



Orienting Youth Services around Young Parents' Needs

Strategies from Three Service-Providing Partnerships in the Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) Initiative

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP) is an initiative to increase education and employment opportunities for young people ages 14 to 25 who have been in foster care, been involved in the criminal justice system, or experienced homelessness (described generally as young people with a history of systems involvement). Three of the nine LEAP network partnerships—The Door in New York; Project for Pride in Living (PPL) and their close partner Hennepin Healthcare in Minnesota; and the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation and their statewide network of partners, including Central Plains Center for Services—made serving young parents a key part of their capacity-building agendas. Over the course of three years, these partnerships took varied approaches to adapt and change their youth work to support young parents, particularly those with a history of systems involvement. This brief highlights promising strategies and lessons across three operational levels: the service, organization, and system levels. It aims to inform other youth- and young parent-serving practitioners, funders, and policymakers.

Here are promising strategies and lessons demonstrated by the LEAP Young Parent Cohort partnerships:

- At the service level, offering individualized, trauma-informed support while also intentionally considering the needs of children and parents helps families. Meanwhile, helping young people create meaningful connections with multiple staff members, prioritizing job quality for direct

service staff, and documenting knowledge to persist within the organization all protect against the disruptions of staff turnover.

- At the organization level, shifting organizational orientation from the person to the family can positively influence how well young parents are served. Also, establishing or strengthening navigational supports and interorganizational communication smooths access barriers.
- At the systems level, engaging across organizations and with policymakers to work toward addressing systemic barriers for young parents can result in tangible positive change for young parents and their families.

BOX 1

Methods

As the technical assistance provider for the LEAP Young Parents Cohort from 2020 through 2023, the Urban Institute team learned about considerations for and approaches to young parent work among the three Young Parents Cohort partnerships. Our team facilitated quarterly-to-semiannual calls for the three partnerships together, including hosting expert presentations, encouraging peer sharing, and inviting youth fellows from the partnership sites to join the discussions. We arranged monthly or bimonthly calls with individual partnerships to focus on issues relevant to their work with young parents. We also attended annual LEAP convenings. From these activities, we developed some understanding about each partnership's history and operations.

To deepen our understanding, we conducted site visits to The Door and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation in summer 2023. During the visits, we held interviews and focus groups with staff at the organizations and their partners, we spoke with young parents involved with the programs, and we observed the physical spaces of the organizations.

In addition to in-person site visits, we interviewed staff and parents remotely. PPL and Hennepin Healthcare were undergoing organizational and staffing changes in summer 2023 and could not host a visit. Instead, we held a virtual discussion group with key staff involved in their LEAP Young Parent efforts.

We shared a draft of this brief with staff from all three partnerships to add insights and make corrections as needed.

Source: Authors' analysis.

Background on the Organizations and Core Partners

We briefly summarize elements of the three LEAP¹ Young Parent Cohort partnerships that are useful to contextualize this brief. These descriptions reflect circumstances at the time of our data collection in mid-2023.

The Door

The Door is a youth development services organization based in New York City. They have four locations in the city, including two youth centers in lower Manhattan and the South Bronx, and a staff of close to 300 people. The Door serves people ages 12 to 24, providing access to a wide range of services to support young people's basic needs and help them progress in education and careers.

Nebraska Children and Families Foundation

The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation (Nebraska Children) is a statewide foundation offering funding and resources to communities to support family well-being, children's educational success, and disconnected young people's² transition to adulthood. Nebraska Children also has an arm that works on policy and legislative advocacy. The Connected Youth Initiative (CYI) is their statewide network for disconnected young people providing resources and support. CYI takes a "no-wrong-door" approach, called central navigation, to connect young people with coaching services and coordinate referrals across providers in their large network. One of the largest coaching partners is Central Plains Center for Services. Nebraska Children also has an early learning area of practice that provides funds and technical assistance to early childhood programs.

Project for Pride in Living and Hennepin Healthcare

PPL is an organization based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, that provides affordable housing and career readiness services. They offer career training, support to receive a diploma, and alternative high schools. PPL also builds and manages affordable housing in the region, pairs residents with support services, and provides homeownership counseling and financial coaching.

Hennepin Healthcare is an integrated system of health care, including a hospital, trauma center, and clinic system, based in Hennepin County, Minnesota. It is a public corporation and subsidiary of the county. Until 2023, this organization was a key partner to PPL focused on providing services to young parents. It offered case management and home visiting for young parents receiving cash assistance from the state Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program to support high school graduation or high school equivalency completion. Hennepin Healthcare's support program for young parents receiving TANF underwent organizational and leadership changes in 2023 and became less actively engaged in the LEAP partnership.

