

# Seeding the Field

The Creation and Growth of the Center for Working Families Approach

THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



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## Contents

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Introduction	3
Field Building Begins	5
A National Network	12
Acknowledgments	15

## Introduction

Many foundations aspire to “build a field” — that is, to create a new way of thinking about a social challenge or develop an innovative approach to meeting it. Sometimes this is described as taking ideas to action, changing practice or leading a social change movement. Those who undertake a field-building approach recognize that to assist not just hundreds, but hundreds of thousands, of people achieve better outcomes, a broad restructuring of practice and policy must take place.

There are examples of how foundations have served as philanthropic strategists, determining in advance that they are going to create or influence a field. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, for example, has several times led the way in building new philanthropic fields, including those related to nurse practitioners, tobacco control and end-of-life care.

At other times, foundations embrace a set of good ideas, find innovative ways to support them and advance them through partnerships and, over time, begin a more intentional field-building effort. The Annie E. Casey Foundation used this approach to nurture and grow its Center for Working Families model into a national approach now known as the Working Families Success Network. That work is the subject of this report.

## EXAMPLES OF FOUNDATION FIELD BUILDING

It is not easy to predict which philanthropic ideas will emerge from what some have called the “ecology of ideas,” gain traction and redefine a field. Consider the following two examples of how that happened — in quite different ways.

**Tackling Tobacco Cession.** Beginning in the 1990s, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) undertook a multipronged approach to smoking, which had emerged as an enormous unaddressed public health problem. One analysis likened the foundation’s approach to a “bear hug”:

The RWJF has been particularly effective when it embraced a field — in the sense of a bear hug — by using all of the tools at its disposal. In its work on tobacco control, for example, the foundation funded policy research, coalition building in states, advocacy groups, demonstration projects, conferences, standard setting, and public information campaigns. It worked with all levels of government, nongovernmental organizations, and voluntary groups such as the American Cancer Society. The RWJF became an active participant in the tobacco control debate, and the foundation’s

then-president, Steven Schroeder, used his office as a bully pulpit. Although the RWJF's tobacco-control work began as opportunistic, by the mid-1990s it had become far more strategic, and the foundation's staff had consciously adopted a comprehensive approach to addressing the problem of smoking.<sup>1</sup>

**Expanding Access to Family-Supporting Tax Credits.** A second example is the work of the Casey Foundation and several other partners that elevated the use of the earned income tax credit (EITC) nationally to improve families' financial standing. As in other field-building efforts, the strategy included a range of tactics: funding legislative and policy initiatives; public awareness campaigns; supporting free tax-preparation campaigns on the ground and national gatherings; creating and fostering networks; developing the capacity for data analysis and evaluation; and producing and disseminating a number of guides and reports for practitioners. In this case, the path toward successfully establishing a new field of philanthropic investing was circuitous and complex — and less dependent on the work of a single entity.

In the course of going back and trying to document how some of the most significant results in the EITC [free tax preparation] work were achieved, we found histories of rich, varied and complex interactions among entities in the field, no simple causal pathways in the achievement of any of the significant results studied, a lack of correlation between the effort/resources expended on a project or program and the resulting outcome, the importance of what some would call coincidence or luck (and others synchronicity), the criticality of networks and the value of reducing the degrees of separation among entities in a field to create more effective networks, and the inability to accurately predict the results of interventions and what interventions are most likely to succeed.<sup>2</sup>

These two examples, and the theories behind them, demonstrate that field building is dependent on a number of important factors, including having the right timing for the work within a larger societal and policy context and recognizing that philanthropic strategies have life cycles. Field building also relies on assembling networks of partners, funders and supporters and must focus on changing how systems operate to address a particular challenge. Having these factors work together over an extended period is a major challenge but a requirement for building a field.

## Field Building Begins: The Center for Working Families

### PART SETTLEMENT HOUSE, PART LOCAL HIRING HALL: A NEW WAY TO HELP ECONOMICALLY STRUGGLING FAMILIES

A conversation in 2004 between the Casey Foundation's then-President Douglas Nelson and a prominent Baltimore community organizer was a key spark in the creation of the Center for Working Families concept. That discussion focused on the reality that many low-income families face an array of challenges that hinder them from building financial security. What they needed was a community entity that combined aspects of a settlement house, local hiring hall and ethnic church. Such a location could provide a connection to work, important support services and access to community networks. It would be conveniently located and offer services timed to meet the needs of working families — and geared toward supporting their incomes and improving their finances.

