

## Moving Forward

The future economic prosperity of the nation is directly tied to the capacity of today's children and youth to contribute as the workers and business owners, parents, and civic leaders of tomorrow. With 1.4 million young parents who are out-of-school and out-of-work, their future—and that of our nation—is at risk. Utilizing a two-generation approach to reconnect OSOW young families with ladders of opportunity is a promising strategy to change this trajectory and interrupt the cycle of poverty in communities nationwide.

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Founded in 1923, the National Human Services Assembly is an association of leading human services providers. It was created by top national executives in the sector who believed their organizations could accomplish more collectively than individually to advance their missions and optimize performance. The Assembly has grown to include more than 80 members, mostly the national headquarters of service provider organizations. These organizations and their respective national networks collectively engaged with nearly every household in America—as consumers of services, donors, and volunteers.

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# Breaking the Cycle of Poverty in Young Families

## *Two-Generation Strategies for Working with Disconnected Young Parents & Their Children*

RESEARCH REPORT

DECEMBER 2013

### Executive Summary

**Over 1.4 million youth ages 15–24 are out-of-school and out-of-work (OSOW) and are raising dependent children.<sup>1</sup> When youth are out of the education system, lack early work experience, and cannot find employment, the likelihood is poor that they will have the means to support themselves and the needs of their children.<sup>1</sup> Too often, this traps their families in a cycle of poverty for generations.**

Until communities offer multiple pathways to connect with ladders of opportunity, many young families headed by OSOW youth will be unable to achieve financial independence. To break the cycle of poverty, many human service organizations use two-generation approaches with “young families” (that is, families with children in which the parent is an OSOW young person ages 15–24 years). One hallmark of these two-generation approaches is the use of strategies that address the developmental needs of the young parents, their children, and the families as a whole.

The National Human Services Assembly (NHSA), an association of America’s leading nonprofit human service providers, conducted an exploratory study of two-generation



programs already in place within its member organizations. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) supported this effort, which sought to document quality two-generation programs and identify program elements that strengthen young families. The study eventually engaged 32 NHSA members and affiliates in sharing their knowledge about two-generation approaches and providing connections to programs that re-engage young parents in education and/or work, nurture parent-child bonds, improve children’s wellbeing, and connect families with economic, social, and other supports.

This report features case studies of two-generation programs, describes elements associated with successful outcomes, and recommends future work.

*Two-generation approaches are a leading strategy to create the conditions for young families to move out of poverty.*

## Definitions for Key Terms as Used in this Report

### Out-of-School/ Out-of-Work (OSOW)

Young people ages 15–24 who are unemployed and not participating in education or job training.\*

(Note: sometimes OSOW youth are referred to as “disconnected youth” because of weak educational, employment, or social ties)

### Two-Generation Approaches

Programs that intentionally serve parents and children individually and together as a family unit. At a minimum, these approaches seek to re-engage young parents in education and/or work; nurture parent-child bonds; improve children’s well-being; and connect families with economic, social, and other supports.

### Young Families

Families with children in which the parent is a young person (15–24 years) who is out-of-school and out-of-work (OSOW).

\* Parrott J, Treschan L. (2013). Barriers to Entry: The Increasing Challenges Faced by Young Adults In the New York City Labor Market. New York: JobsFirstNYC.

## Background

Currently, over 20% of U.S. children younger than 18 years live in poverty, and many of these poor children are in households headed by a young adult (ages 18–24).<sup>2,3</sup> Children growing up in poverty are at increased risk of having low incomes as adults. This cycle of poverty, and its effects, are described by AECF (n.d.) as follows.

*[P]overty undermines child well-being in two critical ways. The lack of income often prevents parents from meeting children’s basic needs and investing in resources and experiences that will help their children develop. The stress created by living in poverty undermines a parent’s ability to devote time, energy and attention to the job of being a good caregiver... The tragic consequence is that children born to parents in the lowest fifth of the income scale are very likely (42%) to end up there as adults.<sup>4</sup>*

High levels of childhood toxic stress contribute to intergenerational cycles of poverty. For both OSOW youth and their children, growing up poor, experiencing trauma, and other adverse childhood experiences have been shown to disrupt brain development and impair both long-term health and economic mobility, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. The Academy found that toxic levels of stress related to childhood adversity can impede learning and in later life are associated with unhealthy coping mechanisms (such as alcohol and illicit drug use, gambling) along with poor physical and mental wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> The Academy (2011) notes that parents who experienced high levels of adversity in their childhoods “are less likely to be able to provide the kind of stable and supportive relationships that are needed to protect their children from the damages of toxic stress.”<sup>5</sup>

Two-generation approaches aim to interrupt the cycle of poverty by investing in both adults and children. Some nonprofit human services agencies and youth employment programs view two-generation approaches as the foremost strategy to create the conditions for young families to move out of poverty.

Although nonprofits have had two-generation approaches for decades, few publications are broadly available that have examples of promising practices for two-generation approaches to strengthening young families. To close this gap, NHTSA conducted an exploratory study of existing two-generation practices for young families with children in which the parent is a young person (15–24 years) who is out-of-school and unemployed. The focus was on two-generation approaches with four interrelated services that:

- 1) Re-engage the OSOW youth in education, job training, or early work experiences.
- 2) Nurture the bond between parent and child.
- 3) Improve the child(ren)’s wellbeing.
- 4) Connect the family as a whole with economic, social, and other supports.

As the case studies show, two-generation approaches are getting young families on paths leading toward economic independence. Highlighting their promising practices—the aim of this report—is a first step toward building support among policymakers, employers, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders to make a full commitment to young families. Ultimately, achieving significant and long-lasting gains for children and young adults will require cultural and systemic change.

## Who Are OSOW Youth?

About 6.7 million youth ages 16–24 are not in school or in a job, according to Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates Center, America’s Promise Alliance, and the Alliance for Excellent Education. The collaboration reports that about half of these OSOW youth are high school dropouts.<sup>6</sup> Compared to their peers, students who are less likely to graduate include adolescents from low-income families, young people with disabilities, African American and Hispanic youth, and students with limited English proficiency.<sup>6</sup>

One in five (21%) OSOW young people are also parents, as reported by AECF’s Kids Count.<sup>1</sup> Because these youth are outside the education system, lack early work

experience, and cannot find employment, they have few immediate prospects to fully support themselves and their children.<sup>1</sup>

A variety of factors—many beyond their control—can contribute to young people having limited economic, educational, or social ties to their communities. Further, these life circumstances may be ongoing, creating barriers to OSOW youth who are trying to get back on track.