Service-Level Strategies and Lessons

Working intentionally to identify young parents' needs and addressing those needs at the service level can improve the wider landscape of supportive services. Many LEAP organizations and partners have incorporated an explicit focus on parents in their work with young people.

Offering Relationship-Driven, Individualized Services

The Door, Nebraska Children and their partners, and PPL/Hennepin Healthcare all described their services as based on relationships and building trust with young people. They emphasized the importance of understanding the young person and their family individually so they can be responsive to their needs, assets, and goals, but also how it often takes several meetings with a young person to build enough trust to discuss more substantive or sensitive topics. A staff member at The Door explained,

We're really, really, really big on individualism—understanding who a young person is and all of the aspects, and being able to meet them where they are.

Young people reported that they felt the difference in these meaningful relationships. Young parents in programming partially supported by the LEAP grant at The Door described how the staff had made one mother's child a new outfit for their birthday, helped another mother advocate for herself to retain her child care voucher, and provided needed supplies like diapers. A young person in Nebraska reflected on a similar relationship with their coach:

It was a blessing. I was like, "I want to make [staff member] my friend." No, seriously, because when you don't get that support and love from the people that you're born into and then you get it from programs, it's like, "Whoa!"

Across these partnerships, the relationships are not limited to one staff member. At The Door, for example, young people are connected with a coach, navigator, or caseworker as well as staff specializing in the type of support they need, such as high school equivalency attainment, postsecondary preparation, foster care system navigation, or parenting support.

Hennepin Healthcare implemented "relationship-based inclusive mentoring" in their nurse home-visiting program. They intentionally did not call it "case management" because of the negative association with that term for young people with a history of systems involvement.

Taking an intentional approach to serve young parents requires considering the family unit. A staff member from Central Plains Center for Services described how they had to consider how many bedrooms were needed and the safety of the neighborhood when helping a young person find housing for themselves and their child. In financial coaching services in Nebraska, staff members help young people plan not only for their own financial future, but also consider ways to build savings for their children's needs and education.

Connecting Young Parents with Existing Resources

Nebraska operates an innovative statewide navigation and coaching model that helps connect young people with services in their communities, within regions, and across the state. When working with young parents, the navigators and coaches serve as a hub to link parents with individual and family services and help them navigate complex systems, including public benefits, child care, nonprofit supports, and the child welfare system. Nebraska's central navigation system has a no-wrong-door approach that allows young people ages 14 to 26 across the state to tell their story once to a local

central navigator, who connects them with various services through warm handoffs. The phone shortcut 211 is connected to this central navigation system, allowing young people to obtain quick access and referrals. Young people can also access funds to meet emergency needs, financial literacy, wealth-building, and individualized coaching.

PPL/Hennepin Healthcare and The Door also have systems that connect young people with existing resources in their local areas. Until recently, young parents who applied to receive TANF benefits in Hennepin County, Minnesota, may have had their case transferred to Hennepin Healthcare to support them in maintaining benefits while working toward an education goal. Nurses provided referrals to community resources to support the needs of young parents and their children. The Door staff screen young people who fill out a membership request form to join the organization and meet with a staff member at an intake session. From there, young parents are connected with a parenting specialist, who helps link them to other services within and outside the organization to meet the family's needs.

Filling Gaps in Young Parents' Service Needs

In considering parents' needs relative to young people more broadly, the organizations recognized some service gaps and made efforts to fill them. The Door launched a multiweek course called Parenting Journey, based on an evidence-based national model, which brings together groups of young people who are parents, expectant parents, or child caregivers to explore the emotional complexities of parenting. This is especially critical for young people who did not have positive childhood experiences themselves. A staff member discussed the intentional choice of offering a course like Parenting Journey:

There's a understanding that you are a person and your whole life has changed [after becoming a parent]...You then have to come to terms with how your identity has shifted and what that means for how you move forward in life—how you plan for yourself. The goals of Parenting Journey is to be more hopeful about the future; to be more confident in your abilities to parent.

Nebraska expanded their Opportunity Passport™ financial counseling and savings match program to include a Maternity Match option.³ This came from a recognition that young people who are expecting need a way to save money earlier in their pregnancy. Expectant young people can start the program in their second or third trimester and get matched savings for housing, education, or transportation costs. This can allow a young person to be better financially prepared for the baby and take more time off work after birth.