The conversation took place amid a new push from foundations, nonprofits and the federal government to create and expand strategies to help low-income families build more secure and predictable incomes and assets. This push reflected the growing recognition that helping someone get a job — even a good entry-level job — was not enough. Innovations responding to the call included products such as individual development accounts and other affordable financial products and services, tax credits and online tools to make it easier to apply for public benefits. Key asset-building players included the Corporation for Enterprise Development, the Aspen Institute, the Casey Foundation and the foundations of several financial institutions.

At the federal level, Congress had taken steps to help working families through the use of tax credits and public benefits. Most notably, the government expanded the EITC and, in 2001, the child care tax credit — the two most important family income supports.

Important work was also taking place to help low-income families take better advantage of such public benefits and income supports. Nonprofits such as Seedco created products to make it easier for individuals and families to learn about and apply for multiple benefits online, making it far more efficient for people to obtain benefits that could stabilize their lives.

The Casey Foundation actively lent its support through program grants and efforts to strengthen public policy. Those investments were informed by lessons the Foundation had developed during its Jobs Initiative — which focused on connecting young, low-income workers with jobs and helping them retain employment — and the Making Connections initiative, which aimed to improve outcomes for children in low-income families by strengthening their families and neighborhoods. Both initiatives showed that, for many families, a job alone wasn't

going to be enough to achieve financial stability and success. Indeed, it became clearer that the path to economic stability and success was not short or direct, as a result of the varied, interlocking issues facing low-income families.

What was missing was a unifying approach to providing multiple financial supports in a way that was accessible to low-income families. Drawing on those lessons, the Casey Foundation began seeking new ways to support a range of services — workforce development and training, access to work supports, such as tax credits and public benefits, and asset building.

“The theory was that we needed to link up workforce and education, access to work supports and asset building,” says Robert Giloth, vice president of the Foundation’s Center for Community and Economic Opportunity. “The thinking was that healthy households had to work on all of those factors to develop financial security.”

That theory led Casey to establish the Center for Working Families approach, which called for participating organizations to provide three core services: workforce development, education and training; improved access to public benefits and work supports; and asset-building services that connected people to such products as checking and savings accounts, as well as financial coaching and education. Under this approach, the services were to be offered in an integrated, or bundled, manner that was convenient and met each individual’s needs. The goal was to stabilize people’s finances through the use of public benefits and work supports; prepare them to obtain employment or move into a better job; and enable them to take steps to improve their finances, such as opening a bank account, improving their credit score or paying off debt.

## FROM PROTOTYPING TO STRATEGIC GRANT MAKING AND TESTING PARTNERSHIPS

After developing the Center for Working Families concept, the Casey Foundation held consultative and design sessions to determine how to fully implement this complex approach, which required a new way of thinking within the nonprofit community.

That meant grappling with important questions. What does such a program location look like? Does it have to be a place? Is it a network? The Foundation and consultants, including the Innovation Lab, created theoretical models and began investing in prototype sites to assess different methods for delivering the three service strands.

The Foundation partnered with organizations it had worked with closely in the past, including its direct services agency, Casey Family Services, and the Bon Secours of Maryland Foundation in Baltimore, as well as organizations that were part of the Making Connections initiative and

grantees already focused on income tax preparation and helping clients take advantage of the earned income tax credit.

Implementing an approach to provide several different services in an integrated fashion posed challenges to the host organizations. “To do the bundled approach, we had to make sure the staff really understood it,” says Kevin Jordan, who oversaw the Center for Working Families approach at Bon Secours of Maryland Foundation and now is senior vice president for national programs at the Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a nonprofit focused on community development. “We worked with line staff to really think about this and get them to realize they had to work together. That meant that for the financial coach, workforce outcomes were equally important as financial outcomes. This was a sea change. People are used to working in silos.”

## EARLY THINKING ABOUT SCALE AND EVIDENCE-BUILDING

Casey nurtured several early sites and looked for ways to expand the work through its own grant making or through partnerships with other interested funders and nonprofits. Two particularly important implementing partners emerged during this early stage that would influence the future of the effort and suggest ways the approach might spread on a broader scale over time.

One was the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) in Chicago, which became an active partner and demonstrated how intermediary organizations could use the concept. In the early 2000s, LISC was supporting a network of seven neighborhood-based employment centers to give neighborhood residents access to convenient employment services. LISC also began considering adding a service to screen clients for public benefits eligibility. In 2003, LISC representatives took part in a Casey session focused on designing the Center for Working Families approach. “The approach was compelling to our community partners. As soon as we brought the idea back to Chicago, 14 of our lead agencies said, ‘I want one of those,’” said Ricki Lowitz, LISC Chicago’s director of economic opportunities. “It was very compelling because they knew that a job alone was not enough.”