- > **Depression and Other Mental Health Conditions.** Researchers attribute 10% of all high school dropout actions to mental disorders.<sup>7</sup>
- > **Exposure to Violence.** Over 60% of youth have experienced some sort of violence during their lifetime.<sup>8</sup> These types of traumatic experiences can have a long-lasting negative effect on health, brain development, and functioning.<sup>9</sup>
- > **Homelessness.** Experiencing homelessness threatens—even disrupts—the stability of young families and places enormous stress on all family members. About 1.68 million youth (ages 16–21) are runaways or are experiencing homelessness.<sup>10</sup>
- > **Involvement in Child Welfare System.** About half of youth who had been in foster care do not graduate from high school.<sup>11</sup>
- > **Non-Citizens.** In 2012, 12% of non-citizen youth could be categorized as OSOW, compared to 8% of their peers with U.S. citizenship.<sup>12</sup>

## OSOW YOUTH AS PARENTS

Just as many OSOW young parents aspire to securing good jobs, they also want to be effective, nurturing parents. Yet, most adolescent (ages 13–17) and emerging adult (ages 18–25) brains are still evolving into their adult form, and this developing maturity affects parenting decisions and practices.<sup>13</sup> According to the National Center on Family Homelessness, emerging adults are still developing their identities, tend to focus more on themselves than others, desire learning and growth experiences, can behave inconsistently, and sometimes take risks without fully considering consequences.

This period of growth, though, is marked by gains in thinking and problem solving skills.<sup>13</sup> While young parents' development can be enhanced by relating to their children, they may not yet have the maturity needed to fully nurture children and sufficiently buffer them from toxic stress. The combination of parenting and trying to provide for their family contribute to the high stress levels common to OSOW youth raising children. This stress can interfere with the maturation process.<sup>13</sup>

### *Young parents may not yet have the maturity needed to nurture children and buffer them from toxic stress.*

Notably, most young parents deeply care for their children, and this asset is instrumental to breaking intergenerational poverty. The deep care that young parents have can be a powerful motivator for staying in a two-generation program. The programs, in turn, can support nurturing parent-child relationships, which are fundamental to children's social-emotional, physical, and mental development.<sup>15,16</sup>

## What Is a Two-Generation Approach?

The Aspen Institute has identified three main types of two-generation approaches.

- > **Whole-Family Approaches** take a holistic view of the family, both parents and children, and design interventions that intentionally enhance the wellbeing of both generations.
- > **Parent-Child Approaches** are directed at parents of children, and the children also receive some sort of support.
- > **Child-Parent Approaches** primarily serve children, but parents also receive some support.<sup>2</sup>

Whole-family approaches are the focus of this NHTA research. See *Jewish Community Services (JCS) of Baltimore* for an example of parent-child approaches.

In the context of young families in which the parents are OSOW youth, two-generation approaches should, according to AECF, bundle services to reconnect:

- > Children to pathways for healthy development via in-home visits, early childhood education and care, and preventive health services.
- > OSOW youth to pathways to college or careers via programs that lead to academic certifications, valuable job skills, and early work experiences.
- > Young families to networks, including supportive adult relationships as well as neighborhood organizations.<sup>1</sup>

In this construct, two-generation strategies not only simultaneously serve both children

and parents, they also attend to the family as a whole.

Attention to the family as a whole is essential. A prior NHTA synthesis of research, practice, and expert insights identified family as the most important asset shaping the lives and outcomes of children and youth.<sup>16</sup> This analysis also found that children best thrive in families that offer them three fundamentals: loving, nurturing relationships; financial stability; and positive connections to social and community networks.<sup>16</sup>

### EVIDENCE FOR TWO-GENERATIONAL APPROACHES

Prior research has demonstrated that a two-generation approach can disrupt the cycle of poverty.<sup>2,17</sup> The Aspen Institute's review found promising evidence that all three types of approaches can effectively reconnect young families to opportunity.<sup>2</sup> A separate 2013 Urban Institute review of evaluated interventions to improve the well-being of disconnected mothers (of any age) and their children identified two-generation strategies as a promising approach.<sup>17</sup>

### THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN OSOW YOUTH

When young people are unemployed and lack basic job credentials, governments spend more money to support them over the long term. One Civic Enterprises study projected a future lifetime taxpayer burden of \$258,040 for each OSOW 16 year old. The same study estimated that the total taxpayer burden for all OSOW youth ages 16–24 years is \$1.56 trillion.<sup>18</sup>

Emerging research in the field has projected a positive return on investment for programs that enable OSOW youth to attain a high school diploma. The return stems not only from reductions in long-term public assistance, but also from lower levels of crime and the economic benefits of a more educated workforce.<sup>18</sup> Thus, investing in connecting youth to pathways for college and careers can benefit society.

## Jewish Community Services (JCS) of Baltimore

Building individuals' and families' ability to become self-sufficient is an integral part of the mission of JCS Baltimore—an affiliate of the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies. According to Joan Grayson Cohen, Senior Manager, JCS Baltimore starts this process by assisting prospective clients—which include young families with OSOW parents—with applying for public benefits and other community services. After they apply, JCS Baltimore provides a comprehensive set of supports that help young parents and other clients overcome adversity and progress toward self-sufficiency. The set includes:

- > Service coordination to assist clients in navigating systems in order to access programs and services.
- > Career services, such as employment assistance.
- > Mental health services, such as therapy and counseling.
- > Life skills development, such as coaching clients on how to apply for child care vouchers and teaching them how to create a budget.

"Getting people in jobs and situations where they are functioning on their own" is paramount to creating a successful future, Cohen says. For some young families, Cohen reports that mental health services may also be especially important if the parents have suffered from abuse and other childhood trauma. In these cases, therapy and counseling are a means for the young people to learn how to overcome adversity in a positive way. These services also set the stage for effective parenting.

## Methodology

As previously noted, the goal of this small exploratory study was to identify promising practices for two-generation approaches using a case study approach informed by the literature and expert opinion. The first step entailed a focused literature review and interviews with five experts in the youth development and human services fields. This work provided a base understanding of existing knowledge of two-generation interventions and the population of young families with children in which the parent is an OSOW youth.

Toward the end of the initial phase, NHSA contacted member organizations with networks that deliver services to youth and families. The case study objectives were threefold.

1. Demonstrate the feasibility of two-generation approaches to reconnecting young families to opportunity.
2. Provide an array of examples of how to integrate a two-generation approach into program and service models.
3. Identify promising practices that may be effective in achieving positive outcomes for young families.

