



CHILDREN & FAMILIES AT THE CENTER

POLICY IDEAS FOR COMMUNITIES, STATES, AND THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

WE ENVISION **AN AMERICA**
IN WHICH A LEGACY OF **ECONOMIC**
SECURITY AND **EDUCATIONAL**
SUCCESS PASSES
FROM
ONE GENERATION TO THE NEXT.

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The Aspen Institute was created more than 65 years ago to be a space for leaders to explore the fundamental issues facing society through a values-based lens and informed by the Socratic method. Building on our history and far reaching cross-sector networks, the Aspen Institute has embraced an institutional commitment to addressing the critical and growing challenges of inequality and poverty – and deeply exploring what that means for children and families in the United States. Ascend at the Aspen Institute is a leading contributor to this important mission and was created in 2010 to serve as a national hub for breakthrough ideas and proven strategies that enable opportunity to pass from one generation to the next.

I am pleased to share with you Ascend's newest publication, ***Children and Families at the Center: Policy Ideas for Communities, States, and the New Administration***, which offers a vision and set of ideas and recommendations that are realistic and relevant. This report is a culmination of multiple strategy sessions and individual contributions from more than 100 leaders from diverse organizations across the country. It reflects the insights of a broad range of sectors. As we enter an uncertain and highly dynamic environment, this report is intended to serve as a roadmap for moving forward. Central to these ideas and recommendations is a set of principles: set outcomes for children and families, engage parents and families, embrace equity and inclusion, spark innovation and radical collaboration, and leverage public-private partnerships.

As you will read in *Children and Families at the Center*, we have prioritized the states and communities as a place for policy action and innovation. Place is where change happens. And states and communities are where policy translates into real life outcomes. We know what works to move children and families forward. We must build the political and public will to accelerate momentum and invest in our shared future.

Our deepest appreciation and continued commitment to all of the parents, policy innovators, elected officials, practitioners, service providers, researchers, and philanthropists who have partnered with us. Your leadership and commitment is more important than ever.

Onward,

Anne Msle
Vice President, the Aspen Institute
Executive Director, Ascend at the Aspen Institute

We start the year with a new administration and a call from the public for a renewed focus on economic security and opportunity. An uncertain policy environment is fueled by political polarization, but also a demand for change. In this shifting landscape, it is urgent that we articulate and advance a concrete agenda for children and families at the community, state, and national levels that leaders can embrace. Both political parties agree: Investing in children and families yields major returns, including safer communities, a more educated workforce, and a stable economy. We have an opportunity to build on this common ground and shared commitment while holding our systems accountable for ensuring positive outcomes for children, families, and communities.

Over the past few years, states have initiated a groundswell of innovation and collaboration to address child and family well-being. In a burst of bipartisan leadership, governors, mayors, and their respective agencies are embracing new solutions to more effectively support the well-being of children, parents, and families. Significant federal investments, ranging from Early Learning Grants to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), have accelerated action in states and communities and laid the foundation for future progress. Our economy is on an upswing with unemployment down from 10 percent in 2009 to 4.7 percent today, job growth up by 15.8 million private sector jobs since 2010, and the real median household income increasing by \$2,800 in 2015, the fastest growth rate on record.^{1,2}

If we take all this momentum and double down on our commitment to investing in what we know works, more children and families will achieve their full potential. Our nation is well positioned to do so.



UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE AHEAD – PRAGMATIC PROBLEM SOLVING

To promote strong families, we must help them break free from the traps of poverty and build long-term economic success. Today, 48 percent of people living in the United States — nearly one in every two people — is poor or low income. Nearly half of children in the United States live in families with low incomes, and 69 percent of African American, 64 percent of Latino/Hispanic, and 66 percent of American Indian children under age six live in poverty.³

The United States has also experienced a generational erosion of economic mobility. For example, a child born into the average American household in 1940 had a 92 percent chance of making more money than his parents, compared to just 50 percent in 1980.⁴ Expanding inequality coupled with reduced economic mobility has undercut the trajectory of children and their families across race and ethnicity as well as class and rural geography.

To thrive, all families need education, stability and safety, a good job, good health, and a sense of confidence and connectedness. Children and families with low incomes face multiple complex, interconnected challenges. The solutions and services children and their parents need are complicated and inefficient. Families must race around town to access different support systems, provide the same information multiple times, and find someone to care for their children — possibly someone they do not know — while they wait in long lines and juggle multiple jobs, school, and family needs. The very services designed to help those who need them most can send families backward rather than helping them get ahead.

