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A 2GEN APPROACH IN MINNESOTA

A STATE CASE STUDY FOR SYSTEMS LEADERS & POLICYMAKERS

DEAR COLLEAGUE,

Supporting families holistically is inherent in Indigenous communities in Minnesota, across the United States, and around the globe. Drawing on that wisdom is at the heart of the modern iteration of a two-generation (2Gen) approach, with the goal to build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously supporting children and the adults in their lives together. Over many years, leaders in Minnesota have demonstrated a keen awareness about the importance of supporting families holistically, and that awareness has driven changes in state programs, policies, and funding.

Current leadership is responsible for a 2023 legislative session that made historic investments in family well-being, as well as the creation of a new Cabinet-level agency — the Department of Children, Youth, and Families — that positions Minnesota to "embrace opportunities to think differently and improve the effectiveness of services for children and families who need them most."

The years leading up to these recent transformational investments tell a rich story about Minnesota's innovation on behalf of families, using a 2Gen (or "whole-family") approach. This case study aims to share that story. We began our work in late 2022, and concluded prior to the end of the state's 2023 legislative session. For reference, a summary of the final biennial budget produced by the Minnesota Children's Cabinet is included in the appendices.

Ascend at the Aspen Institute extends sincere appreciation to our many partners in Minnesota for their commitment to implementing whole-family approaches to increase economic mobility for all families in the state. Beginning with Governor Drayton and deepening with Governor Waltz, state whole-family approaches have positioned Minnesota as a leader in the 2Gen field. We are indebted to Erin Bailey, Assistant Commissioner of the Minnesota Children's Cabinet, for her visionary work collaborating with and implementing whole-family approaches across state agencies. We thank Jovon Perry, Director of Economic Assistance and Employment Supports with the Minnesota Department of Human Services' Children and Family Services Division, for her whole-family approach efforts, which began at the community level and inform her statewide work and national influence.

A special thank you also goes to our 20 Ascend Network Partners in Minnesota, who generously shared their learnings as frontline innovators working in partnership with families each day. Ascend is proud to count four extraordinary Minnesota leaders among our Aspen Ascend Fellows: Mayor Melvin Carter of the City of St. Paul; Joe Hobot, President & CEO of the American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center; Gloria Perez, President & CEO of the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, and Nathan Chomilo, Medical Director for the State of Minnesota's Medicaid and MinnesotaCare programs.

Each of these leaders and partners has contributed in significant ways to the story you are about to read. We hope you will be inspired to deepen 2Gen approaches across your state systems. Please let us know how Ascend may be supportive.

Sincerely,

ANNE B. MOSLE
Vice President, the Aspen Institute;
Founder & Executive Director, Ascend at the Aspen Institute

MARJORIE R. SIMS
Managing Director,
Ascend at the Aspen Institute

SARAH HAIGHT
Director, 2Gen Practice,
Ascend at the Aspen Institute

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Cover photo: Sydney Martens and her daughter.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2023, an America where all children and families can thrive remains beyond our collective reach, evidenced by persistent extreme wealth and income inequality and starkly disparate outcomes by race. Yet at the same time, truly transformational work is underway in some states and communities that is illuminating paths forward toward the shared well-being to which we aspire.

Pioneering work in the 20th century and into the current era has yielded core principles and practices to guide future work toward achieving the goal of population-level well-being for families. In order to truly enable thriving across generations, policymakers and practitioners are recognizing that the circumstances, needs, and wishes of family members are not isolated from each other but are interconnected, and that respecting and working with whole families is key to charting a course toward enduring well-being. For family-serving professionals and communities to center families' lived experiences and provide whole-family supports, public-sector systems themselves need to be transformed in two ways: by breaking down siloed programmatic structures that impede holistic approaches, and by rigorously applying an equity framework to shine a light on the legacy of systemic and structural racism and design them out of systems until outcomes no longer have any correlation with one's racial or social identity.