NHSA directly interviewed 17 national organizations—all NHSA members—using a semi-structured guide about two-generation practices in their network of service providers. Interviewees and other NHSA members provided information and referrals to local affiliates that exemplified leading practices in two-generation approaches to young families.

The initial criterion for selecting case studies was the availability of objective data about program effectiveness; however, few programs had formal evaluations. NHSA subsequently selected organizations based on the use of whole-family approaches and the availability of program information. NHSA gave priority to programs that exemplified national family-strengthening practices (see *Leading Family-Strengthening Practices*) as a surrogate for data indicating program quality.

## Leading Family-Strengthening Practices

As identified by NHSA in 2007, 10 family-strengthening practices had emerged across the human services sector from a decade of investment supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Research and practice indicated that the best family-strengthening programs:

- > Build on family and neighborhood strengths.
- > Strengthen the capacity of families to function effectively and progress toward self-sufficiency.
- > Intentionally address the needs of the family as a whole or collective unit (a “whole-family” approach).
- > Respond flexibly to family and community circumstances.
- > Create or strengthen partnerships across service systems.
- > Help to prevent crises by meeting needs early.
- > Make services accessible in neighborhoods where people live and work.
- > Tailor services to help the individual in the context of family and community.
- > Involve families and communities in the design and delivery of family supports and services.

*Source:* National Human Services Assembly. (2007). *Family Strengthening Writ Large: On Becoming a Nation that Promotes Strong Families and Successful Youth*. Family Strengthening Policy Center.

A third step was conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviews with these local practitioners. The interview guide sought information about population served, program goals and components, availability of outcome data, and practices that were perceived as instrumental to success. Supplementary information included program materials, available evaluations, and a few interviews with former program participants. Each organization reviewed its case study for accuracy.

Finally, NHSA reviewed the case studies as a body of new knowledge to identify common practices that practitioners had flagged as instrumental to achieving positive outcomes. NHSA staff reviewed this preliminary set of practices against the knowledge gleaned in the first phase and refined the set. The final set of practices is presented in the *Elements of Success* section.

## Beyond the Label: Crittenton Sees Whole Person

The National Crittenton Foundation relates to each young woman as a multi-faceted individual. Each individual young woman is valued as a unique, distinct person instead of as a member of a group. While conducting research for this brief, NHSA interviewed several graduates of Crittenton programs. With Crittenton support, each graduate had overcome immense obstacles during her young life and embarked on promising pathways. One young woman recalled being a “good” student who was always “off the radar” in a school filled with youth whose situation presented as more worrisome. When the young woman shared her problems with her parents and counselors, they made light of her troubles. Soon, she was pregnant. After that, faculty, staff, and even her family no longer saw her as a high school student. Instead, she was now a “teen mom.” After entering a Crittenton program, the young woman learned that she was a complex, multi-dimensional person with distinct roles—teenager, mother, student, and person—to play in separate spheres of her life. Today, after drawing on Crittenton services to build a vision for the future, she is enrolled in a master’s degree program.

## Case Studies of Two-Generation Programs for Young Families

*(Case studies are presented on pages 9–12.)*

### FINDINGS

The case studies not only demonstrate that the two-generation approach is feasible but also provide a rich array of examples. The featured organizations were diverse, served a variety of young family populations, had assorted program goals, and drew upon

***While two-generation approaches are feasible and appear to be effective if implemented well, whole-family interventions are not simple.***

different sources of funding. The service mix varied depending on the availability of other community resources, program partners, and program goals. That the whole-family, two-generation approach could be successfully adapted to a heterogeneous set of programs suggests the model is amenable to widespread replication.

Further, evaluations of a few of the featured programs suggest that two-generation approaches, when implemented with quality, can generate positive outcomes for young people, their children, and the family as a whole. Output and anecdotal information across the case studies also suggest positive results.

While two-generation approaches are feasible and appear to be effective if implemented well, the case studies together highlight that whole-family interventions are not easy or simple given the complexity of young families’ situations. First, most OSOW young parents are not fully prepared for the multiple roles they have rapidly acquired. Second, the families may be homeless, family members may be involved in the child welfare or justice systems, and they often have minimal connections to their community. A single intervention or two cannot provide the full range of supports necessary so young families have the means to be healthy and independent. Rather, the formidable challenges they face require a coordinated set of multiple services, such as education, health care, housing, legal services for custody issues, and home visiting interventions (and more). Third, the agencies must serve multiple persons at different life stages and the family as a whole. Case managers have to be knowledgeable about child, youth, and family development as well as effective interventions for each.

### ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Eight elements of success emerge from a cross-case analysis of the featured programs. Many of these promising practices are echoed in the literature and expert opinion. These elements are interrelated but also distinct. The elements fall into two categories: program design and services.

### PROGRAM DESIGN

High-quality, two-generation programming uses a whole-family approach. Programs simultaneously promote the OSOW youths’ workforce readiness, the young person’s capabilities as head of household and as parent, the child(ren)’s wellbeing, and the family’s stability.

Because of the dynamics of serving multiple generations at different life stages, actual program operations tend to be multi-faceted, intensive, and longer-term.

- > **Multi-Faceted.** The featured programs use a combination of preventive services and interventions to provide young parents with the tools to raise their children in a positive environment. Weaving together diverse resources for individual families means case managers must know and be able to navigate the myriad systems that OSOW young families may encounter.
- > **Intensive.** Because of the complex situation of young families, reconnecting them to opportunity is an intensive process. Program staff must work with individual families to create and implement specialized plans. Notably, group-oriented services (such as job training, parenting classes) can complement individualized services.
- > **Longer-Term.** Giving young families a strong start tends to require services over a 6–24 month period or longer. Many young parents are still developing the capacity to nurture children and get and keep jobs that can support a family. The programs offer young persons the time, resources, and supportive environment to develop brain maturity, education and workforce credentials, and parenting know-how. Also, some young parents benefit from behavioral health interventions to overcome barriers, such as trauma, depression, or substance abuse.
- > **Collaborative.** All of the programs cultivate working partnerships with other sources of support for children, young people, and families. Organizational partners include government agencies, employers, many other service providers, and civic groups (such as faith-based institutions, play groups). Case managers also facilitate partnerships with individuals in the community who care about young families' success. These collaborations are absolutely essential to strengthening young families. Further, the programs use these

partnerships to connect with potential clients, easily refer families to other community resources, train staff, and, sometimes, fund services.