Even though their solutions may vary, policymakers across the political spectrum agree: We can and must do better. We have a solid foundation from which to build, including policy solutions, best and promising practices, cross-sector partnerships, and models that policymakers, community leaders, on-the-ground innovators, parents, and philanthropists can start using today to leverage existing resources and give children and families the opportunity to live their best lives.

BUILDING ON BRAIN SCIENCE AND TWO-GENERATION INNOVATION AND MOMENTUM

Evidence shows a child's healthy development hinges on stable relationships and supportive environments. Economists and child development specialists agree: Investments in quality, comprehensive early child care and learning, especially prenatal to age three, will lead to a more educated population, stronger workforce, and a more engaged society. Improving access to high-quality child care also brings immediate economic benefits, including increased rates of employment and higher incomes for working parents, particularly working mothers.⁵

This consensus among child development experts, brain scientists, and economists has strengthened bipartisan agreement at the federal and state level that every child deserves the care he or she needs in the earliest years when supporting brain development is most critical. With many leaders on record calling for the nation to do more, this issue is ripe for action.

A growing body of research and innovation around the power of addressing the strengths and needs of children and parents together is also fueling this momentum. The practice of intentionally serving children and the adults in their lives simultaneously is referred to as the two-generation (2Gen) approach. Data documents the positive effect parents' educational attainment, economic stability, and mental and physical health have on a child's development and trajectory. In addition, when a child is thriving, he or she has a positive impact on the parent.⁶ This concept of mutual motivation is at the heart of the 2Gen approach. Over the past few years, states and communities have been applying a 2Gen approach to serve children and families more holistically and effectively.

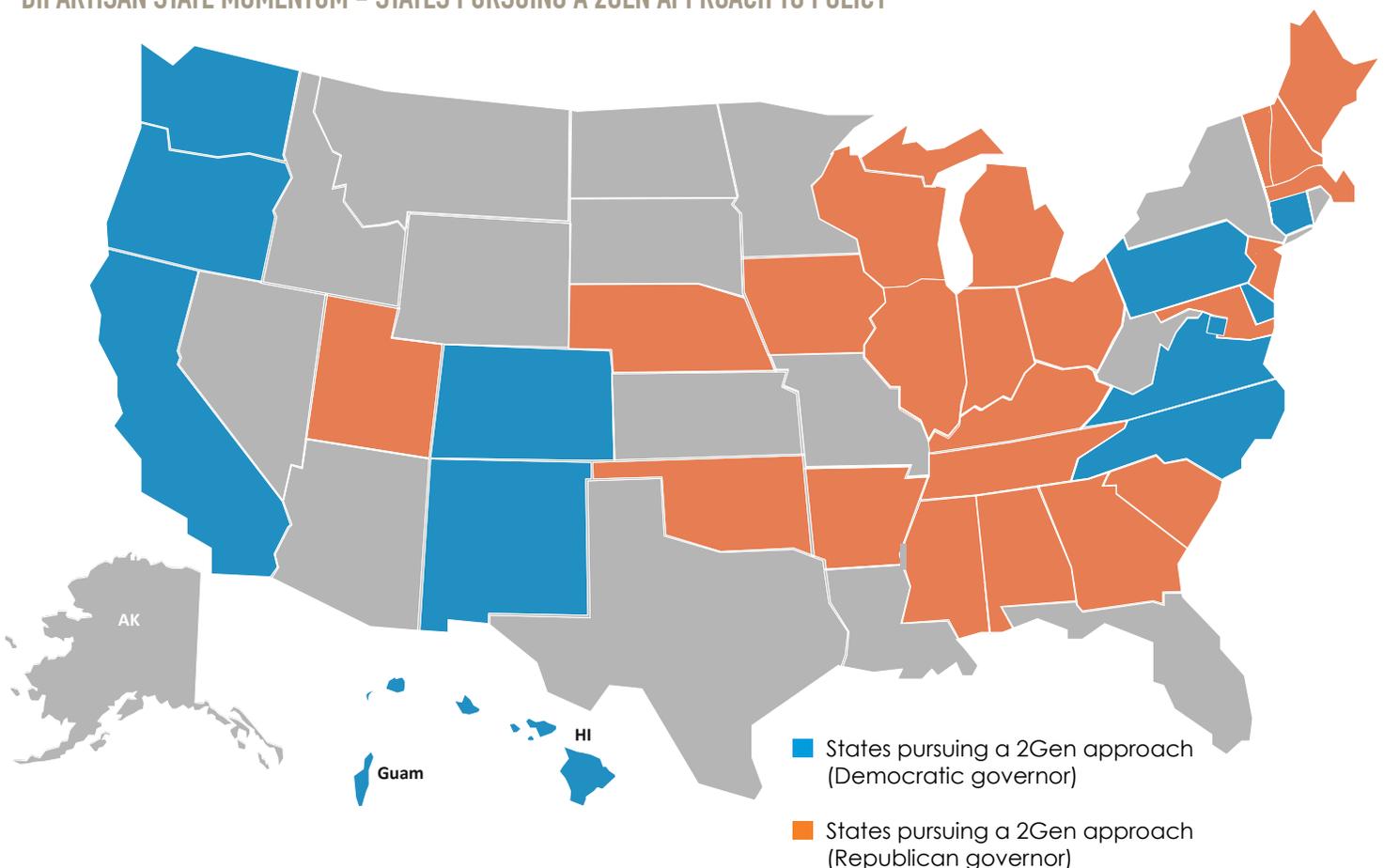
BIPARTISAN PUBLIC APPROVAL FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND PARENTS TOGETHER