Because the work of transforming systems to enable whole-family approaches that achieve equitable outcomes is complex and long-term in nature, national momentum can be accelerated by looking to the places where there is a long-standing and enduring commitment to this transformational work. State government leaders are at the forefront of this work, due to their oversight of public-sector systems and the associated funding and programs that support children and families. This case study is designed to provide an immersive experience into the work of state government leaders, partners, and communities in the state of Minnesota to achieve transformational systems change and advance powerful 2Gen whole-family approaches to achieving family well-being.

The short, section-by-section highlights offered below are intended to provide readers with a sense of the story contained in this case study.

MINNESOTA

Minnesota is known as a state with a high quality of life; its rich racial and ethnic diversity is a strength, but stark inequities persist, as it is one of the worst places in the country for people of color.[1] The state's geography, demography, and history help set important context for the story of the 2Gen/Whole Family Systems change work of recent years, pointing to the contextual challenges as well as the history of the state's organized response to the needs of children and families.

THE 2GEN MOVEMENT IN MINNESOTA: 2GEN 2.0

With 2Gen approaches achieving greater national prominence and investment in the 2010s, Minnesota's leaders at the time, including Governor Mark Dayton, confronted unacceptable enduring, stark disparities in life outcomes for children of color and children experiencing poverty. With a critical mass of key leaders across settings and levels on board, the state advanced more intentional and rigorous interagency work to reveal systemic barriers to family well-being and to work collaboratively to

1 Minnesota Ranked 2nd-Worst In U.S. For Racial Equality. (2017, August 22). Www.cbsnews.com. https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/minnesota-racial-inequality/

remove them. A level of ongoing conferral across agencies and divisions, aided by shared governance structures, produced a flourishing of interagency initiatives that paved the way for launching the Minnesota 2-Generation Policy Network and an associated cohort of local pilot sites to prototype service-delivery changes that could better serve whole families. The story of this evolution offers readers the elements of a pathway to pursue, adaptable to the unique conditions of other states and communities.

FROM 2-GENERATION POLICY NETWORK TO WHOLE FAMILY SYSTEMS: EVOLUTION OF MINNESOTA'S INITIATIVE

Spanning two gubernatorial administrations, Minnesota's 2Gen policy and practice matured to develop new transformative processes that reduce the administrative burden on local service providers and enable the involvement of grassroots organizations in communities of color. Notably, this progress led to the successful blending of siloed funding streams and a reinvented request for proposal (RFP) process centering equity. Doubling the number of pilot sites, the renamed Whole Family Systems (WFS) Initiative yielded a rich set of innovative programmatic prototypes in communities experiencing the deepest disparities, as well as concrete changes to state policy and transformed relationships between local and state partners and across state divisions and agencies. WFS has generated tools and resources readers can use for efforts around equity-centered systems change and overcoming barriers to whole-family policy and practice.

ENVISIONING THE NEXT PHASE

State leaders and partners reflect on what will be required to both sustain the work for whole-family systems change and to take it to the next level. They offer counsel, key lessons, and recommendations to readers considering undertaking or deepening this kind of work.

An attendee at the Ascending in Minnesota convening. Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

Marjorie Sims and Mayor Melvin Carter at the Ascending in Minnesota convening. Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

INTRODUCTION

For those who care deeply about the well-being of all American families, the past several years have yielded a bewildering mixture of signals — events, population-level crises, social and political dynamics and actions — that together have created a sense of disorientation and difficulty in knowing where to focus our attention and collective action. Sometimes lost in the sensory overload are the remarkable stories of persistent, resilient and evolving efforts across the country to transform systems and co-create solutions with families and communities.

While no one is immune to the impacts of seismic societal change — not children and families themselves, nor the public officials, service providers, advocates, and community members whose purpose and work are focused on building family well-being — the long-term work to transform systems has forged ahead, continuing to deploy and refine innovative approaches and to achieve hard-earned gains. At a time characterized by uncertainty and deep concerns about the current state and future of the country and its people, these stories should not be lost in the cacophony of headlines and messages that demand our attention.