In partnership with Hennepin Healthcare, PPL offers an extended case management and wraparound support program for young people who receive cash assistance through the state TANF program. This includes supporting young parents' basic resource needs and health to ensure they can remain in education, which is both necessary for maintaining their cash benefits and supporting their families. Hennepin Healthcare's home-visiting services provide in-home comprehensive support for pregnant and parenting young people. Young people also have to meet with their case manager—either a public health nurse, social worker, or community health worker—monthly to maintain their benefits. Their case manager also helps them set and pursue goals.

Celebrating Parenting While Also Recognizing Its Challenges

One way that services help meet young people’s needs is to work with them to understand and celebrate parenthood, while also realizing the challenges. Staff at The Door reflected on this dynamic:

It’s a beautiful, positive thing [being a parent], and it is also very challenging. They sit together. It’s different for every young person. Sometimes they just want somebody to talk to. Sometimes they want connection to other parents. Sometimes they just have an immediate need that needs a fix. It really depends on what it is that they need. Young people we spoke to reflected on how much they loved being parents, but also how difficult the systems that they are in make it for them.

Staff in Nebraska also reflected on how parenthood can serve as a catalyst for young people to focus on their goals in a new way, as they have someone besides themselves to consider. They described that becoming a parent can increase a young person’s motivation and raise their aspirations.

But staff and young parents also noted how being a parent, especially when a young person’s basic needs are not secure, is a source of stress. One young parent explained,

You can’t even enjoy your time with your newborn baby because you’re either rushed back to work, or you’re rushed to do these things with [the state TANF program] really, really fast to get your hours, to get your money, to provide for your child. It’s like, “Wow. Now I can’t bond with my baby the way I want to because I’m so stressed out.” Then [my baby’s] stressed out because I’m stressed out.

This is where organizational services and supports targeted to the needs of young parents and their families can make an important difference. Well-situated supports can disrupt an intergenerational cycle of systems involvement through prevention so the young parent can provide their children with a different upbringing than they had.

Organization-Level Growth

Youth-serving organizations that begin to focus on serving young parents may find that their overall operations and existing partnerships evolve. This is called “targeted universalism,” where focusing on the needs of a particular complex population can result in beneficial changes to meet broad goals across all groups (powell, Menendian, and Ake 2019). A leader from Project for Pride in Living summarized it well:

If you think about targeted universalism—designing for young parents is designing for all people.

We documented multiple changes in organizational structures and practices among youth-serving organizations and their partners resulting from the LEAP young parent cohort grant and related efforts.

Reorienting Services from the Person to the Family

Though many organizations within the three LEAP Young Parent Cohort partnerships had long served young people who were pregnant or parenting, several began to identify young parents explicitly as a focus population for their services as a result of the LEAP work. This included tracking them within service data, identifying them among youth survey respondents, and orienting resources to meet their

needs. The Door hired a parenting specialist, and Nebraska Children and Families Foundation's CYI made a public commitment to young parents, particularly those with a history of systems involvement. In addition, college and postsecondary education partners began to draw more institutional attention to the needs of students with children. A staff member from Nebraska explained,

We just realized...that young people that were pregnant or parenting had specific needs...There was specific interventions that we could do to enhance the CYI model specific to young parents. That really happened with LEAP and the initial cohort of thinking about student parents. That is what started a much broader focus on pregnant and parenting youth. Then, shortly after that, we actually added pregnant and parenting youth to our CYI population specifically. We called them out as a subpopulation, and then it just ballooned from there.

Other services also shifted with this refocus. Some organizations have created kid-friendly spaces by offering toys and coloring materials in conference rooms, or they offer to meet clients in kid-friendly locations like local parks or fast-food restaurants with play areas. Even if they cannot directly accommodate children, they make it clear that children are welcome and even expected, so the parents do not feel their child is a burden or barrier to receiving supportive services or accessing education or career pathways. While some organizations have rules against children in the building, they have begun to make more efforts to accommodate children in safe ways that align with organizational rules when the parent needs to come in for a necessary service.

A large shift in Nebraska was adjusting their coaching framework from *Youth Thrive* to *Youth and Families Thrive*, which combined *Youth Thrive* with *Strengthening Families* to create an explicit dual-generation approach—meaning it considers how to coach toward improving the well-being of both young parents and their children. Nebraska Children's early childhood programs were already using the *Strengthening Families* approach, so they described it as a natural evolution. One staff member said this change still took a bit of a mindset shift:

It's such a shift for professionals, I would say, because you were so used to working directly with the young adults and almost like, "What do we do with the child?"...Well, you work with the child. You incorporate that and that child...You make sure that to work with a young adult that you're helping them meet the needs of their child because you can't separate them, or you shouldn't if you're looking at preventative support.