Public support for a 2Gen approach continues to increase. A bipartisan 2016 election-eve survey finds support for a 2Gen approach among a majority of both Democratic and Republican voters. Seventy-six percent of voters agreed that if we want to ensure children with low incomes are successful in their early learning, we must also invest in their parents' economic well-being; and a majority of voters (86 percent) support the 2Gen approach, even if it increases their taxes (74 percent).⁷ Many 2Gen solutions are already showing promising results, and the public is hungry for pragmatic solutions that can make a difference. For example, increasing access to quality early childhood development services is making it easier for parents to access career jobs that offer upward mobility and allow them to provide for their families. These approaches are ready for policymakers, academics, advocates, businesses, and others to adopt on a wider scale.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES — A FOCUS ON STATES AND COMMUNITIES

An increasing number of forward-thinking states are already pursuing creative ways to boost the effectiveness of these programs and integrate them into efforts to improve child and family education, economic, and health outcomes. With a new administration set to review and revise federal policies and an active and critical mass of states poised to come together to amplify their commitment to children and families, the time is right to give more communities access to 2Gen opportunities. States and communities are poised to reimagine existing services and accelerate collaboration and innovation to meet the needs of children and the adults in their lives and ensure all families have an opportunity to gain lasting economic security. Further, with potentially

BIPARTISAN STATE MOMENTUM - STATES PURSUING A 2GEN APPROACH TO POLICY



tightening state budgets, innovative approaches that effectively use existing programs and resources to produce better child and family outcomes will be in demand.

Over the past five years, Ascend has partnered with, learned from, and provided extensive technical assistance to comprehensive state efforts in Colorado, Tennessee, Connecticut, Utah, Washington, Maryland, and Hawaii. More recently, more than 35 states have indicated a strong interest in integrating 2Gen strategies into state and local policies and programs. Additionally, the National Governors Association and the American Public Human Services Association, among others, are actively deepening their 2Gen approach.

Progress in the states has translated into real bipartisan breakthroughs at the national level as well. In 2016, Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) and Senator Martin Heinrich (D-NM) introduced the Two Generation Economic Empowerment Act, a measure aimed at increasing opportunities for families living in poverty through programs targeting both parents and children.

More than 50 years after President Johnson declared a 'War on Poverty,' millions of Americans still struggle to find the resources they need to meet the basic necessities of life. In Maine, the poverty rate stands at 13.4 percent, just slightly below the national rate. Our bill proposes a new approach to fighting poverty, one that focuses on addressing the needs of children and their parents together – 2Gens – in order to help break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. It marks an important first step toward reevaluating our approach to poverty-reducing programs and encouraging innovative, more effective uses of taxpayer dollars.

- US Senator Susan Collins, Maine

While we've seen signs of economic recovery, far too many families in New Mexico and across the nation are still struggling to make ends meet and can't escape multigenerational poverty. I'm proud to partner with my Republican colleague from Maine Senator Susan Collins to introduce this bipartisan bill to give states, local governments, and tribes more flexibility to develop innovative programs that really work to help families find a way out of poverty.