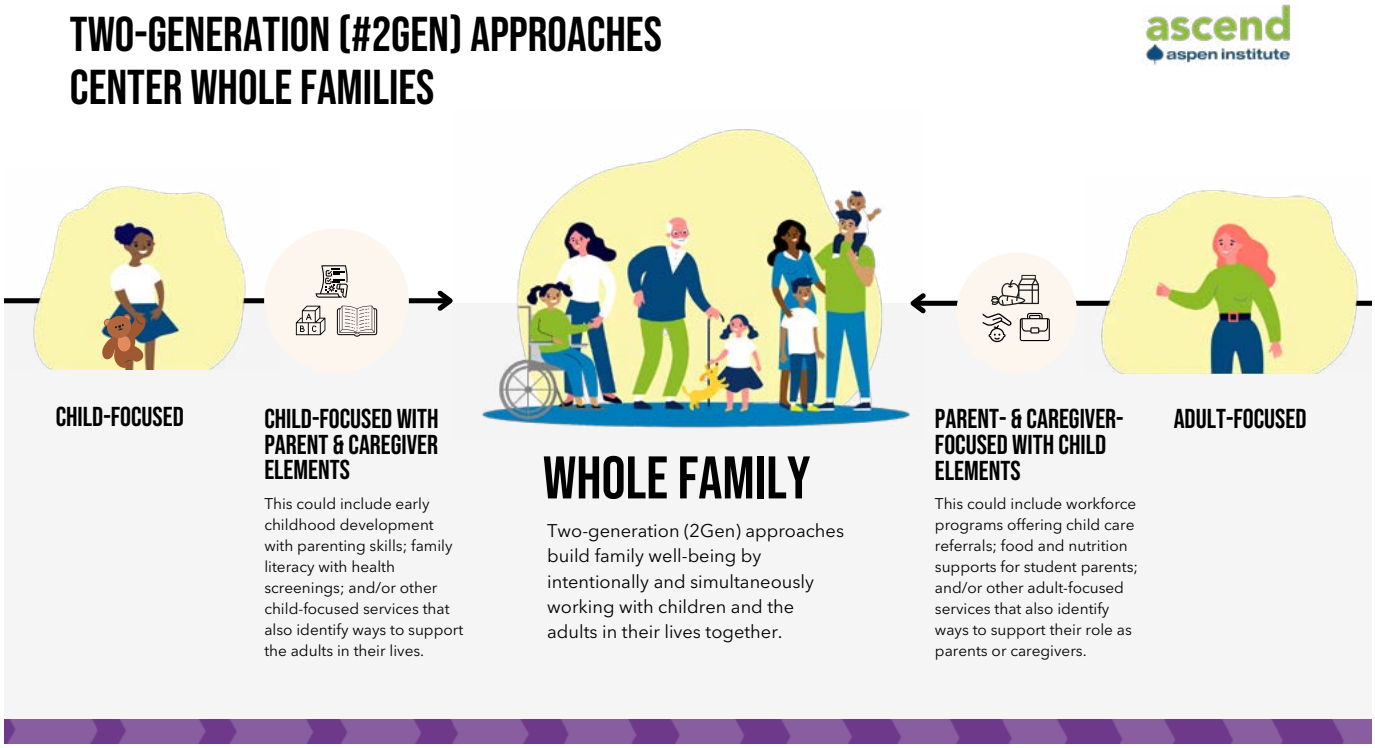
This case study is intended to capture the richness and depth of the work to transform systems and advance powerful two-generation (2Gen), whole-family approaches to achieving family well-being in one state: Minnesota.

TWO-GENERATION / WHOLE FAMILY APPROACHES

Many programs focus exclusively on children and their development or on adults' needs and goals; the way services are funded and administered reflects the design of public-sector human-services programs and systems that were originally launched to address a single societal problem or issue impacting a subset of the population. As systems have been built over time, each has functioned independently, creating programmatic and funding siloes that are not designed to work together functionally, in terms of budget, systems and rules, data, or services integration.

