA launched the SAYF Learning Academy in March 2022 with six cross-sectional teams that included parent leadership representing Maryland, Maricopa County (Arizona), Massachusetts, Nebraska, Nevada, and Wake County (North Carolina). Through the development of targeted practice tools, peer-to-peer learning, and individualized planning, each team worked to advance system alignment so that young families experience seamless service delivery that meets their individual needs.

The SAYF Learning Academy teams participated in a series of activities to examine their systems and develop plans for implementation. The cross-sectional teams developed strategic plans in partnership with APHSA and parent leaders. The teams then took these plans and prepared for implementation, which was the focus of SAYF II, the last phase of the young families work.





SAYF II Overview

Building off the strategic planning process in the initial SAYF Learning Academy, and the power of co-designing systems with the parents who use them, APHSA launched SAYF II to work with state and county leaders and the parents in their communities to implement system alignment strategies to improve service delivery to parents under the age of 24 and their young children. In 2023, APHSA launched its Young Families community of practice where state and county leaders were invited to dive deeper into strategies to enhance work in this area, engage in peer-to-peer learning, and discuss the importance of co-designing human services programs with parents under the age of 24.

A central component of the Young Families work was understanding how to design human services programs with and for young parents. Human services leaders had the opportunity to learn from parents in the SAYF Learning Academy, technical assistance cohort, community of practice, and young families roundtable, where parents shared their perspectives with human services leaders on how to improve their programs.

System Alignment for Young Families Technical Assistance Cohort II

In the final year of this project, APHSA launched the second round of technical assistance for states and counties looking to implement plans to better align their human services programs for and with parents under the age of 24. Cohort II members were selected based on submitted plans which demonstrated a dedicated vision for system alignment to better support young families and a plan to coordinate across systems and agencies, partner with parents under the age of 24 as leaders and co-creators, and leverage community partners to increase and expand access to critical services for this population.

Through SAYF II, APHSA provided direct technical assistance to Allegany County Department of Social Services (Maryland), Dakota County Community Services Agency (Minnesota), and the Division of Child Support Services in the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS). Additionally, via SAYF II, APHSA consulted with a fourth state Department of Human Services to recommend embedding system alignment strategies that support young families within the state's Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.



Allegany County Department of Social Services & Local Management Board

Integrating Lived Experience Expertise into Benefit Navigator Programs

In phase II of the technical cohort, APHSA conducted biweekly meetings with the Allegany County team to discuss the implementation plan for standing up a new primary navigator role housed with the Allegany County Local Management Board, in partnership with the Allegany County Department of Social Services. Allegany County looked to move upstream of human services by connecting young parents with community services before they reached crisis. Additionally, the team wanted to ensure that families did not have to navigate the system alone to learn which services they were eligible for and how to access those programs. Further, having input from a parent with lived experience helped ensure Allegany that they were designing a role that truly addressed the needs of the target audience. This may be a viable strategy for other states and counties that have a range of services available for families, which may be siloed or difficult to navigate without deep knowledge of the various programs.

In addition to meetings with Allegany staff, APHSA also compiled research on key aspects of the role, such as scope of practice, typical caseload, and training for navigator roles while also connecting Allegany with Dakota County, Minnesota, which recently implemented a similar program.

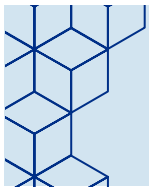
Allegany County successfully launched its navigator position in the fall of 2023 and expressed the invaluable impact of having people with lived experience involved in the process. Peer-to-peer connections available through the technical assistance cohort also impacted how they approached opportunities and challenges for the new role.

Colorado Department of Human Services, Division of Child Support Services

Compensating Community Member Lived Experience Expertise

The Division of Child Support Services in the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) was interested in developing standardized community member compensation pathways. Creating a standard compensation policy would reduce administrative barriers to authentically engaging and partnering with community members who can inform system policies, programs, and services. While CDHS had compensated people with lived experience participating in the CDHS Family Voice Council since 2018, there was not a department-wide nor division-specific policy guiding how staff should approach accounting or contracts, and how to consider the impact of compensation on public benefit eligibility.

Particularly with a goal of embedding the perspectives of young parents into the Division of Child Support Services, APHSA provided CDHS with research support on best practices and guidance from peer states with similar initiatives. In October 2023, CDHS released a **department-wide policy** that set a standard community member compensation protocol. In addition to a policy release, department leadership released a **public webinar** diving into why such department policies are important for community members and agencies, and how the policy supports authentic community engagement and partnership.