- US Senator Martin Heinrich, New Mexico

While programs and services to help families with low incomes are funded primarily through federal legislation, states and communities have considerable flexibility in how investment priorities are set and how programs hit the ground.

Several federally funded programs — including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG); Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV); Medicaid; and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) — are administered at the state level. Therefore, states and communities have the flexibility

In 2012, nearly one in five kids in Colorado was living in poverty. It's a number we've worked hard to reduce: today [2016] it's one in six, and we want to drive those numbers down even more. One of the approaches we're taking is called Two Generation, or Two-Gen, a comprehensive effort that moves families out of poverty and toward self-reliance.

- Governor John Hickenlooper, Colorado

I...do hereby proclaim August 30, 2016 as "2G for Tennessee Day" in Tennessee and encourage all citizens to join me in this worthy observance.

- Governor Bill Haslam, Tennessee

to test new approaches, promote innovation, and develop better ways to meet the needs of both children and the adults in their lives. While states administer these programs, federal agencies decide how they are regulated. Navigating conflicting requirements across these programs and agencies can be challenging. To make the most of these programs and strengthen economic success throughout their communities, states need to take a hard look at what is working; assess where services are failing to support children, parents, and families; and determine how to better align benefits — such as housing, Medicaid, WIC, TANF, and SNAP — so these funds go farther and help more families.

The federal government and Congress play a vital role in creating policies that have wide-ranging impact on our country. Moving forward, there is an opportunity to build on important federal investments in critical areas, including, but not limited to, economic opportunity, education innovation from the early years to postsecondary,

community collaborations, and health care reform.

Establishing concrete outcomes for the well-being of children and families can serve as a powerful "North Star" that will guide all sectors of our society as they collectively work toward common goals using shared metrics — especially during times of distinct policy shifts. While the public sector serves as an important anchor and catalyst for the economic security of families, public-private partnerships and cross-sector collaboration are essential to ensure that progress leads to permanent advancements and changes.

As conversations around potential block grants, privatization, or shifts in spending emerge, a thoughtful analysis of lessons from past efforts — the good and the bad — can inform advocates, states, and federal policymakers so that together we can hold families harmless in the midst of policy changes. Establishing clear outcome goals for children and families will be essential to ensuring systems and efforts are accountable to family well-being and responsive to what families say they need. The relationship between states and the federal government is critical to how policies translate into programs and services for families. Solutions and investment must meet both the scale and timing of the challenges they are designed to address.

We are excited about the opportunity states and communities have to strengthen and replicate these efforts. This report is intended to support states and communities ready to capitalize on this moment. Ascend gathered insights from policymakers, experts in the field, and families in communities across the country to assess evidence-based practices that are already working on the ground as well as ideas for what innovation and experimentation is needed to continue fueling the 2Gen movement.

With this input, Ascend identified the top opportunities for states to reimagine public supports and services so that they work better for both children and their parents. The

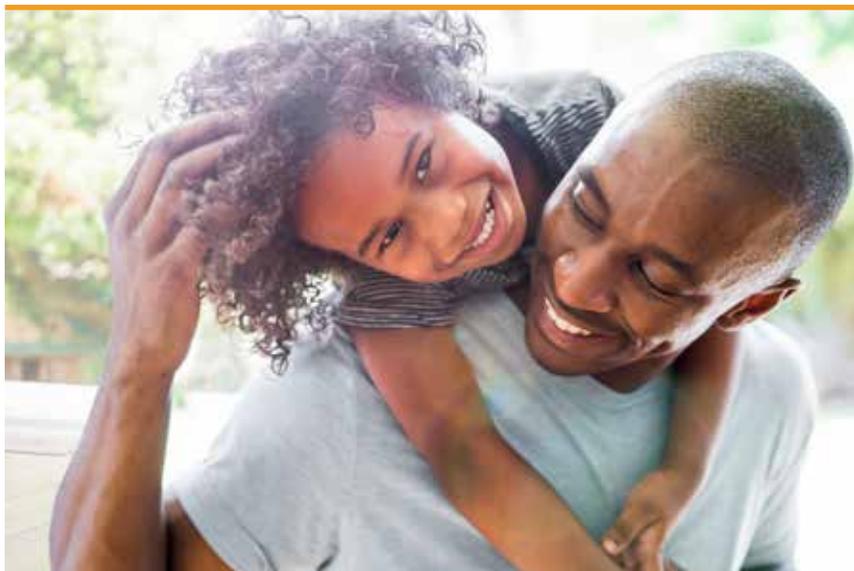
recommendations presented here build on current programs and leverage existing resources and funding streams to give all children and their parents an opportunity to simultaneously succeed. And best of all, states and communities can start implementing many of these ideas right away.