With the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, LISC took the concept to community-based organizations across the city. The Chicago experience led the Casey Foundation to provide a three-year grant to expand the work with the national LISC office in two additional cities, Detroit and Indianapolis.

A second key partner was Central New Mexico Community College, which, by embracing the strategy, showed how it also could meet the needs of low-income students in a college setting.

Based in Albuquerque, the college was an attractive partner because of its more than two-decade experience offering tax preparation services; additionally, the college was eager to explore ways for students to access tools to build their assets, including individual development accounts, and to help them take advantage of scholarships and other financial supports.

“The Center for Working Families model gave us language about how to do that — and a strategy,” says Ann Lyn Hall, executive director of CNM Connect, the campus-wide student support program that grew out of the model. “We knew there were all these things students needed, but finding a way to connect the dots in a way that made sense was something we needed help with.”

The college’s work in this arena also led to aligned funding for CNM Connect from local foundations and from the Kresge and W.K. Kellogg foundations.

During this period, as more sites adopted and refined the Center for Working Families strategy, partners identified key pillars and principles of the work (e.g., the centrality of financial coaching to the model) and coined terms (e.g., bundled services) to describe their activities.

## EXPANDED NATIONAL SUPPORT

By 2006, the Center for Working Families approach had developed enough support and interest that Casey and its partners sponsored a national conference. The MacArthur Foundation, which had supported the LISC work, cohosted the conference and invited a range of other funders to attend. Efforts to recruit other funders continued after the conference.

Among the national entities in attendance was Bank of America, which began to provide funding for financial coaching and coordinated its funding with the national Center for Working Families work. It was a natural fit for Bank of America, which had long supported financial education and other efforts to promote financial stability. And working in coordination with a growing national approach made sense: “Everyone agrees that there are fewer philanthropic dollars available and more people in need,” says Wynne Lum, philanthropy manager at Bank of America. “It was important to collaborate to meet the increasing needs in the community. Especially when the economic crisis hit in 2008, it really hit home that people now want financial education and other resources.”

Beginning in 2007, Casey and key partners — including representatives of United Way, Seedco, Central New Mexico Community College, Bon Secours of Maryland Foundation and LISC — took the concept on the road, giving many presentations about it to various organizations and funders across the country. Interest was strong, and many more got involved in the work.

## BUILDING THE EVIDENCE

As the approach spread throughout the country, Casey supported a series of evaluations of Center for Working Families sites. A [final evaluation](#) found that providing integrated services paid dividends. In a key finding, participants who received these bundled services were three to four times more likely to achieve a major economic outcome — such as getting out of debt, purchasing a car or completing a training or education program — than those whose services were not bundled. Participants with the best chance of success received services that were both bundled and intensive: They were five times more likely to achieve a major economic outcome than their counterparts who did not receive bundled services. Integrating services also increased participants' ability to realize short-term achievements, such as obtaining a job, improving their credit score or regularly using a bank account.

Such findings helped generate further interest and growth. The Foundation's partners began using the data in their own reports and attracted public and private funding. At this point, the Foundation realized the potential of the effort as a field-changing opportunity. It developed a long-range plan for expanding the reach of the Center for Working Families approach through partnerships and relationships. As a guiding principle, the Foundation began saying this integrated-services approach would, within 20 years, be the normal way of doing business for workforce organizations across the country. Casey's plan had several key components and included field-building strategies such as developing additional implementation networks, increasing capacity, supporting policy and legislative changes, and building robust evidence to support continuous improvement and to make the case for this different approach to practice. Importantly, the long-term plan signaled a more deliberate strategy and ambition for engaging partners in building the field.

The opportunity to bring in new partners grew during a time when several major institutions were focused on supporting new approaches to promoting financial stability. In particular, the Center for Working Families approach had much in common with United Way Worldwide's Financial Stability Partnership launched in 2008. In particular, the United Way initiative focused on promoting asset development and improving clients' access to public benefits and work supports.

At about the same time, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation developed a new grant-making framework that included a set of strategies to foster family economic security. "We knew that it was critical to be able to provide comprehensive, wraparound bundled services to families — that it really helped stabilize both parents and children in life, school and work and in reaching their full potential," says Paula Sammons, program officer for family economic security at the

Kellogg Foundation. “So in developing our grant-making strategy, we paid special attention to economic stability and workforce mobility issues.”