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Dakota County Social Services, Minnesota

Building Resources to Partner with People with Lived Experience

In the second cohort, Dakota County continued their efforts to integrate people with lived experience into their agency and to work against administrative barriers to compensating people with lived experience for their contributions. In previous years, the agency leveraged lessons from the human services value curve to redesign service delivery to young families by building out the Pathways to Prosperity and Well-Being (P2PW) pilot program. P2PW uses an intentional service delivery model that centers on equity, leveraging the expertise of both multidisciplinary staff and families, paired with flexible economic supports that allow families to target their greatest needs. The agency continues to refine this program, including identifying training, evaluation practices, additional staff, and other resources that align with the feedback received from participants.

Dakota County, like many other jurisdictions, faced barriers to developing a process for paying parents due to administrative rules that prohibit payments to external partners. APHSA served as a thought partner and connector with other states and counties working through these issues. Dakota County is also working to build the capacity of people with lived experience to engage in co-design work through leadership development.



APHSA met with Dakota County to discuss resources, including peer states and counties, that were looking to addressing the issue of compensation. Dakota collaborated with APHSA to examine how states and counties compensated their parents with lived experience, engage in peer-to-peer conversations with Allegany County about navigator programs, and will soon map out how to provide leadership training to parents with lived experience using the technical assistance funds. The goal is to build the capacity of young parent leaders to engage in meaningful ways to co-design projects with Dakota County agencies. The agency recognized that while bringing the voices of parents under the age of 24 would benefit their work, not everyone who wants to do this work has the skills needed or desired to be successful. Ensuring that the parents felt confident, empowered, and prepared for co-design work is important for the Dakota County team.

State Department of Human Services

Exploring Flexibilities in the TANF Block Grant for Child Care

In addition to providing direct technical assistance to the three jurisdictions above, APHSA also provided guidance to an additional state agency and their consultants in the work to modernize TANF in the state. Although still early in their planning phases, the agency is considering ways to increase childcare access to parents under the age of 24 with low-incomes, supporting increased access to quality childcare while parents invest in school and work. Since many families receiving TANF are young families, targeting partnerships through TANF can strategically support investments in young families.

APHSA served as a thought partner to the state and their consultants and created a research brief to examine innovative practices in TANF, TANF-Community Action Agency (CAA) partnerships, and TANF-child welfare collaborations. This brief allowed the state to examine additional opportunities to explore and how they might be viable for the state to consider as it looks to transform its agency.



Themes from SAYF II Technical Assistance Cohort



People with lived experience should be compensated for their time, but human services agencies oftentimes struggle with creating processes and policies that ensures this happens. Figuring out how to compensate people for their lived expertise is not always straightforward, and many government agencies have clear restrictions around compensating external partners that make it difficult to directly pay participants. Thus, APHSA collaborated with members to examine a variety of options, including examining how other states and counties had implemented a process. In some instances, the use of a community partner was the simplest way to distribute the technical assistance funds and compensate the parent leaders. Other human services agencies should consider whether passing the funds through community partners would allow them to recruit and retain people with lived experience in their projects.



Identifying areas where people with lived experiences would bring value to the project was not always apparent upfront. APHSA collaborated with members and at times challenged them to think intentionally about how they saw parents with lived experience providing value to the various phases and components of their projects. Human services leaders were very open to thoughts and feedback and it was clear throughout the process that they saw the input from people with lived experiences as an invaluable in redesigning their programs to better serve parents under the age of 24, it was just a matter of operationalizing their roles. Co-designing systems takes time and resources, and all teams demonstrated their willingness to invest as part of this process.



Peer to peer connections and learning about what other human services programs are doing was an invaluable resource to cohort participants. The opportunity to work through ideas, examine documents and manuals, and learn from the mistakes of others were some of the elements of peer to peer and resource sharing that was highlighted by participants. Focus on Young Families Community of Practice.

Focus on Young Families Community of Practice

The Focus on Young Families Community of Practice (CoP), launched in February 2023 and consisted of a series of eight monthly sessions with state and county human services staff from various levels who came together and learn more about how to design and enhance supports and services for young families. Staff from a range of programs who interact with young families participated in the CoP, such as staff and administrators from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child care, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In facilitated conversation related to young families, human services staff got to explore and reflect on a range of topics. Below are some of the topics explored and key takeaways from those sessions.