Set and track outcome goals for children and families. Establishing shared, cross-agency desired outcomes for children and families is an important process. It serves to focus comprehensive efforts and acts as a powerful accountability tool. Creating a development trajectory for a child and parent will help connect different interventions and provide more holistic support.

Strengthen and leverage health and human services innovation, collaboration capacity, and leadership. Health and human services agencies are a strong gateway to programs, services, and public investments that most directly affect families. Their programs range from addressing basic needs to the ultimate goal of breaking the cycle of poverty. Connecting the social determinants of health with the 2Gen approach has opened new conversations and opportunities for systems alignment as well as internal and cross-agency collaboration to drive better outcomes for children and the adults in their lives. Maintaining a 2Gen approach to physical, mental, and emotional health services will ensure these systems remain linked and connected to other relevant platforms, such as early childhood, workforce, and community supports.

Develop a new paradigm for parent and family supports that builds upon the best and emerging practices in family coaching and workforce training. Informed by the perspectives and experiences of families, there is an opportunity to advance the educational and economic stability of families by using these best practices as important guides. This new approach for family supports more effectively links workforce development and skill-building programs to early childhood programs that serve parents in need of living-wage employment and training; trains and supports family engagement specialists and coaches on assessing and addressing toxic stress; links and aligns resources for young parents or “opportunity youth” with those for their young children, such as TANF and child care subsidies; and ensures that supports critical to family success — such as transportation and housing vouchers and paid leave for sickness or caregiving — are available to parents striving to climb the economic ladder.

Expand access to quality child care and early childhood development services to build a culture of early learning that gives all kids the brain-building opportunities they need to succeed later in life and at the same time allows parents to hold a job or go to school without child care disruptions. Studies show access to high-quality early childhood development and child care brings immediate economic benefits to families, including increased rates of



employment and higher incomes for working parents, particularly working moms. Yet the skyrocketing cost of quality early childhood development programs is a significant burden to families with low incomes, limiting access to high-quality care and impacting a parent's ability to seek education or career employment. By aligning existing funding streams, quality standards, and policies, states can create comprehensive, accessible, high-quality early childhood development programs that feature wraparound services, such as education and workforce training, as well as the social supports families need to achieve economic stability that passes from one generation to the next.

🗨️ Create a strong pathway to career jobs that offer parents a living wage and benefits, such as health care and family leave, that enable them to provide for their children and help their families attain lasting economic stability. A higher income provides greater access to healthy foods, quality health insurance, and better living conditions. Higher family income is also associated with positive outcomes for children, including better health, behavior, academic achievement, and, ultimately, financial well-being as adults. Millions of families across the country work hard to support their families but still don't earn enough to make ends meet. To strengthen the path to career employment, states and communities must provide real opportunities for parents with low incomes to access the education, training, and supports needed to find and keep jobs in high-demand industries. Doing so will promote economic mobility and bring the promise of long-term financial security to parents and their children. By coordinating services to match job training to the local job market, preparing workers to advance to higher-skilled and higher-paying jobs, and ensuring access to other critical supports — like child care — states will put more parents on a career pathway that benefits both parents and their children.

🗨️ Reimagine and streamline existing services and financial supports so they work better for both children and parents and help families achieve long-term economic stability. As parents move into career jobs, they need time to establish a solid footing before they lose critical supports. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child care subsidies, health care coverage, food stamps, and housing allowances are based on income levels. As parents' incomes increase above the program eligibility limits, families lose access to services — even if they are not yet self-sufficient. Therefore, parents can earn more but still be no closer to moving their families to financial security. States have



wide flexibility to set financial eligibility criteria, assistance amounts, and time limits. States also determine when and how families are reassessed. As states review how they administer supports, ensuring families are earning enough to not only cover the cost of their basic needs but also build a financial cushion before they lose critical supports will put more children and their parents well on their way to long-term prosperity.