This dual-generation focus has the added benefit of strengthening the organizational focus on prevention, because addressing the needs of families together reduces the risk of children entering public systems.

Reflecting organization-level shifts toward a whole-family approach, some program staff shared that they need to focus even more on the sustainability of supports when dealing with parents and children. For example, some counsel young parents about how to maintain and not burn out their support networks to promote long-term stability.

Making Connections within Organizations

Organizations that began to take a two-generation or whole-family approach to their youth work began to see opportunities for more internal connections. Nebraska's CYI formalized connections with their early childhood programming. They described the process as follows:

We had never really thought about the older youth initiatives and the early childhood initiatives as integrated and working more together. We've worked pretty siloed, even within our own organization. This also led to thinking internally about, okay, we've got all these really strong early childhood initiatives...How do we then match that with young parents? We did a lot of work internally to align those initiatives in the same process.

Among other internal efforts, they leveraged their central navigators to help families access different parts of the organization through internal referrals and connections.

The Door strengthened connections to whole-family supports when they brought on a parenting specialist in November 2022. This addition to the team increased capacity to link parents to internal programs and resources like legal aid, food assistance, benefits access, clothing and hygiene resources, support for runaway and homeless young people, career and education programs, counseling, and other services.

Building Capacity to Support Parents into Staff Training

To support young parents' needs in addition to system-involved or disconnected young people generally, some organizations had to enhance worker capacity. For example, in Nebraska, all coaching staff members at a core service partner are trained in the *Youth and Families Thrive* model.

The Door surveyed their staff as an early step in their LEAP Young Parent Cohort work to measure their understanding and comfort around youth parent issues. Through this effort, they were able to raise awareness of the young parent service population among staff members, identify champions already working in the organization, and tailor training and resources to the staff members' needs. This is part of what motivated them to create a parenting specialist position, which has become the "holder of the resources" and the "go-to for information" for other staff in the organization who encounter issues particular to parents.

When young parents were identified by an organization as a priority population, the specialized knowledge and skills staff gained from helping a young parent became less of a "one off" or "add on" for program staff and more valued as the core expertise of the role. One staff member explained,

At first it's going to be case-by-case basis, but, eventually, I feel like it's going to be like we're going to formalize this into, okay, these are the supports available for this particular population.

On the other hand, other staff members at The Door described tailoring services for young people who are parenting as having always been part of their work in meeting young people's individual needs. This may reflect individual staff members' approaches rather than The Door's organizational orientation.

Taking a Strengths-Based or Asset-Forward Approach

When working with young parents, many staff members had to reframe their thinking to emphasize the strengths of parenthood and how having a child can be an asset. This reorientation happened at both the services and organizational levels. As noted above, it is common for people to treat young people who become parents as facing a life setback, but it can also be an opportunity for growth. One coach from Nebraska explained,

When they find out that news [that they are pregnant], my honest opinion, and what I say to them, is this can serve as such a beautiful motivator...I really push that this is now not just for you, but it's for your children. It's this fantastic opportunity.

Incorporating Youth Leadership with Specific Attention on Young Parents

Many of the LEAP organizations already had a youth leadership component, sometimes developed through earlier LEAP efforts. The explicit young-parent focus has encouraged organizations to ensure that their youth leadership groups have young parent representation and that, generally, they are thinking about parenting youth in their recommendations. The Door has taken this approach for their internal youth leadership group that hosts workshops and events and helps make decisions at the organizational level, including giving input on hiring and leading their policy group working with the Administration for Children's Services. Nebraska Children involves young parents in their community-specific and regional youth leadership chapters. They also support a parent and caregiver citizen review panel for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services and a general Pregnant and Parenting Advisory Committee for Nebraska Children. Some of these young parent leaders helped inform the systems-level efforts described below.

Systems-Level Strategies

While aligning individual services and organizational approaches to young parents' needs can meaningfully improve some of their opportunities, these young people often face systemic barriers to meeting their education, career, and life goals. Staff at organizations involved in the three partnerships identified some of these challenges and offered promising examples of how to work toward systems-level solutions.

Staff discussed several major gaps in supports young parents need to move toward their education and career goals and how these gaps can compound and make progress harder:

- All three partnerships noted that **lack of stable housing** often prevents young parents from focusing on moving ahead in other areas of their lives. Staff members reported that a common experience for many young parents is that they are in unstable relationships that fall apart and, when that happens, their housing situation destabilizes. And in all regions the partnerships serve—including both urban and rural areas—when parents go to look for alternative housing, they typically struggle with the lack of safe, affordable units available. The amount of housing subsidies available do not come close to meeting needs (Wheaton et al. 2023) and often do not cover

expenses like application fees and security deposits, which can be fundamental barriers to renting. Service providers in Nebraska and New York City mentioned that even when young parents obtain a housing voucher, landlords often engage in source-of-income discrimination, preferring to rent to tenants paying market rate rather than deal with the slow bureaucracy involved in administering housing vouchers. Further, many young parents lack credit, do not meet minimum income requirements, or have eviction records that lead landlords to view them as undesirable tenants.