Framing



Framing and messaging was an early session in the community of practice, with the goal of discussing how to effectively communicate the importance of focusing on young families to increase buy in and attract funding and resources for this work. While those who work directly with young families may understand the focus of targeting resources towards this group, those less familiar with brain science and the unique needs of young families may need more information as to why human services program might need to take an equitable approach to serving these families. Further, information about how to craft a powerful narrative that does not alienate or reinforce negative stereotypes about groups is also pivotal to building a powerful message. In the session, members discussed their own work in framing and messaging around young families and heard a presentation from APHSA partner **Karen Key** on how she uses framing to cultivate impactful messages for the human services system. More information about targeted framing can be found [here](#).

Data and Demographics



Understanding what the young parent population looks like at the state and county level is critical to ensuring programs and services are targeted to meet their unique needs. Collecting and applying data is an invaluable part of ensuring you have the right resources in place. Within the community of practice, members convened on current strategies to identify the young parent population. Members also participated in a facilitated discussion on demographic data analysis and collecting data in-house, drawing on lessons learned from work in **LA County and New Mexico by Ascend at the Aspen Institute**—conducting demographic analysis of young families in each jurisdiction to inform effective strategic planning to support young families. One key takeaway is that it is possible that a state or county's young parent population looks different from the larger demographics of an area. Therefore, understanding what this population looks like is critical to appropriately aligning human services programs.

Human Services Value Curve



Community of practice members and APHSA's Organizational Effectiveness team discussed the **Human Services Value Curve (HSVC)** and how members have or could examine service delivery to young families through this lens. The HSVC allows states and counties to take a critical look at their systems and serves as a road map for how to move human services upstream to improve the overall well-being of families. Human services leaders had the opportunity to examine what stage they are in within the value curve and how they can move towards prevention and universal services and supports for families.



Young Families Roundtable Luncheon at 2023 Economic Mobility and Well-being Conference

As part of the community of practice, the APHSA team hosted a team of young parents interested in engaging with human services leaders about improving and aligning human services programs for young families. The event, hosted at the APHSA Economic Mobility and Well-Being conference, occurred as part of the conference sessions and was an opportunity for parents who participated in the community of practice and technical assistance cohort to convene in person and engage in more in-depth discussions on the topics relevant to this demographic.

Some of the key highlights from that session include increased understanding of complexities young parents face, identifying their unique needs as a parent under 24, and the opportunities for more aligned system. Young parents also expressed feeling empowered to tell their stories and more confident in their ability to connect and collaborate with human services leaders to transform systems after attending the event. APHSA continues to partner with these young parents and provide additional opportunities to build their leadership capacity as they engage in co-design for a better aligned human services system. Below are some of the highlights from the roundtable session.

During the event, parent leaders shared the challenges and opportunities they saw within the human services system. Specifically, parents talked about their frustrations with finding opportunities, and that often times they find out about resources through word of mouth. Messaging channels, like social media and texting were elevated as ways human services leaders can better reach younger adults. Further, they discussed how miscommunication or lack of clarity around what they are eligible for, steps required to be enrolled into services, and redundancy in paperwork and requirements can often leave them frustrated with, or sometimes uninterested receiving, the programs and services that could positively impact their life.

Young Parents Roundtable Takeaways

- Young parents interact with a lot of systems, oftentimes more than older adults. Thus, the need for coordination between those systems is even more critical to their well-being and ability to participate in key activities such as work and school.
- Understanding what a young parent's family looks like and what their needs are is unique to the state, locality, and individual, and human services leaders should work intentionally to learn as much about their unique young family population as possible. This can be done through range of activities, including speaking with young parents themselves and examining demographic data.

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Looking Ahead

The young families work provided an opportunity for APHSA to assist state and county human services leaders in digging deeper into how they can support and meet the needs of young families. Rather than assume, the last four years have been spent diving into research and data, piloting projects, and hearing from the young parents themselves about how the human services system can be enhanced. The incorporation of people with lived experience should be centered in this work. Ideally, they should be leading this work, and there are organizations using the [Youth Participatory Action Research framework](#) to do so.

Through this framework, youth are trained to design, implement, evaluate, and draw conclusions to address social problems. This framework allows entities to genuinely engage people with lived experience in projects, and more agencies should examine how this work might be done in their projects.

Understanding how Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB) interacts with this work is important to consider as well. EDIB is at the center of this work, as it looks to examine how the young family demographic differs from the larger population, what their unique needs are and how to equitably distribute resources to meet their needs, and how to ensure they feel included as part of a co-design process that centers their experiences and works to ensure they feel a sense of belonging within the larger human services system.

Resources

For further information and resources about young families, see the archived [Focus on Young Families microsite](#) that highlights some key literature around young families and highlights from the past four years of the young families work at APHSA.