## SERVICES

Overall, two-generation approaches for young families integrate a developmental perspective into service delivery. Such a view recognizes that individuals and social groups (such as families) have an inherent capacity to grow, extend their potential, and adapt to external influences. The featured programs all tap into young parents' aspirations for their children's future as a powerful motivator to do the hard work of preparing for careers and raising children. Services promoted healthy development by helping young families access supports, become more employable, and overcome obstacles.

## POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

The fundamentals of positive youth development theory guide nearly all aspects of the featured two-generation programs. (See *What Is Positive Youth Development?*)

## *Two-generational approaches for young families integrate a developmental perspective into service delivery.*

Specifically, young people work with a caring, knowledgeable adult whom they trust, and the program culture is positive. Services emphasize building on the young person's strengths (rather than focusing on problems), and youth provide input about their development plans and take ownership of their decisions and their lives. Flexible program structures enable case managers to creatively tailor services for the unique situation of each young person and family.

In two-generation approaches, this framework guides programs to build young parents' educational credentials, job skills, initial work experiences, and employment-related networks. These assets are critical to landing good jobs.

## Elements of Success

### Program Design

- > Multi-faceted
- > Intensive
- > Longer-term
- > Collaborative

### Services

- > Positive youth development
- > Baby boosts
- > Family development
- > Social connections



## What Is Positive Youth Development?

Positive youth development is an intentional, pro-social approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a manner that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances youths' strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths.

**Source:** The Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs. Accessed 10/17/2013 from <http://findyouthinfo.gov/youth-topics/positive-youth-development>

## BABY BOOSTS

The featured programs deliberately promote children's healthy development through multiple services, which NHSA calls "baby boosts."

- > **Timely health services for the children**, including prenatal care. After birth, two-generation programs connect young families to preventive well-child care. Both medical and family services emphasize early detection of and care for health conditions and developmental delays.
- > **Early childhood education and care** serve both child and parent. Two-generation programs help young parents find safe, nurturing child care providers so they can go to school, training, or work. Some agencies secure placement with Head Start or high-quality providers that have educators and environments that deliberately nurture child development and work with parents as partners.
- > **Parent-child attachment.** Program staff affirm positive interactions between parents and their children, such as by drawing attention to how children express affection and praising parents for active listening. Further, if young parents and their children are separated, the programs quickly bring them back together, such as by finding suitable housing, using frequent supervised visits, and encouraging involvement by the non-custodial parent (as appropriate).
- > **Parenting education and training.** Enriching parenting skills helps children thrive. For example, parenting classes and home visiting services teach young parents about stages of child development and practices that nurture development, such as creating routines, removing hazards, and providing positive discipline.

## FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

Quality two-generation programs attend to the young family as a whole. OSOW young parents are themselves still developing, and their situations often impact their ability to fully mature and help their children to thrive. For example, the youth may have high stress levels from getting by with minimal income, caring for an infant, and earning a

GED. This dynamic makes it vitally important that programs quickly and continuously promote family development. The featured programs work to:

- > **Stabilize family life.** In the short term, the programs focus on immediate needs, such as affordable housing and enrollment in food stamps, Medicaid or SCHIP, and other governmental and private programs (such as local food pantries).
- > **Develop young parents' abilities to head a household.** A nuanced tactic is helping young parents develop a "family mindset" of being responsible for raising their children, thinking of themselves as parents, and viewing their family as contributing to the greater community. More explicitly, some programs help young parents with life skills, such as learning how to rent housing, manage finances, make plans, and navigate community systems.
- > **Provide other building blocks for the future.** Wrap-around supports for the family as a whole may include English as a second language classes; work supports (such as tax credits, income supports, transportation assistance); and asset development (such as savings accounts).

## SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

All families need positive social and emotional support from family members, peers, neighbors, and community groups who care about them. The featured programs deliberately strengthen young parents' existing ties to caring people and supportive adults. Some also build relationships between young families and natural helpers in the community who informally look after the family, especially after they graduate from the programs.

To expand their network, programs also encourage young parents to become involved in their community, such as by joining faith-based communities or taking children to weekly library programs. Several programs nurture young parents' relationships with peers who share their experiences of working to develop a better life. This type of peer network further reduces social isolation and makes programs fun.

## CASE STUDIES: Two-Generation Programs for Young Families

### Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies (AJFCA)

According to Lisa Budlow, Director of Programs at AJFCA, her organization's member agencies are working to create a whole-family solution for OSOW youth with children. AJFCA is a membership association for over 100 Jewish family service agencies across the United States and Canada. They range in size from small departments of local Jewish federations to some of the largest human services agencies in North America. AJFCA has a flexible approach to programming and tailors their efforts across their membership network. Their members provide vital services to clients of all ages, faiths, and economic backgrounds. They counsel families, feed the hungry, assist the elderly, and protect the vulnerable. United by their traditional Jewish values, many of their organizations strive to serve in a collaborative manner relying on community connections, flexibility, and creating and maintaining lasting relationships. When asked what she sees as making the most difference with young families, Budlow answered: "community outreach, and being an agency that makes itself accessible" to the community at large. In order to gain trust from community members, it is important to be seen as an agency that is there to help.

### Jewish Family Service San Diego

Linda Hutkin-Slade, Divisional Director of Clinical and Community Services at JFS San Diego, an AJFCA affiliate, explained the "work done at JFS is to protect the vulnerable, build self-sufficiency, build the parent-child bond, stop the cycle of poverty, and teach individuals how to parent in an effective way—not to repeat the cycle of violence." JFS San Diego has over 50 programs, at least half of which focus on young parents and families. Through the Positive Parenting Program (called "Triple P" and funded by the County of San Diego), JFS is able to focus on low-income families with children ages 0–5, especially non-English speakers through Head Starts and elementary schools in historically socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Triple P participants often struggle with challenging situations that increase their stress levels as parents, such as single parenthood, immigration concerns,

and lack of resources available for non-English speakers.

With more than 25 years of evidence, the Triple P curriculum has shown tremendous levels of success, including a 35% reduction in emergency room visits for child injuries, and a 44% reduction in out-of-home placements.<sup>i</sup> Research has shown that Triple P has also helped end the cycle of poverty related to physical punishment during childhood.<sup>ii</sup> Many behavioral problems in adult life, including depression, anxiety, hopelessness, drugs and alcohol abuse, and general psychological maladjustment stem from the experience of physical abuse in childhood, which Triple P prevents.<sup>iii</sup>

Hutkin-Slade believes that aiming interventions like the Triple P program at parents as early as possible makes the greatest difference for young families. By breaking the cycle of abuse common to families who have decreased social mobility due to their financial circumstances, the chances for success in life improves. Echoing the words of Ruby Payne,<sup>iii</sup> she notes that living in poverty is a "cultural difference" and explains that "when people tend to be judgmental of these kids" (e.g., as lazy, ignorant) more harm than good is caused. In general, people "just don't really understand what their lives are like," especially for someone coming from a middle class, well-educated community. Having social service practitioners who are willing to actively go into the community that is home to OSOW youth and their children is useful. By helping to break down barriers between social service provider and client—both physical, such as transportation-related, and emotional, such as being forced to

leave their comfort zone and enter a neighborhood where others might judge them in order to receive a service—greater advancements in service provision can be made.