🗨️ Build real-time feedback and evaluation capacity to achieve better results for children and families. The need for improved data, data

collection, and technology to support evaluation is critical to supporting states as they implement a culture of change and institutionalizing a 2Gen approach. A current lack of coordination among federal departments, state agencies, and local providers makes it impossible to get a true picture of what children and parents with low incomes need or how best to address those needs. A disjointed data system also forces families to fill out multiple reports with the same information and travel to multiple locations — often with their young children in tow — to apply for the services they need. Leading practitioners and researchers across the country are exploring new ways to collect and share data to gain a solid understanding of what both children and their parents need, and programs and services are being created or redesigned to ensure a stronger measure of impact for both. With more comprehensive data systems, states can streamline case management and improve health, career, and education services for children and families. Improved data systems will also give states the information needed to apply innovative research and evaluation techniques and quickly identify opportunities to put children and their parents on a path to economic success.

Backed by experts and able to attract attention from both sides of the aisle, **these ideas have the potential to change the lives of millions of children and their families for the better — and states already have the tools they need to make real progress in the months ahead.** By prioritizing a 2Gen approach, states and communities can take the lead in powering a cycle of opportunity that over time will elevate the entire country — reducing health care costs, increasing school achievement, producing a more educated workforce, and ensuring all families have an opportunity to live the American Dream.

States can continue to find innovative ways to meet the needs of children and parents simultaneously — and strengthen the entire family — by developing a state child and family 2Gen plan. States may accelerate their plans by adopting these basic 2Gen principles:

- **Set and track outcomes for children, parents and families** using previously uncoordinated data sets from across multiple state agencies.
- **Leverage public-private partnerships** to test innovations and implement rapid-cycle learning and evaluation to find what works best and replicate it.
- **Apply an equity and inclusion lens** that considers race, ethnicity, gender, and geography across institutionalized structures to remove systemic barriers and combat intergenerational poverty.

As states begin applying these recommendations, they can also draw inspiration from other states that are already successfully implementing a 2Gen approach. For example, by improving provider reimbursement rates and setting a new statewide income-eligibility limit for entering the program, Colorado is helping more parents access quality care and early learning for their children. To tackle the state's high infant mortality and child fatality rates, Indiana created a Management and Performance Hub (MPH) — a centralized data sharing center among the state's agencies, the Office of Technology, and the state Office of Management and Budget. For the first time, state leaders can look across systems to identify opportunities to improve the health of Indiana's infants and children. Hundreds more examples like these continue to pop up across the country, demonstrating time and again that when it comes to helping families move out of poverty, a 2Gen approach works best.

With political, scientific, economic, academic, community, and advocacy support aligned, this is an unprecedented opportunity to close the achievement gap and create a legacy of economic security and educational success that passes from one generation to the next.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS

The federal government can bolster state efforts to use 2Gen approaches to improve the well-being of families. As Congress and the administration take up infrastructure spending, health care, jobs, tax reform, and child care, they have an obligation to families and an opportunity to support states in implementing the recommendations presented here to further the economic success and well-being of families throughout the United States.

Support families and build on progress to expand health care coverage, improve quality, and reduce costs.

Every family turns to the health care system at some point in their lives, for themselves or for their loved ones. Our youngest children, young parents, families with low incomes, and others who are vulnerable need a system that works. In undertaking reforms, Congress and the administration can help more families access the care they need to stay healthy — and lower the overall toll of health care costs on the country's economy — by:

- Closing the last gap in health care coverage to reach the remaining 9.2 percent not currently covered;
- Expanding and improving MIECHV and the WIC program to reach all eligible children and families;
- Designing a child wellness visit program that supports a 2Gen model of care by considering children, mothers, and fathers; and
- Addressing financing for mental health and early child development services in pediatricians' offices and health care clinics.

 **Prioritize human capital when investing in infrastructure.** People can only get back to work and stay there if they have job training that matches the local market, are prepared to advance to higher-skilled and higher-paying jobs, and have high-quality, affordable childhood development services. Often described as the “invisible part” of the U.S. economy, child care contributes to the local economy by supporting parents, local employers, and early childhood workers and impacts how families both earn and spend their money. As the federal government considers infrastructure spending, it can:

- Recognize the care economy as part of the critical national infrastructure — from professional development and appropriate compensation to investments in facilities for early learning and child care, K-12, and postsecondary education;
- Incorporate the availability and location of child care in the context of other community development goals and activities, including smart growth and sustainability planning initiatives;
- Conduct long-term analysis and consider the return on investment when assessing community child and elder care assets and needs, including the maintenance

of facilities and ongoing professional development and pay for early childhood workers;

- Invest in people. Launch a national commitment to human potential for all — with a first 1,000 Days investment to ensure that all children get the strongest start in their development for short- and long-term rewards. Ensure all job initiatives lead to career jobs that offer dignity and advancement opportunities; and
- Consider how public-private partnerships can help overcome the financing challenges of improving local child care systems.