By contrast, 2Gen[2] approaches build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives *together,* acknowledging and building on the reality that the lives of family members and the outcomes they seek are inextricably intertwined. This represents a fundamental shift from traditional programmatic approaches that serve children and adults separately. Family life is by its nature multidimensional, and it's best understood by listening to the real experts — the families themselves. Whole-family approaches use a family-centered lens to co-create pathways to achieving the positive outcomes families want.

2 The terms "two-generation" (abbreviated as "2Gen" and "2-Gen") and "whole family" are used interchangeably throughout, reflecting practice across the United States and in Minnesota, where terminology has shifted in response to community input.



BUILDING ON A LONG HISTORY OF FOUNDATIONAL WORK AT THE STATE LEVEL AND IN LOCAL MINNESOTA COMMUNITIES, A NEXT LEVEL OF COORDINATED, SYSTEMIC WORK HAS BEEN UNDERTAKEN IN RECENT YEARS TO REDESIGN PUBLICLY FUNDED SERVICES BY:

- Working across siloed state systems — programs, divisions, and agencies — to mitigate or remove administrative barriers — such as siloed funding streams; differences in administrative rules, definitions, and criteria; and incompatible IT systems — making it possible to provide integrated local services; and
- Funding and supporting local pilot sites to serve as learning communities, as well as laboratories and proving grounds for innovation, generating promising new approaches to working with whole families that build on core 2Gen principles.

2Gen approaches emerge and spread in many ways. They are shaped by and respond to the realities, conditions, relationships, and contexts unique to each area. This case study is written for interested policymakers and practitioners working with families, as well as for leaders in academia and philanthropy.

The hope is that readers may benefit from learning about and immersing themselves in real-world stories of how this work unfolds in diverse places. This kind of exploration enables readers to understand the importance and potential impact of whole-family approaches and of the associated systems-change work involved in creating the conditions for these efforts to succeed and proliferate. To that end, and through the support of the Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, Ascend at the Aspen Institute is producing this publication, along with a companion case study in 2024, to document the work and tell the story of how 2Gen took hold and spread in two states, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The Ascend team is proud to count four extraordinary leaders from Minnesota among our Fellows: Melvin Carter (Mayor, City of St. Paul), Nathan Chomilo (Medical Director, Minnesota Department of Human Services), Joe Hobot (President and CEO, American Indian OIC), and Gloria Perez (President and CEO, Women's Foundation of Minnesota). Each of these leaders has contributed in significant ways to the story you are about to read; we gratefully acknowledge their contributions to this work.

MINNESOTA

Karla Benson Rutten, Miriam Cullimore, Dr. Sharon Pierce, and Amanda Schermerhorn (left to right) speaking on a panel at the Ascending in Minnesota convening. Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

Minnesota is best known for its natural beauty, quality of life, and prosperity. Nestled in the upper Midwest region of the United States, Minnesota's almost 87,000 square miles encompass vast prairies, deciduous forests, and ubiquitous freshwater bodies reflected in the state's moniker, "Land of 10,000 Lakes." According to World Population Review, the state of Minnesota ranked second-best for quality of life and fourth-best state to raise a family in the United States in 2022.

THE RANKING REFLECTS:

The **fourth-longest life expectancy** in the nation, with an average of **80.9 years**

One of the lowest levels of poverty in the nation, with **91% of residents living above the poverty level**

High levels of **employment**, **food security,** and **K-12 performance**.

Minnesota is less well-known as a state characterized by its tremendous diversity of national origins, racial and cultural identities, and geographies.

There are eleven American Indian[3] sovereign Tribal nations across Minnesota, each with its own government — seven Anishinaabe (Chippewa, Ojibwe) and four Dakota (Sioux). Although together these groups comprise only 1% of the total Minnesota population, Tribal nations have tremendous significance to the state's history and culture. Minnesota's population also includes African American (6.1%), Hispanic (5.3%) and Asian (4.7%) Minnesotans; in the last several decades, the state has become a major place of resettlement for Hmong and Somali refugees. The state's population distribution reflects a clear urban-rural divide, with 60% of residents living in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul and 40% spread across the state in mostly rural or semi-rural settings that together are referred to as Greater Minnesota.