### National Crittenton Foundation

The National Crittenton Foundation is the umbrella for the 27 members of the Crittenton family of agencies around the country serving approximately 20,000 families per month. For more than 129 years, this network has supported young women and girls—many of whom are young, single mothers—and their children with multi-generation approaches.

Each member agency is independent and tailors its services to community needs, yet they all share a similar guiding philosophy: build on "what works"—the strengths and resilience in the young families' lives, instead of trying to fix what is wrong. In practice, this means that Crittenton agencies tend to focus on "bonding and attachment, parenting skills, health, education goals, and career development and workforce training," according to Jeannette Pai-Espinosa, President.

Many young women supported by Crittenton agencies say the biggest driver of success for them is to be able to *achieve* goals and move into the middle class. The young parents *know* they need education, but feel traditional educational pathways don't always work for them. Accordingly, Crittenton agencies involve these women in designing programs that work for them. By asking for their input, the agencies engage the women in actively working toward their own success. In interviews with young women enrolled in their program network, the women revealed that they are looking for social capital, especially connections important to becoming upwardly mobile. In response, Crittenton agencies now intentionally help program participants develop relationships with a "cheerleader" or "advocate" to help them achieve goals. Community connections are also important to helping young families overcome obstacles such as lack of access to child care, a reliable car, or tutoring support.

According to Pai-Espinosa, "the most significant—but least articulated—goal of the network's dual-generational programs is

i Bornstein, D. (2013). The Benefits of Positive Parenting. *The New York Times* (Feb. 20). Available from: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/20/helping-the-parents-to-spare-the-children/>

ii Durrant J, Ensom R. (2012). Physical Punishment of Children: Lessons From 20 Years of Research. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 184 (12). Available from: [http://www.cmaj.ca/content/184/12/1373.full?ijkey=363180cf4deb4c39780e1e8cf0775efce2b8df3d&keytype=tf\\_ipsecsha](http://www.cmaj.ca/content/184/12/1373.full?ijkey=363180cf4deb4c39780e1e8cf0775efce2b8df3d&keytype=tf_ipsecsha)

iii Payne, an American educator, is best known for her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, and her work on the culture of poverty and its relation to education. She has argued that the culture of the middle class is different than the culture of poverty.

to help young families build and achieve a different vision for their life.” Crittenton’s young mothers often come from families challenged by multiple generations of young parenthood, low academic achievement, and living at or below the poverty line. Breaking these cycles requires a holistic approach. Often Crittenton agencies do this by having on-site high schools with early childhood learning centers so that both parents and children are able to continue their education and development. The families also can access on-site health care to minimize time outside the classroom while mothers take their children for check-ups and immunizations. To promote financial stability, Crittenton runs credit recovery programs as well as job and career development services.

A majority of Crittenton participants are survivors of high levels of childhood trauma, adversity, and violence. Given the prevalence of these traumatic experiences, Crittenton staff use the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) instrument to assess negative exposures that individuals have had while growing up.<sup>iv</sup> Staff help begin the healing by giving young mothers the “unconditional support and love that they never thought they would have.” Parenting programs, such as “Loving Your Baby From The Inside Out” in Helena, Montana, take the next step by teaching the young mothers that “they can be good moms by developing a sense of attachment and bonding” with their child and by making positive choices for their family.

### National Urban League (NUL)

The National Urban League is a historic civil rights and urban advocacy organization dedicated to economic empowerment in historically underserved communities. Founded in 1910 and headquartered in New York City, the National Urban League has improved the lives of more than two million people nationwide through direct service programs that are implemented locally by its 95 Urban League affiliates in

36 states and the District of Columbia. The organization also conducts public policy research and advocacy activities from its Washington, DC, bureau.

### Northern Virginia Urban League

A local affiliate of the National Urban League, the Northern Virginia Urban League (NVUL) serves pregnant and parenting teens (ages 13–19) with a multi-generational approach through its Resource Mothers program. The home-visiting program model is from the Virginia Department of Health, which established Resource Mothers to help teens make the transition to parenting and to achieve healthy outcomes for both baby and mother. The “resource mothers” are trained community health workers who have raised their own children. These mentors work with youth in their family and school contexts, assure timely receipt of prenatal and well-child care, connect young families to community resources, and guide teens in their new parenting responsibilities and efforts to become self-sufficient. NVUL and other Resource Mothers programs participate in the Virginia Home Visiting Consortium, which trains home visitors and promotes high standards of care. Funding from the City of Alexandria, Fairfax County Consolidated Community Funding Pool, and the Virginia Department of Health enables NVUL to deliver Resource Mothers.

NVUL’s Director of Programs, Yvette Bailey, describes Resource Mothers as a comprehensive approach, addressing the needs of the child and the mother from A to Z. The first step is bringing pregnant teens to a center during their first trimester to start prenatal care. Subsequent appointments are scheduled during non-school hours. Once the babies are born, the program emphasizes well-baby care for immunizations and early detection of any health conditions or developmental delays. For the mother, the new health objective is to delay future pregnancies.

The home-visiting component for NVUL’s programs is truly multi-generational. Resource mothers go to young women’s homes and work with whoever is in their lives. This in-person presence enables the mentors to tailor services to each unique situation. One thing Bailey’s team has noticed is that “when there is disconnect between the teen’s parents, the mother, and the baby’s father, the teen is under

a lot of stress.” High levels of stress can contribute to premature birth, low birth weight, and negative developmental outcomes for the child. Accordingly, resource mothers are skilled at opening up communication and exploring family dynamics to see what support is needed where (e.g., food, housing, mental health) so as to reduce stress levels on the teen and baby.

The baby’s well-being is always in mind. Resource mothers connect young families to high-quality early childhood care providers that deliberately promote infant development, not just meet basic needs. Also, resource mothers monitor infants for developmental delays in case support services are needed. This is an important part of NVUL’s program because developmental delays can contribute to academic problems and eventual school dropout, which in turn perpetuates intergenerational poverty.