- Similarly, **child care is a large systemic gap** that prevents young parents from moving forward with their goals (Sick, Spaulding, and Park 2018). Service providers explained that child care vouchers do not adequately support young parents' care needs. These vouchers only pay for care during work hours, which means they lack care they need to attend classes or job interviews. And fluctuating work hours at unstable jobs often leave them without care. Parents who receive subsidies often find it hard to find a provider they feel comfortable leaving their child with who has slots available during their work hours. Furthermore, many providers choose not to accept subsidies because they often receive lower pay than they would from a private-paying family, and dealing with reimbursement from the government can be a hassle.
- Staff noted that **child care barriers are often intertwined with transportation barriers**, particularly in areas that lack reliable public transit. Nebraska service providers said that buses are unreliable, so young parents who do not have a car may struggle to find a workable child care arrangement that allows them to drop their child off at care and get to work on time. This issue is acute in the many child care deserts in rural areas of the state where people must travel long distances to care and to work.⁴
- Service providers also described how, even where supports exist, **young parents struggle to navigate bureaucracies** to obtain them. Young people lack experience dealing with public benefits and other public systems. These systems are confusing, time-consuming, and burdensome. They may not know how to advocate for themselves with caseworkers—or, when they do, the caseworkers may not be knowledgeable about how to serve them (Adams, Hahn, and Coffey 2021). Staff in all three regions mentioned that young people can get discouraged dealing with these workers, who are not always supportive or helpful. Staff at The Door reflected that, given high caseloads at public agencies and low pay leading to turnover, there is no room for the relationship-building needed to make young people comfortable engaging with public systems and for public caseworkers to support them fully.
- A few staff members in Nebraska also reflected that **student parents often face additional gaps because society assumes higher education is a space of privilege** where young people do not need resource supports to persist in school. Student parents often fall in the gaps between policy systems.⁵ Housing, child care, transportation, and family health care—all core costs of attendance for student parents—are often not funded even when schools waive students' tuition.

Coordinating to Fill Service Gaps

Aware of systemic challenges, members of the LEAP partnerships have filled gaps at the systems level to serve young people more seamlessly. One of the most far-reaching examples is Nebraska CYI's statewide partnership, which supports a referral network of youth-serving providers.⁶ CYI divides the state of Nebraska into geographic areas with a cross-sector, locally driven, collaborative working group of providers. A backbone organization in each area coordinates efforts across the local collaborative and runs the central navigation resources for young people and families. The organizations directly involved in collaboratives serve as anchor resources for the central access navigation system. There are also statewide meetings where coaches, state partner agencies, and other staff can network and learn from one another. One service provider explained what this looked like as a system:

There's an interactive...map so you could go and find the central navigator for any of the areas. The spirit behind it is that the central navigator, or navigators—sometimes there's multiple—they understand this resource network so that the young person or the family or the parent, or whoever's accessing the system, doesn't necessarily have to.

One example of how the CYI partnership filled in service gaps involved working with the College of Saint Mary in Omaha in the early years of LEAP. Coaches referred students to the college's "Learning and Earning" program that provided housing and food for mothers and their children. Since the end of that partnership, CYI has continued to connect young parents with housing supports through braided public funding sources.

Another example of developing systems-level partnerships to fill in service gaps is The Door's targeted partnerships within New York City's large web of service providers, including those related to young people overall and young people who are parenting. They have placed increasing emphasis on building connections to city agencies young parents interact with, most notably offices within the Administration for Children's Services, including child welfare, child care, and youth services. They also work with the nearby office that provides Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits and have identified a network of local nonprofit referral partners who provide various services for parents, including mother-child programs, parent shelters, shelters for young parents and expecting young people, counseling, and home visiting. And they have engaged in local provider partnerships in Harlem and the Bronx to discuss their service populations and engage directly with young parents in community-building activities. These efforts helped equip The Door staff to instruct clients on how to self-advocate to get what they need.

Creating Child Care Supports through Partnerships and Policy

The Nebraska partnership pushed several structural efforts to increase child care availability. Through a community effort led by the school district, public agencies and volunteers formed a nonprofit organization to start a child care center with about 250 slots in a rural area. The center operated as a licensed partner of the school district, allowing them to share teachers so the early childhood education teachers could be paid living wages through the school district pay scale.