MINNESOTA'S CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Children under the age of 18 make up 22% of the state's total population, nearly identical to the national proportion of 23%. However, just 28% of Minnesota households are home to a minor child — far fewer than the national average, where 40% of all households include a child under 18. Fewer children also live in a single-parent household in Minnesota (29%) than nationally (34%).[4]

Looking at the state as a whole, data pertinent to child and family poverty paints a positive picture. Minnesota's family poverty rate (6%) and percentage of young children under 5 in poverty (12%) are among the lowest in the nation.[5] However, underneath this population-level data is a troubling paradox.

3 The term "American Indian" is used throughout because it is the descriptor most often chosen by members of Minnesota Tribal nations.

4 KIDS COUNT Data Center. (2022, October). *Children in single-parent families.* Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/106-children-in-single-parent-families

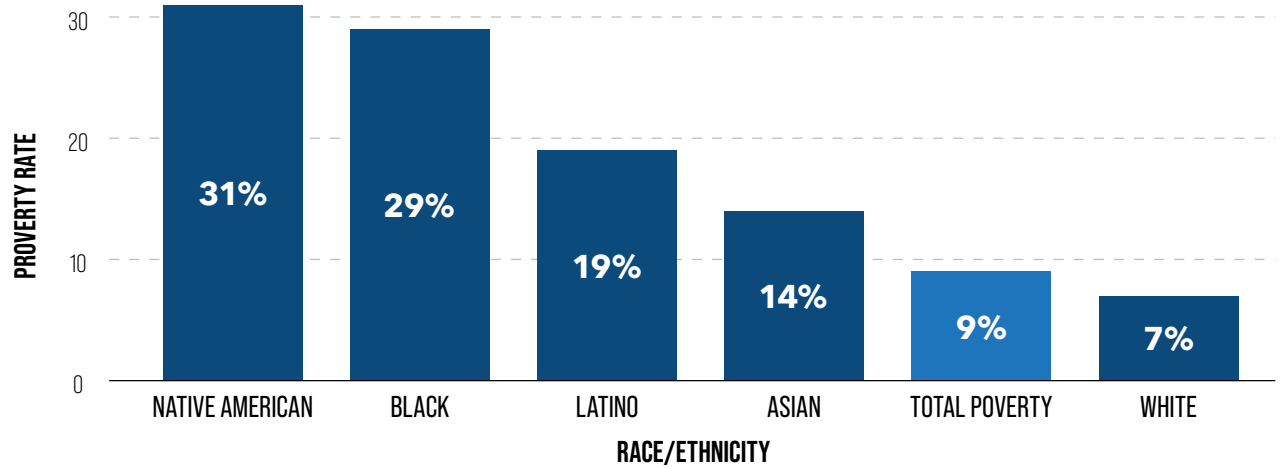
5 KIDS COUNT Data Center. (2022, September). *Children in poverty by age group in Minnesota.* Annie E. Casey Foundation. https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/5650-children-in-poverty-by-age-group?loc=25&loct=2#detailed/2/25/false/2048,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867/17,18,36/12263,12264

THE MINNESOTA PARADOX

While overall quality of life in the state is demonstrably high at the population level, a starkly divergent reality exists when looking at the lived experiences and life outcomes of Minnesota's communities and families of color. The often-obscured harsh realities experienced by BIPOC Minnesotans burst onto the national scene in 2020, as Americans reacted with shock to the videotaped brutal murder of an unarmed African American man, George Floyd, by a Minneapolis policeman, who suffocated Floyd by pressing his knee to Floyd's neck for several minutes while Floyd was handcuffed and lying face-down in the street. University of Minnesota economist Samuel L. Myers, Jr. describes this dissonance as the "Minnesota Paradox:"