High school graduation (or GED) is another way that the Resource Mothers program helps young families gain footholds on ladders to opportunity. If a teen mother has truancy problems or has dropped out, her resource mother organizes school partners and others to talk together with the teen and develop a plan for resuming her education. After graduation, the mentors encourage the young moms to start at a two- or four-year college. When teen fathers want to drop out, resource mothers urge them to stay in school so they are better able to support their children over the years.

Strong family and community partnerships plus a high-performing group of resource mothers are the hallmarks of NVUL’s successful program, according to Bailey. Referrals to Resource Mothers come from Alexandria and Fairfax public schools and local health departments. NVUL works closely with schools’ guidance counselors and social workers to address barriers that could keep pregnant and parenting students from earning their high school diplomas. Before young families leave the program, resource mothers make sure they are connected to community groups for ongoing support.

NVUL’s group of skilled health workers is another key program asset. Bailey reports that their resource mothers are effective because “they understand the communities where our girls come from and are passionate about what they do.”

<sup>iv</sup> Developed in 1995 by a doctor at Keiser Permanente and sponsored by the CDC with more than 17,000 patients, this 10 point scale has shown that the higher the score, the greater the chance of negative outcomes later in life.

## United Neighborhood Centers of America (UNCA)

UNCA builds neighborhoods *with* neighbors. UNCA is a national advocate for social justice and community building that is inclusive, holistic, asset-based, and in the tradition of the settlement house movement. UNCA's members comprise a voluntary network of nonprofit community-based organizations including settlement houses, neighborhood and community centers, and similar community-building organizations. Since 1911 UNCA has worked to strengthen and empower its member centers as they work alongside neighborhood residents both to improve conditions in some of America's poorest urban areas and to strengthen youth and families. UNCA's members are found in a wide variety of neighborhoods and build community with neighbors as diverse as urban America itself. Diversity, flexibility, and authentic and engaged relationships with neighbors are some of their greatest assets. With multi-generational programs and services that serve as context for relationship building, UNCA's members embody a whole-family, multi-generational approach to community progress.

In January 2014, the UNCA network will join together with the Alliance for Children and Families network to comprise one powerful and unified force for social justice and positive community change.

### Martha O'Bryan Center

An UNCA member agency, the Martha O'Bryan Center in Nashville, Tennessee, serves the poorest of the poor: most families make less than \$6,000 per year. Over time, the Center has created an integrated "high-way of services" across clients' life spans. These include multiple programs that help young parents engage in school, job training, and work while also attending to the well-being of their children. As explained by Marsha Edwards, CEO, the program succeeds in part by not calling the young parents "disconnected," a label that disparages their lives by assuming the youth are "disconnected from things we think they should be connected to" and that overlooks the youths' strengths and life experiences. Instead, the Center works to ensure that all people, including young families, are "tied together."

This philosophy underlies Tied Together, the Center's signature parenting program for young families. What started as a course to build parenting skills, Tied Together has grown into a program model that has strengthened more than 350 young families. Tied Together is a 10-week parent education program with a key emphasis on bringing together the community—from physicians, to librarians, to educators, to other young parents—to support young parents as they raise their children. The program does this by having staff and experts from various agencies, including the Department of Children's Services (DCS), come to the Center so parents can connect with them and feel more confident in reaching out for resources to support them on their parenting journey. By having DCS participate as a key partner, Tied Together encourages parents to regard DCS as an agency that supports their families. In addition, Tied Together offers a resource fair so young parents learn about community offerings for their families. Finally, the program reinforces engagement with other young parents who have similar situations.

The parenting component of Tied Together has goals such as reducing infant mortality and childhood injuries. Program staff use a Center-developed curriculum that is paired with the evidence-based Nurturing Parent curriculum and is implemented in a way that is fun, invigorating, and upbeat so that parents want to participate. The curriculum is grounded in the belief that "parents are the experts on their children." It teaches parents how to ask their children's pediatricians questions and how children's brains develop so youth have realistic expectations and can give their children positive support in their development at different "ages and stages." One of the most important parts of the curriculum is a two-week focus on loving guidance. By teaching parents positive alternatives to physical punishment, Tied Together protects children from hitting and other trauma that can impede healthy development. Another aspect helps youth differentiate "good" information from information that is questionable.

The Center and Tied Together work with Vanderbilt University sociologist Dr. Kimberly Bess. She has conducted an external program evaluation. The Center uses the findings to further strengthen its model program.

## Youth Advocate Programs (YAP)

Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) provides a unique, community-based alternative for young people who would otherwise be homeless or in the juvenile justice, child welfare, or behavioral health systems. Through YAP, young people are able to stay within their home communities and near their families. Community advocates work with young people to help them graduate from YAP having developed positive connections with pro-social people, places, and activities within their community. They are able to live safely in a secure and stable home, with improved skills, having their basic needs better met, and as part of a strengthened, more cohesive family.

YAP's model is research-based and uses program evaluations and new research to continuously improve its program delivery. The federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, National Council on Crime and Delinquency, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, among others, have recognized YAP's model as a promising or effective alternative to institutional care. Grounded in the belief that each child has unique needs and assets, YAP uses a strengths-based approach to bring about change. Advocates are matched with young people with whom they share strengths, interests, and culture, including the same neighborhood. The advocates work with the youth and their families to create holistic, individualized plans to reconnect youth to their communities, including:

- > Engaging youth, their families and broader family teams (parents, caregivers, and others who are supportive of the youth) to create individualized plans of support.
- > Serving as case managers who unify services across educational, employment, health, child welfare, and other systems and engage youth in purposeful activities to achieve the goals in the young person's plan.
- > Organizing supportive community residents, organizations, associations, and other community resources to support the youth, family, and family team.
- > Involving youth and their families in giving back to the community. This develops their sense of value and competency and enhances youth ownership in and connection to the community.

> Most importantly, championing youth and providing unconditional support. YAP employs a “no-reject, no-eject policy”: youth will not be kicked out of the program because their case is tough and/or complex.

### **Parenthood**

For young parents, the advocates integrate parenting and child wellbeing into the individualized plan and its implementation. The flexibility of the YAP model enables this whole-family, multi-generational approach in all programs. For example, a YAP fatherhood program in Atlantic City, New Jersey, helps strengthen young fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives by developing not only youths’ understanding of what it means to be a nurturing dad but also their ability to use conflict resolution skills to resolve interpersonal issues.

### **Trauma**

Most YAP youth have experienced trauma, both before and during their involvement with the system. Trauma is often misunderstood or ignored, causing further isolation and disconnection from the community. Youth in YAP often have parents who also experienced trauma, which impacts their ability to parent and care for their children. Because of this, YAP works with the young people’s parents, not just the youth, to address trauma.