 **Ensure affordable, high-quality child care and development.** Millions of families rely on child care daily. The need for quality child care cuts across all demographics from working parents to young parents who are going to school to build a better life for themselves and their families. Working families should not have to compromise quality to cut costs — or put one parent's career on hold if his or her salary does not cover child care expenses. Increasing access to affordable child care must also include a commitment to supporting quality and ensuring that children and families get the specific care and development opportunities they need. As Congress and the new administration develop child care policies, they can make investments in child care and help lift working families out of poverty by:

- Expanding access to quality child care and early learning, including the Preschool Development Grants Program; Early Head Start and the Maternal, Infant, and Young Children Home Visiting Program (MIECHV); and the Early Learning Challenge Fund;
- Increasing investments in innovation and brain science to improve early learning and development outcomes for infants and toddlers and support positive parenting;
- Ensuring Head Start and child care quality standards and best practices are met and rewarded so more families get the care and services they need to give their young children a good start in life;
- Locating high-quality child care services convenient to college campuses for students who are parenting;
- Ensuring access to quality early childhood development services for all working families with low incomes and children under age three, with specific support for the early childhood workforce who are the backbone of the child care system;
- Reaching all children in poverty who are under age three through MIECHV;
- Expanding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part C to significantly reach very young children with special needs; and
- Catalyzing new financing models and incentivizing performance-based public-private partnerships to overcome the financing challenges of improving local child care systems.

 **Strengthen family leave policies and engage the private sector in programs and policies that support jobs, productivity, and strong families and communities.**

- Expand access to paid family and medical leave for the first six months of a child's life for both parents;

- Reward businesses of all sizes that support their workforce as employees and parents; and
- Incentivize innovation at all levels of decision-making — in public policy, services, and programs as well as in the private sector — that respond to the realities of all families and their lives.

Putting these ideas into practice will power a cycle of opportunity that lifts up the entire country by reducing health care costs, increasing school achievement, producing a more educated workforce, and expanding the earning potential for working families.

CONCLUSION

The demographics of families struggling with low incomes and poverty may be diverse, but all parents and families have the same goals: economic stability for their families and a better future for their children. A 2Gen approach can make these goals a reality. Research documents the impact of a parent's education, economic stability, and overall health on a child's learning and development trajectory. Similarly, children's education and healthy development are powerful catalysts for parents to improve their own well-being, as parents will often do for their children what they may not do for themselves.

There is wide agreement among American voters that more needs to be done to ensure families have the opportunities and tools they need to escape the cycle of poverty. States and communities can leverage this momentum to accelerate 2Gen programming and ensure more children and their parents have the help they need to get ahead. States have the resources, programs, and tools to start implementing these recommendations today. This report is a blueprint states can use to continue finding innovative ways to meet the needs of children and parents simultaneously, strengthening the entire family's well-being and securing lasting economic stability for current and future generations.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁷ Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group survey of 2,400 likely voters who voted in the 2016 elections nationwide conducted November 6-8, 2016 by telephone using professional interviewers, including 58% reached on a cell phone. The margin of error is +/-2% at the 95% confidence interval.