> *Minnesota is one of the best places to live in America. It regularly produces some of the highest average scores in the nation on the SAT exams … . The famed Mayo Clinic is an international leader in medical research … . Good schools. Excellent housing. A strong regional transportation network. Excellent employers … contribute to a sustained and vigorous corporate giving culture where nonprofits are some of the best known in America.*
>
> *Surprisingly, Minnesota is also putatively one of the worst places for Blacks to live. Measured by racial gaps in unemployment rates, wage and salary incomes, incarceration rates, arrest rates, home ownership rates, mortgage lending rates, test scores, reported child maltreatment rates, school disciplinary and suspension rates, and even drowning rates, African Americans are worse off in Minnesota than they are in virtually every other state in the nation.*
>
> *The simultaneous existence of Minnesota as the best state to live in, but the worst state to live in for Blacks, is the crux of "The Minnesota Paradox."*[6]

The Minnesota Paradox can also be applied to the realities experienced by the state's families and communities of color more broadly, including American Indian and Hispanic Minnesotans — poverty rates, for example, are more than *four times* higher for American Indians and African Americans than for white people in the state.[7]



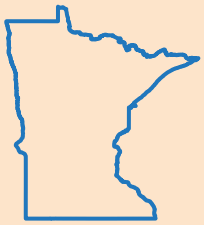
Source: *Poverty: Basic Facts and Figures: MNPH Data Access - MN Dept. of Health - MN Data. (2019).* https://data.web.health.state.mn.us/poverty_basic

6 Myers, S. L., Jr. (n.d.). *The Minnesota paradox.* Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice, Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. Retrieved October 7, 2022, from https://www.hhh.umn.edu/research-centers/roy-wilkins-center-human-relations-and-social-justice/minnesota-paradox

7 Minnesota Public Health Data Access. (n.d.). *People in poverty in Minnesota.* Minnesota Environmental Public Health Tracking Program, Minnesota Department of Health. Retrieved October 7, 2022, from https://data.web.health.state.mn.us/poverty_basic

PARTNERING TO SUPPORT FAMILY WELL-BEING: MINNESOTA'S PUBLIC AND NONPROFIT SECTORS

Minnesota is one of only nine states where public-sector human services are supervised by a state agency with decentralized administration at the county level. Many of the services and supports offered to Minnesota families are under the human services rubric, including child care, child safety and permanency, children's mental health, and food assistance, as well as economic supports through the TANF-funded Minnesota Family Investment Program. In a decentralized system, implementing change statewide can be challenging. At the same time, counties bring robust local capacity and community connection to the work of systems change and of catalyzing new practice approaches. With 87 counties and 11 Tribal nations all providing services and supports to families, there are many opportunities to experiment with different approaches in diverse local contexts, yielding innovations and learnings.



Minnesota is one of only nine states where public-sector human services are supervised by a state agency with decentralized administration at the county level.

Historically, Minnesota has had a reputation for innovation and excellence in its nonprofit sector and philanthropic community, which together have a lengthy track record of investment in meeting the needs of whole families. It is home to pioneering family-serving nonprofits such as Pillsbury United Communities, with roots extending back to the 19th-century settlement house movement and known today for an array of programs, neighborhood centers, and social enterprises. The state also continues to give rise to dynamic new groups. Emerging from diverse communities, grassroots nonprofits are creating new programs to serve children and families together and to achieve more equitable outcomes. Minnesota is also home to many philanthropic leaders with a history of investing in children, youth, and families, and in whole-family approaches. Among these are the McKnight Foundation, the Minnesota Initiative Foundations, the Sauer Family Foundation, and the Graves Foundation.

SERVING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: HIGHLIGHTS FROM STATE HISTORY

The roots of Minnesotans' commitment to thriving children and families and to their interconnectedness long predates the state's admission to the Union in 1858. The history, culture, and traditions of the area's Tribal nations have centered the inherent value of each child and their connection to family across generations. By 1879, Minneapolis was home to one of the nation's first settlement houses, the Bethel Mission, where the needs of working mothers and their young children were met through the establishment of the city's first free nursery. Also established in the late 1870s, the Minneapolis Humane Society was launched to protect and serve abused or exploited children; today, it operates as The Family Partnership and is a 2Gen provider.