In addition, Nebraska Children was part of a successful advocacy effort to increase the maximum income for child care subsidy eligibility from 130 percent to 185 percent of the federal poverty level. Meanwhile, they are actively exploring how to lessen the “cliff effect” so young parents can maintain subsidies even if they work longer hours or take a promotion that would otherwise have made them ineligible for support.⁷ They have engaged with the business community as collaborators to address these and related issues.

In a third effort, Nebraska Children successfully advocated to the Nebraska state legislature to pass a bill establishing the Child Care Tax Credit Act⁸ and reinstating the School Readiness Tax Credit Act,⁹ providing refundable and nonrefundable tax credits for child care providers, centers, and employees to encourage use of high-quality facilities and obtain higher professional qualifications while offsetting operational costs.

Working with Employers

LEAP organizations support job development and employment for young people who are parenting through work with employers. It has historically been challenging for human services departments or nonprofit partners to work with employers, but LEAP partners demonstrated how it can be beneficial to develop employer partnerships that provide young people, and especially parents, with wraparound support when they are employed while helping them access better career pathways. The Nebraska partnership was able to work with some corporations that largely employ rural immigrant workers with limited English proficiency (e.g., food packing plants) to explain employer expectations and to help employees meet emergency needs for transportation and utilities. They worked with some employers to get laundry services on site. And, as noted previously, the partnership is collaborating with employers to address child care issues in the state.

The Door also established partnerships with employers to support their young people’s employment and career pathways. One example of this is their partnership with a large clothing retailer for work readiness preparation with a direct-hire opportunity. They have another large clothing partner that attends hiring events and offers employment to many young people. And other partners across major sectors (construction, medical, security, and information technology) offer both internship and employment opportunities for young people through The Door.

Reinforcing Practice Changes with Policy Work

The organizations participating in the partnerships recognized that, given the systemic nature of young parents’ barriers to meeting their goals, identifying and pushing for policy improvements parallel with service reforms would help ensure young people can access the resources they need.

One example of policy work reinforcing services is The Door’s engagement in a citywide partnership around improving experiences for young parents already in foster care. Since 2021, The Door staff have engaged with the Administration for Children’s Services leadership as part of a large group of service providers, legal aid providers, social workers, and advocates led by a child service nonprofit to ensure

young parents in foster care have their needs and their children’s needs met. These conversations target specific policies, including ensuring young parents in care know their rights. They worked with the Administration for Children’s Services on guidance to support father visitation of children whose mothers are in foster care. They also worked on reforming case reviews and moving mandatory reporter guidelines toward a more strengths-based approach for young parents at risk of child welfare involvement rather than a framework of focusing primarily on reducing risk and harm. That involved looking “at the strengths of the parent [and] of the case” before deciding whether to file a report.

Another example of policy work reinforcing service-level reforms is the work Hennepin Healthcare and its Hennepin County partners undertook to identify and leverage flexibilities in TANF policy that would allow the program to better support young parents. Hennepin Healthcare was a job development partner for young parents who received public cash assistance. In this role, rather than providing traditional job search and employment services, they provided home-visiting services and wraparound supports. However, they identified several core aspects of the program that limited their ability to support parents in meeting their education and employment goals: the state’s low income-eligibility threshold for cash assistance discouraged parents from taking more hours or higher-paying jobs, and the slow and punitive application process (which required extensive paperwork and documentation, among other challenges) prevented many eligible people from getting assistance. This led Hennepin Healthcare staff to coordinate extensively with the county human services agency and the state legislature to explore opportunities to disregard income for parents to help them maintain public assistance while working and to offer presumptive eligibility to parents to smooth the process of obtaining assistance.

The last example is how Nebraska engaged in a statewide push for policy changes to cover college costs and provide comprehensive supports so system-involved and pregnant and parenting young people could access postsecondary education. The Fostering Achievement in Nebraska (FAN) Network was a group of state high-level policy stakeholders—including public and nonprofit colleges (two-year and four-year); the state departments of labor, education, and health and human services; the state judiciary; the state coordinating commission for postsecondary education; state workforce agencies; central navigation; the statewide comprehensive coaching organization; and philanthropy.¹⁰ They divided into workgroups that met regularly over several years to address strategies to help system-involved young people (including young parents) meet their postsecondary attainment goals. The FAN Network explored the full costs of attendance (including additional costs for parenting students), identified possible flexibilities in funding (e.g., providing housing reimbursements for off-campus housing), and noted the need to coordinate with public human service agencies to provide for students’ basic needs. The FAN Network recruited a state senator to champion the effort, and he introduced a study of best practices around connecting young people to higher education through enhanced supports.