### **Challenge**

While YAP maintains a no-reject, no-eject policy, sometimes system mandates can jeopardize a youth’s progress. For example, if at the end of YAP’s services, the youth doesn’t meet a specific system-imposed requirement, the referring authority may place the youth into the system/institution for which YAP was the alternative. However, YAP’s commitment to keeping youth safely home in their communities doesn’t end when a system mandate forces a youth back to an institution. YAP works in partnership with state and local governments to reduce reliance on policies and practices that favor institutionalizing youth and to promote policies and practices that maximize the use of effective community-based alternatives.

## **YWCA USA**

YWCA USA leads a national network of YWCA member organizations that is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. Each local YWCA offers programs to realize the work of the mission and to meet the unique needs of their local community. At the national level, YWCA USA provides members with technical assistance and capacity-building services, such as identifying “best in show” programs and making them available to all members of the network. Based on this work, YWCA USA has learned of local associations’ two-generation approaches to serving young OSOW parents and their children. A common thread among these YWCAs’ programs for young families, according to Casey Harden, Vice President of Association Services, is finding the “sweet spot” in pairing access to practical supports (ranging from basic needs to education) with cognitive behavioral change in counseling. This pairing empowers young women to achieve emotional and economic self-sufficiency, as exemplified by one such program in Washington State.

### **YWCA Seattle | King | Snohomish**

The Young Parent Program at YWCA Seattle | King | Snohomish uses “housing as a carrot to reconnect OSOW mothers with education and employment opportunities,” as described by Sue Sherbrooke, CEO. This combination of housing, education, and employment training is necessary to reconnect young families to opportunity. Tamarack Randall, Director of the Young Parent Program, puts it best: “Having housing without education and employment means the chances of keeping housing is very low. Having employment but no housing means maintaining employment will be very difficult.”

Central to the program is intensive case management that is grounded in a strengths-based approach. When young people begin, case managers do an initial assessment that identifies their barriers as well as their strengths. Because young people often struggle to identify their strengths, Randall reports that “being able to work with young women” to recognize their talents is really important. Case managers can then figure out barriers and needs, and how to best address those. The Young Parent Program is extremely flexible by

design because the participants are incredible diverse—ranging from those with a 7th grade education to a high school GED, or an immigrant with limited or no English to a native speaker.

While focusing on the needs of the parent, the Young Parent Program also promotes child wellbeing. It does this on multiple levels. First, the program ensures that all children are enrolled in preschool or day-care. This helps give young parents the time to work through their goals. Also, by providing a parenting class, young parents are given the tools to be stronger parents for their children.

Through the Young Parent Program, youth in transitional housing or shelters work with a housing case manager to ensure that their current housing situation is made more stable. If they are in a shelter, the program finds them transitional housing. If they are in transitional housing, a more permanent solution is found. Part of the success of the program is due to ensuring that each case manager has special training on how best to work with young parents. As part of this process, the case manager coordinates wrap-around services, especially by connecting the young women to services for domestic violence, mental health, and drug abuse.

An education and employment case manager helps with job searches and tutoring. The first goal is to make sure those enrolled get a GED or a high school diploma because without that credential, they cannot get a good job. Beyond that, the program is responsive to what goals young women set for themselves. According to Randall, the core idea is that by “letting them make a goal, we can hold them accountable for it.” Program participants make use of the YWCA’s Young Parent Center, which has computers, job search tools, tutoring, etc. By providing a place for young people all in the same situation, YWCA is able to make them feel safe, comfortable, and supported.

The success of the program speaks for itself. Nearly 80% of participants who exited the program exited “positively.” That is, they did at least one of the following: attained their GED, entered into more stable housing, got a job, or enrolled in post-secondary education or vocational training. In addition, a vast majority of those 80% achieved multiple positive outcomes.

## Programmatic Challenges

In our research, policy experts, nonprofit leaders, and program managers all focused on a central challenge: government-funded systems are not designed with young families in mind. The primary systems that affect young families are early child education and care, K–12 education, welfare, workforce development, higher education, child welfare, and justice. Each system has its own priorities and requirements, typically centered on one or just a few population groups. Systems that primarily serve adolescents may not have a deliberate approach to adolescents who are parents and living independently. Systems that primarily serve adults may be inaccessible or less helpful to underage youth. Programs that primarily serve childless adults may have performance goals that are unrealistic for young persons who are parents.

As a result, government funding, regulations, and program requirements often hamper the ability of nonprofit human services and youth development organizations to help young parents build promising futures for their families. Common barriers that nonprofit service providers encounter are fourfold.

- > **Doubling of Issues.** By serving both parent and child, the issues are “doubled.” Two-generation interventions need to have expertise in multiple systems and to devote time in order to open multiple doors and coordinate disparate services.
- > **Funding Silos.** Over the years, the development of funding silos has made it difficult for providers to cobble together the wide range of resources that young families need to get on their feet.
- > **Legal Age.** Some systems may treat the young parent both as a minor and as a parent with full rights. For example, a teen parent may be living on his/her own, yet find that housing programs or leasing companies require them to be at least 18 years. Or, a young parent may be aging out of foster care but yet be underprepared for managing a household, especially one with children.

## Comprehensive Dropout Recovery Interventions

The Civic Marshall Plan (CMP) focuses on using evidence-based strategies to address the dropout crisis and engages leading organizations from across sectors to align their efforts with the CMP. Dropout recovery is one CMP element that is especially relevant to OSOW youth because it calls for further investment in youth who are no longer enrolled in high school.\*

YouthBuild USA is one example of a comprehensive and effective dropout recovery intervention for low-income youth. When young people ages 16–24 enroll in a YouthBuild program, they work full-time toward attaining a GED or high school diploma and enhancing their job skills by building housing for low-income community residents. They get paid a stipend for their work producing housing, and for this service, many also earn an AmeriCorps education award toward post-secondary education. Besides providing youth with responsibility, opportunities to develop skills, and leadership experiences, YouthBuild achieves results because programs create a positive mini-community of adults and youth who are committed to each other’s success and where young people feel the active support and mentoring of caring adults. After 6–24 months, YouthBuild graduates are ready for college or to continue their career in the construction industry. Twenty-six percent of YouthBuild students are parents, and many state that they are powerfully motivated by a desire to provide security and opportunity to their children.

\* Balfanz, Robert; Bridgeland, John M.; Bruce, Mary; & Fox, Joanna Hornig. (2013). *Building a Grad Nation: Progress and Challenge in Ending the High School Dropout Epidemic*. America’s Promise Alliance.