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Autumn Green, Endicott College
Kristen Grimm, Spitfire Strategies
Tracy Gruber, Utah Department of Human Services
Sandra Gutierrez, Abriendo Puertas
Lina Guzman, Child Trends
Katie Hamm, Center for American Progress
Bridget Hamre, University of Virginia
Kelly Harder, Dakota County Community Services, MN
Maria Harper-Marinick, Maricopa Community College District
Jim Hart, New York State Office of Children and Family Services
Raquel Hatter, Tennessee Department of Human Services
Libby Hein, Children's Home Society of Washington
Kerin Hilker-Balkissoon, Northern Virginia Community College
Bill Hudson, National Association of Family Child Care
John Hudson, Alabama Power
Jefferson County Prosperity Project Families, CO
Lynn Johnson, Jefferson County Department of Human Services, CO
Stephanie Jones, Harvard University
Myra Jones-Taylor, Dalio Foundation
Kevin Jordan, LISC
Ann Kalass, Starfish Family Services
Ariel Kalil, University of Chicago
Beth Kanter, Spitfire Strategies
Katherine Kempe, NAEYC
Sherri Killins, The BUILD Initiative
Christopher T. King, The University of Texas at Austin
Sara Kitson, New York City Wide Head Start
Mark Kling, Colorado Family Resource Center Association
Jeannine La Prad, Corporation for a Skilled Workforce
Andrea Levere, CFED
Traci Lewis, Ohio State University ACCESS Collaborative
Kirsten Lodal, LIFT
Joan Lombardi, Early Opportunities, LLC
Jennifer March, Citizens' Committee for Children of New York
Sara Maranowicz, Bohemian Foundation
Jennifer March, Citizens Committee for Children of New York
Mary Martin, Colorado Department of Human Services
C. Nicole Mason, Center for Research & Policy in the Public Interest
Hannah Matthews, Center for Law and Social Policy
Charles Brian McAdams, Family Scholar House, Inc.
Sara Mead, Bellwether Education Partners
Sunita Mohanty, The Primary School
Jeanette Monninger, University Settlement
Kelli Moore, Full-Service Community Schools
Sheila Murphy, Save the Children
Dipesh Navsaria, University of Wisconsin School
Lincoln Nehring, Voices for Utah Children
Vivian Nixon, College and Community Fellowship
Rick Noriega, AVANCE
Kerron Norman, ANDRUS
Aisha Nyandoro, Springboard to Opportunities
Kandyce Ormes, Buckner International
BB Otero, Otero Strategy Group
Jeannette Pai-Espinosa, The National Crittenton Foundation
Parents & Members, Washington State Assoc of Head Start & ECEAP
Gloria Perez, Jeremiah Program
Kris Perry, First Five Years Fund
Marisa Phillips, Lufkin Bukner
Lori Pittman, Puget Sound Educational Service District
Robin Pizzo, Lansing Community College
Toni Porter, Early Care and Education Consulting
Victoria Prieto, Zero to Three
Sarah Rittling, First Five Years Fund
Tanya Robinson, The National Crittenton Foundation
Cleofas Rodriguez, Jr., Nat'l Migrant & Seasonal Head Start Assoc
Felix Matos Rodriguez, Queens College
Marni Roosevelt, Los Angeles Valley College Family Resource Center
Donna Cohen Ross, Health Management Associates
Joel Ryan, Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP
Sophie Sahaf, LIFT
Jessica Sager, All our Kin
Judith Sandalow, Children's Law Center
Stephanie Sears, Gateway Community and Technical College
William Serrata, El Paso Community College District
Amy Shriver, Blank Children's Hospital
Josh Sparrow, Boston Children's Hospital
Helene Stebbins, Alliance for Early Success
David Stillman, Washington State Dept of Social and Health Services
Anne Stone, Washington State Dept of Social and Health Services
Cynthia Stringfellow, Ounce of Prevention Fund
Katharine Stevens, American Enterprise Institute
Julie Sweetland, FrameWorks Institute
Darius Tandon, Northwestern University
Cheryl Terres, Arapahoe County Dept of Human Services, CO
Courtney Thomas, Allegany Cty Human Resources Dev't Commission
Sarah Pennal Thomas, Goodwill Ind of Central & Southern Indiana
Georgia Thompson, National Black Child Development Institute
UTEC
Alan van Capelle, Educational Alliance
Lorelei Vargas, New York City Administration for Children's Services
Jose Velillo, Bloomingdale Family Program
Ariel Ventura-Lazo, Northern Virginia Community College
Janna Wagner, All Our Kin
Jifinder Walia, City University of New York
Albert Wat, Alliance for Early Success
Sarah Enos Watamura, University of Denver
Joe Waters, Institute for Child Success
Domenica Watkins, Institute for Child Success
Teri Weathers, Nurse-Family Partnership
T'Pring Westbrook, The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Sherece West-Scantlebury, Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation
Roxane White, Nurse Family Partnership
Marcy Whitebook, Center for the Study of Child Care Employment
Henry Wilde, Accelerated Learning
Daniel Williams, WMCAT
Ann Silverberg Williamson, Utah Department of Human Services
Leigh Wilson, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
Mary Page Wilson-Lyons, The Women's Fund of Greater Birmingham
Kathie Winograd, Central New Mexico Community College
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Mindy Ysasi, The SOURCE
Amy Zimmerman, Legal Council for Health Justice



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