Nebraska partners also worked to strengthen prevention of addiction-related child welfare involvement through a combination of policy advocacy and strong local supports. The Nebraska Children and Families Foundation advocated for the passage of the Plan of Safe Care in the state’s Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act, which aimed to identify prenatal substance use early and prevent Child Protective Services reports and risk of child removal. This involved working with local

communities on identifying parents or expectant parents with addiction challenges and providing tailored supports. Schools also became referral sources for young people needing these supports.

At the same time, Nebraska Children’s legislative work continued to reinforce practice reforms. Nebraska Children pushed for legislation to change reporting requirements for child abuse and neglect and narrow the definitions to reduce overreporting. They also trained young people to advocate to members of the legislature around their needs. They began including parents in those events, some of whom suggested that young people in foster care who become pregnant should automatically be referred to home visiting as a prevention measure. One of the staff members involved in these conversations explained the impact these young parent leaders had:

The young people said...“I was pregnant while in foster care. Why wasn’t it just an automatic referral to home visiting?” It just seems so logical to them. “Why didn’t that just happen because I was pregnant and in the system?”

This led to conversations between Nebraska Children and the state department of human services about expanding automatic home-visiting referrals for young parents. Simultaneously, they worked with legislators to educate them on the benefits of home visiting. Other systems-level efforts in Nebraska included supporting a parent and caregiver citizen review panel for the Nebraska department of human services.

Discussion

The LEAP Young Parents Cohort faced various challenges that limited progress at times, but the cohort partners all demonstrated ways to successfully improve approaches to young parent services despite difficulties. And elements of the LEAP grant itself helped facilitate their progress.

Challenges and Strategies

The fragmentation of the landscape of supportive services for young parents was a persistent, systemic challenge for service providers. Program rules that affect eligibility for supports that young parents rely on are often complex, can change when a person’s life circumstances change, and vary by location. Nongovernmental service availability also varies greatly by location. It is typically not realistic for any service provider to have a comprehensive understanding of all services and supports available to a give young person. As a result, the resources a young person gets connected to could depend on the knowledge of an individual supportive staff member. One of the common approaches to addressing this challenge has been to **establish or strengthen navigational supports and interorganizational communication** to improve young parents’ ability to find and access existing resources.

In part because of the strains of parenting and other commitments, maintaining youth engagement and attendance in programming is also a perennial challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic reduced programs’ and caseworkers’ in-person interactions with young people at a time when parents were juggling child care, work, and their own schooling, often in isolation. This disrupted relationships and made engagement even more difficult for service providers. Some organizations developed **creative**

engagement strategies, like PPL’s multiday “hack-a-thon” for young people to develop solutions to different issues important to them.

Meanwhile, young people’s skepticism of systems means it takes a long time to build trust, which can be undermined when staff members turn over—an unfortunately frequent occurrence in the nonprofit space where low pay and stressful work are commonplace. Turnover in public systems of caseworkers, housing navigators, or public legal advocates also affects young people. Turnover not only undermines trust, but also is a loss of valuable institutional knowledge, because much systems navigation capacity relies heavily on individual staff members’ knowledge and connections. Some organizations bolstered against staff turnover by **helping young people create meaningful connections with multiple staff members, paying attention to job quality of direct service staff, and documenting resources and knowledge to share with others** (including directly with young people).¹¹

Engaging young fathers proved more difficult than engaging young mothers. Young fathers are less likely to be custodial caregivers and more hesitant to reach out for help. Organizations have tried to address this at various levels: **coaches seek to empower fathers even if they do not have a relationship with the mother while encouraging the mother to include the father; they seek to recruit fathers to youth leadership groups; and they work on policy issues like father visitation rights while their children are in care.**

Some important contextual factors influenced the effectiveness of the partnerships’ efforts. Geographic context, including rurality, plays a big role across these diverse partnerships—in various ways, geography interacts with local service culture. Rural areas face service deserts where providers scramble to meet needs, but they face less competition for funding and usually undertake a more collaborative approach than in urban centers. In New York City, large caseloads, the multiplicity of organizations and a lack of time make it challenging to focus on initiatives beyond direct services. But focusing on direct services can run counter to realizing broader systems change, and it can be harder when direct service positions are poorly paid and emotionally taxing. Having **good communication in systems partnerships** helps overcome some of these issues, if organizations can make the time, space, and connections to make communication feel respectful, productive, and worthwhile. Leaders of strong partnerships needed to carve out time to meet consistently and build strong working relationships.