### > **Disparate Government-Funded Systems.**

The absence of high-level coordination, conflicting goals, and different rules about legal age tend to hinder service providers’ ability to tap into multiple programs needed for young families’ development plans.

In the case studies, the agencies work around these barriers in part by employing specialists who can navigate through and weave together multiple systems. Collaborations also partially mitigate these challenges. But these types of work-arounds can be resource-intensive and may not achieve the impact that would be possible if policy-makers provided flexible funding and program structures that enable supports to follow youth and families across systems.

## Research Limitations and Recommendations

The findings described in this report are exploratory, as appropriate for the study objective and design. The two primary limitations are the use of a convenience sample and reliance on agency self-reports for the case studies. Follow-on research should examine the findings in more depth, such as with a full literature review, additional case studies, and site visits to collect other types of data.

Even so, the process enabled NHSA to profile six programs that were quite diverse in populations served, goals, service mix, and type of agency. That the heterogeneous programs had practices in common, and that these practices have been recommended in prior research, is a strength.

More in-depth research is needed. Some program evaluations have or are quantifying the impact of two-generation approaches, but program funders do not consistently support systematic evaluations. Additional quantitative analyses and program evaluations would provide much needed insight into the effect of program design on outcomes. In the interim, service providers and others can turn to the National Youth Employment Coalition’s Promising and Effective Practices Network for research-based practices that are associated with successful transitions to adulthood (see *textbox, page 15*).

Researchers, policymakers, service providers, and advocates must also look beyond best practices to the complex interplay between programming and public policy. By identifying obstacles to high-quality interventions, work-arounds currently used, and effective policy support at the local, state, and federal levels, the field can scale up two-generation approaches.

### Organizations Contributing to the Research\*

Adventist Community Services	National Crittenton Foundation
Alliance for Children and Families	National Fatherhood Initiative
Association of Jewish Family and Children’s Agencies	National Urban League
Association of Junior Leagues International	National Youth Employment Coalition
Catholic Charities USA	Northern Virginia Urban League
CenterLink	Prevent Child Abuse America
Child Trends	Salvation Army
Goodwill Industries International	Salvation Army Eastern Michigan Division
International Association of Jewish Vocational Services	Salvation Army Metropolitan Division (Chicago)
Jewish Community Services of Baltimore	Search Institute
Jewish Family Service San Diego	The Dibble Institute
Lutheran Services in America	United Neighborhood Centers of America
Martha O’Bryan Center	United Way Worldwide
National Center on Family Homelessness	Volunteers of America
	Youth Advocate Programs
	YWCA Seattle   King   Snohomish
	YWCA USA
	YouthBuild USA

*\*This program brief does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the individuals or organizations consulted in this research.*

## Recommendations

Systematically addressing systems-level barriers to two-generation approaches would enable nonprofit agencies to serve more young families better than is currently possible. A first step is shifting negative views that some decision makers have about OSOW youth who are also parents. Experts and practitioners in NHSA interviews reported widespread social bias against teen parents, high school dropouts, young people who had been involved in the justice system, and families experiencing homelessness. Recently, the White House Council for Community Solutions has made an effort to understand the needs of OSOW youth as well as the costs associated with their lack of community connections.<sup>20</sup>

Second, change at the community level would entail developing ladders to connect young families to opportunity. At the community level, AECF calls for:

- > Expanding the availability of child care, especially in schools and at the workplace.
- > Investing in education and workforce development systems that offer multiple pathways to success in communities with high concentrations of OSOW youth. Because young families have different situations and goals, a single or inflexible pathway is unlikely to enable these young parents to compete for good jobs.
- > Improving the quality of jobs that employ young people. Job quality is more than wages that can support a family. Quality also relates to supportive working conditions, opportunities for career advancement, and policies, such as flexible scheduling, that are responsive to personal caregiving responsibilities.
- > Providing additional support to families in which parents are OSOW youth.<sup>1</sup>

Third, governments at all levels can unlock funding silos and give service providers more flexibility. The federal government has begun this process by establishing the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs. This group brings together 18 federal agencies that support programs and services focusing on youth. Coordinating youth investments is one way the group strives to collectively improve youth outcomes. Specific tactics include aligning and simplifying federal guidance for youth programs, coordinating youth programming and funding support at all levels of government, and coordinating technical assistance efforts. The group also plans to assess and disseminate models of collaboration and information about effective partnership strategies.<sup>21</sup> State and local governments could adapt this federal model or create partnerships with stakeholders that find ways to assure programs seamlessly support young families as they progress toward economic independence.

## National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC)

The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) is a national membership network with more than 250 member organizations; about 40 percent of members offer education, training, employment services, early work experience, and other supports to OSOW youth as they prepare for the job market. For almost 20 years, NYEC has provided critical leadership in the youth workforce preparation field through its Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet). This structured system enhances the quality of programs that prepare young people to become productive and self-sufficient workers, taxpayers, parents, and citizens. NYEC's efforts are grounded in substantial research linking high quality programs to successful outcomes.

Three interrelated components in PEPNet elevate program quality by gradually building the capacity of organizations and programs to use effective practices.

- > **PEPNet Quality Standards.** Research-based practices that enable program excellence and are associated with consistent outcomes related to successful transitions to adulthood.
- > **PEPNet Tools.** Resources and supports to help youth programs achieve PEPNet standards, such as the PEPNet Quality Self-Assessment and Quality Improvement Planning Template.
- > **PEPNet People.** A learning network of nationally recognized youth programs and other professionals who share practical strategies, examples, and lessons about successful efforts with youth.

PEPNet standards are grounded in a developmental approach that focuses on building youth competencies and that takes a whole-person perspective that is inclusive of youths' family context. The standards endorse the use of case managers to weave together supports that help youth achieve their goals. This flexible approach means that when youth are parents, case managers help young parents secure reliable childcare; gain access to food stamps, Medicaid, and other economic supports; and connect with other community resources for families.

According to Mala Thakur, Executive Director, the most effective service that youth programs can provide is connecting a young person to a caring adult. This relationship empowers the young person to realize changes they need to make "to go further in the labor market, re-engage in education, and address risky behaviors or other challenges that may impede development, personally or in the workforce." NYEC also emphasizes using employment as a key engagement tool. By helping to build job and soft skills, self-efficacy, and a resume, employment opens up more doors to a young person than previously possible. Employment is a form of education that youth find relevant; further, working helps to expand their network, puts money in their pockets, and gives youth a chance to contribute to society.