Following the lead of Central New Mexico, several other community colleges developed an interest in adapting the Center for Working Families approach for their campuses, recognizing their students were struggling with an array of financial challenges. As interest from that quarter continued to grow, the Casey Foundation partnered with MDC, a national nonprofit focusing on economic equality and reducing poverty. MDC would go on to launch Achieving the Dream, a national nonprofit helping community college students achieve postsecondary credentials. Using the Achieving the Dream network, MDC created a learning group of 15 additional colleges.

The Center for Working Families strategy was one that deliberately created opportunities for expansion and enabled partners to take advantage of opportunities as they emerged. By the end of the 2000s, the strategy enjoyed support from a diverse group of national, regional and local partners, and it became a focus for influential national gatherings. In 2010, a second national conference took place in Chicago to focus on the integrated-services delivery approach embedded in the Center for Working Families strategy. Bank of America, Kellogg, United Way Worldwide, LISC and the Casey Foundation joined with their local affiliates, grantees and colleagues from many different fields to share lessons and learn from each other.

At the conference, LISC announced it had won an annual Social Innovation Fund grant of \$4.2 million for five years from the Corporation for National and Community Service. The Social Innovation Fund serves to replicate innovative, evidence-based approaches that promote health, educational outcomes and economic opportunity for individuals and families. LISC also received \$4.24 million per year in matching funds from a wide range of institutions, including Citi Foundation, Bank of America, Walmart, the Casey Foundation, U.S. Bank, the MacArthur Foundation and the Open Society Foundations.

The 2010 conference and the Social Innovation Fund’s recognition of the approach and LISC’s work marked a turning point, as new funders and national intermediaries joined the effort and played important roles in advancing the strategy. Together, several of these organizations decided to create a new group — led by Casey, Kellogg, Kresge, Bank of America, LISC, United Way and MDC — to give the growing movement more structure.

While funders had been working together to align their support for the integrated-services approach, beginning in 2012, they began co-investing in LISC, United Way and MDC to bring additional focus and unity to the strategy. Their joint investments supported cross-network technical assistance, the development of citywide strategies in Houston and Detroit and the

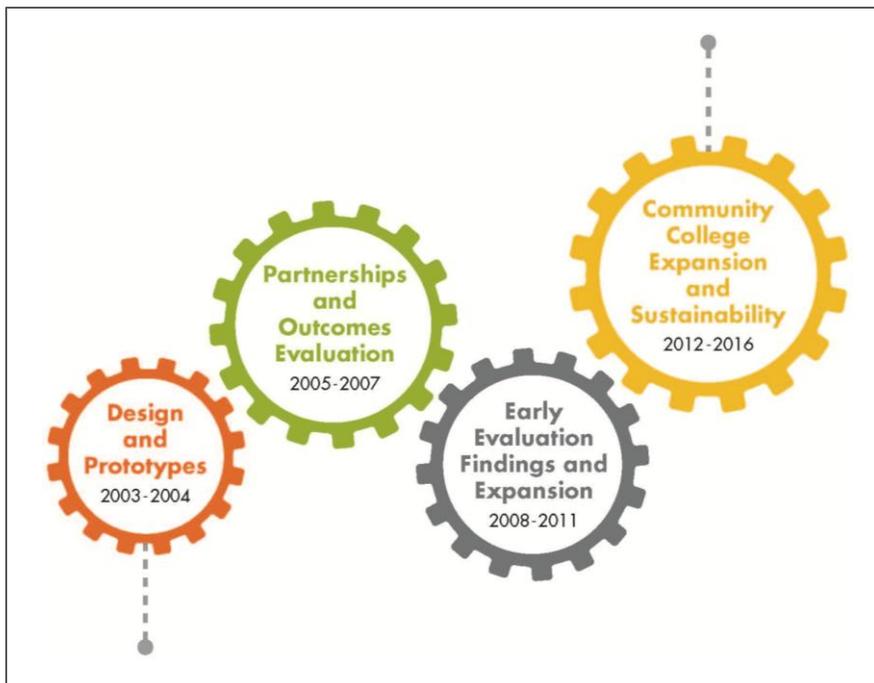
creation of common measures and standards. The group revisited Casey's long-term plan and made it its own.

The leadership group has identified several opportunities and goals for advancing the strategy. These include intensifying and expanding community college participation, engaging new national partners and their affiliates and exploring ways to engage employers to ensure that workforce strategies mesh well with employment opportunities.

The strategy's growth and the partners' on-the-ground expertise have generated interest from the federal government. The Center for Working Families programs and intermediaries are participating in several evaluations as part of broader government innovation and demonstration efforts around the country, which seek to identify and expand effective strategies to increase economic stability.