Lessons at the Service, Organization, and Systems Levels

Despite the varied challenges, the LEAP partners’ work demonstrates examples of how positive change is possible at the service, organizational, and systems levels and what facilitators of success look like. At the service level, the partners all showed how offering **individualized, trauma-informed support while intentionally considering the needs of children and parents together** is a promising approach. Staff across the partnerships recognize that it is necessary to meet young people where they are and support them in setting and working on their own goals. These providers understand that many young parents, especially those with a history of systems involvement, have faced challenges in their lives that take a mental and emotional toll and that overcoming internal blocks to progress is key to success. They also

assume good intentions and focus on young parents' strengths and capacities as parents, students, workers, and community members rather than their limitations and challenges.

At the organization level, partners showed that **shifting organizational orientation from the individual to the family** can positively influence how well young parents are served. Doing so helps service organizations consider more systematically how they can support children's needs so parents can attain their personal goals. This includes making organizational spaces child-friendly to make parent engagement easier. In some cases, it includes making connections between parent- and child-serving providers within organizations. And it sometimes means organizations train service staff on understanding young children's needs to effectively undertake a whole-family approach. Partners also recognized the need to include young parents in youth leadership opportunities within organizations so their lived experience can be accounted for in service planning.

And at the systems level, organizations successfully **engaged across organizations and with policymakers to work toward addressing systemic barriers for young parents**. In Nebraska, this includes systemwide service coordination to make comprehensive whole-family supports accessible. At The Door, it includes more local partnerships to meet various needs. At PPL, it includes a deeper partnership with the nurse home-visiting program to better serve young people who are parenting. All three partners have engaged with legislative or administrative actors on key policy issues affecting the young parents they serve, including child care, child welfare, and cash assistance. In several cases, young people have proved effective messengers when LEAP partners gave them platforms to advocate for policies that would better meet their needs.

LEAP as a Facilitator

LEAP organizations credited a few specific aspects of the grant model for their success in making progress for young parents. The first was how the **establishment of the cohort itself** targeted funding and placed emphasis on young parents. They also benefited from the **learning community** with other organizations doing young parent change work, which was supported by **knowledgeable technical assistance providers and specialized coaches**. They indicated that the grant gave them time, space, and support to iterate to find effective and appropriate approaches to the work. And all of them were able to use the LEAP grant as a **strand in a braid of funding** from various resources that increased their organizational capacity to serve young parents, focus on organizational growth, and address opportunities to change broader systems.

Notes

- ¹ A description of the LEAP initiative and the partnerships is available at www.aecf.org/leap and in "Learn and Earn to Achieve Potential (LEAP)," Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021, <https://assets.aecf.org/m/blogdoc/aecf-LEAPfactsheet-2021.pdf>.
- ² Disconnected young people are those not attending school and not meaningfully employed. See, for example, "Youth Not Attending School and Not Working by Age Group in United States," Kids Count Data Center, Annie E.

Casey Foundation, last updated November 2022, <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/9292-youth-not-attending-school-and-not-working-by-age-group#detailed/1/any/false/2048,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867/4121,4122,4123/18399,18400>.

- ³ See “Omaha,” Project Everlast, Nebraska Children, accessed December 13, 2023, https://www.projecteverlast.org/omaha/opportunity_passport.html.
- ⁴ The Center for American Progress defines a “child care desert” as a census tract with more than three children under age 5 for every licensed child care slot. Their interactive tool is available at “U.S. Child Care Deserts,” 2020, <https://childcaresdeserts.org/>.
- ⁵ See more about this issue at “Student-Parent Families at the Center,” Urban Institute, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.urban.org/projects/student-parent-families-center>.
- ⁶ They were able to scale this system up through a federal Social Innovation Fund Grant and with the LEAP grant.
- ⁷ For more about the cliff effect, see Anderson et al. (2021).
- ⁸ “Historic Nebraska Child Care Tax Credit Package Signed into Law,” First Five Nebraska, June 1, 2023, <https://www.firstfive-nebraska.org/blog/governor-signs-lb754-into-law/>.
- ⁹ “School Readiness Tax Credit Act,” State of Nebraska, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://revenue.nebraska.gov/about/information-guides/school-readiness-tax-credit-act>.
- ¹⁰ See “Fostering Achievement in Nebraska,” Nebraska Children, accessed December 13, 2023, <https://www.nebraskachildren.org/what-we-do/connected-youth-initiative/fostering-achievement-in-nebraska.html>.
- ¹¹ See the resource created for partners at Anderson, Coffey, and Daly (2022).

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