These evaluations will help identify additional ways to adapt the strategy to better meet the needs of clients. They also will help engage new funders and implementing partners and strengthen the case for building the field to federal policymakers.

### Evolution of the Center for Working Families Model



## A National Network

### ADVANCING THE WORKING FAMILIES SUCCESS NETWORK

As different partners have taken up the Casey Foundation's Center for Working Families approach, they've made it their own. Although some sites continued with the original name, LISC's were called Financial Opportunity Centers. United Way members used the term SparkPoint Centers or Financial Prosperity Centers. And as previously mentioned, Central New Mexico Community College had CNM Connect.

But over time, the leadership group recognized the need for a national brand to unite these diverse efforts, while still allowing for local adaptation and identity. In early 2013, the group launched the Working Families Success Network, a national brand embracing and advancing the integrated-services approach. In a sense, this shift recognized that the approach had grown from being a Casey Foundation program into a strategy adopted and adapted by a larger field of organizations, intermediaries and funders.

The November 2013 conference of the Working Families Success Network is another opportunity to frame the work, reach a larger audience, engage additional funders and introduce this new brand. The conference will highlight results of the work, explore lessons and best practices and connect new partners. Participants will include community-based organization leaders, current and prospective funders, representatives of intermediary organizations and policymakers, all of whom will have the opportunity to explore the integrated-services delivery approach in detail.

Building a philanthropic field requires a theory of change and smart ideas, as well as partners committed to the effort and, importantly, an organizational infrastructure to anchor the work. The leadership group recognizes the need to develop a more structured organizational approach that can expand, sustain and support the work of the Working Families Success Network.

"We like that the Working Families Success Network is trying to scale this work," says Lum of Bank of America. "I'm hoping, through the network, that we are helping to generate collaboration. We want to figure out how we pool our support and get all the smart people together to figure this thing out. That's been the nice thing about joining this collaboration."

In 2014, the leadership group will explore ways to take what has been a loosely organized but highly committed group of funders and intermediaries and either build a new structure or connect to an existing one. The network will also continue to examine its approach and consider how to improve it.

“One of the questions moving forward for the network is how do we integrate other broad services to support family stability? For example, those services could relate to access to health insurance or to improving children’s educational performance,” says Peter Beard, senior vice president of impact priorities at United Way Worldwide. “There will be some additional evolution as we look at the work and think through how we are improving the lives of both parents and children.”

The Working Families Success Network has more to do to strengthen the emerging field of financially focused integrated services. The next stages of field building will include advocating for the broad adoption of common metrics to guide implementation and evaluate effectiveness, strengthening the policy strategy and embedding it within workforce and asset-building advocacy organizations and continuing to improve the quality of practice. The network’s overall goal will be to support the evolution of its approach into the accepted way of doing business to help individuals and families across the United States achieve financial stability and success.

## FIELD-BUILDING LESSONS

After a decade of work to first develop and implement the Center for Working Families concept and then help build a network to expand it nationally as the Working Families Success Network, several top-line lessons have emerged that may be helpful to other foundations, nonprofits and intermediary organizations as they work to develop new ideas and engage in field building through partnerships.

- 1. Foundations and nonprofits have different interests and focuses for their investments and work.** To build a field and have wide impact, key players must identify where they have common interests and work on those they share. This requires understanding the organizational culture and needs of other agencies. In short, it requires patience and persistence.
- 2. Invest in data and evidence-building from the beginning — and be aware of opportunities to be able to seize them.** LISC, for example, was able to apply for and win a major Social Innovation Fund grant because it had done prior evaluations and was ready when the funding opportunity arose.
- 3. Have a theory from the beginning of how the work might reach a wide scale and lead to field-level change.** Be prepared to adjust the theory based on real-world experience and lessons.

4. **Organizations that lead the initial creation of a concept must create opportunities for others to own the work and improve upon it.** Find ways for all partners to contribute their individual and organizational strengths.
  
5. **Pay attention to building common understanding of goals and agreement on measurable outcomes.** Find the right balance between adopting an inclusive “big tent” approach and holding on to core concepts, principles and outcomes.

The Casey Foundation is proud of its work in framing, nurturing and supporting the first stages of the Center for Working Families approach and even more appreciative of the partners who have helped adapt and expand it and are now leading the field forward through the Working Families Success Network.

## Acknowledgments

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<sup>1</sup> Isaacs, S.L. & Knickman, J.R. (2005). Field building: Lessons from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's anthology series. *Health Affairs*, 24(4), 1161-1165.

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