While New Deal programs (1933-1938) sought to establish a safety net of sorts to avoid the most catastrophic outcomes for Americans, poverty remained a persistent reality affecting millions of children throughout the middle and late 20th century, with periodic legislative attempts to improve conditions. Landmark 1964 War on Poverty legislation was designed to confront the reality that the experience of poverty profoundly impacts the well-being of children and families across the lifespan and across generations. The legislation created federal programs — including Head Start — that were, for the first time, explicitly designed to address the needs of both young children and their parents. The 1980s and 1990s saw a proliferation of nonprofit and public-sector initiatives and programs designed to provide services and supports not just to children or adults, but to whole families. The term "2Gen" was introduced in the late 1980s by the Foundation for Child Development to describe programs that were emerging across the country.[8]

In Minnesota, the 1980s saw the creation and expansion of Family Resource Centers, a new kind of community hub for providing 2Gen supports. In the 1980s and 1990s, Minnesota give rise to two organizations whose programmatic models were groundbreaking in 2Gen practice and are nationally recognized today: the Student Parent HELP Center created by the University of Minnesota in 1984 is now the longest-standing program in the nation helping college students who are parents and their children succeed. A commitment to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty also motivated a Minneapolis faith leader, Michael O'Donnell, to found the Jeremiah Program in 1993. Today, the program operates in the Minnesota cities of Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Rochester, as well as six other communities nationwide. Its mission is to disrupt the cycle of poverty for single mothers and their children, two generations at a time. The model utilizes multidimensional, holistic approaches that include safe and affordable housing, quality early childhood education via on-site child care centers, and support for career-track college education, along with empowerment and leadership training.

While whole-family approaches continued to be developed in Minnesota and nationwide throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the 2Gen field came into greater prominence starting around 2010, when philanthropic leaders began re-examining the power and potential of these approaches. With the publication of Two Generations, One Future in 2012, Ascend at the Aspen Institute helped catalyze a growing and developing 2Gen field. At the same time, Minnesota's history and current context created the conditions for a next wave of 2Gen innovation and systems change — for and with Minnesota's families — to take hold.

8 Ascend at the Aspen Institute. (2022, September 22). *The 2Gen Approach*. Retrieved October 7, 2022, from https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/2gen-approach/

THE 2GEN MOVEMENT IN MINNESOTA: 2GEN 2.0

Diane Haulcy and attendees of the Ascending in Minnesota convening. Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

Building on a foundation of prior work aimed at addressing the well-being of Minnesota's children and families, the early 2010s saw leaders across sectors increasingly seeking ways to take the work and its impact to a whole new level. The reality in the early 2010s was not what Minnesotans aspired to for all Minnesota's children. Data and evidence further revealed worrying, stark disparities in life outcomes — in health and mental health, in educational attainment, and across a wide swath of measures of well-being — for Minnesota's children experiencing poverty and for children of color. With innovative approaches such as 2Gen gaining attention on the national stage, the opportunity to achieve better and more equitable outcomes for all the state's children came into focus.

Because the complex, long-term work of turning the curve on a societal trend requires commitment and leadership across sectors, settings, and levels, readiness to act on innovations and opportunities is an essential ingredient to achieving traction. For Minnesota in 2011, a shared commitment to addressing child well-being and to the centrality of thriving families was evident in key spaces and places. From incoming Governor Mark Dayton and his Cabinet, to state-level career professionals, to county and local community partners, a critical mass of committed leaders set the stage for new and interconnected initiatives aimed at creating the conditions for all families to thrive.

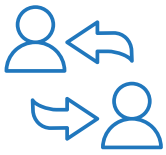
When Governor Dayton and Lieutenant Governor Tina Smith took office in January 2011, they quickly made known a top priority for their administration: achieving the world's best workforce by dramatically improving educational outcomes, from early childhood through postsecondary and career education, using data-driven, results-based approaches. The governor's approach reflected an understanding that outcomes for children and youth are interrelated. Governor Dayton called together leadership staff from all the child-facing state agencies, charging them with working in interdisciplinary ways across divisions and agencies.

State systems play a major role in shaping what is possible to do programmatically in local communities. They establish rules and regulations, operate infrastructure (for example, IT systems), make funding decisions, and provide oversight. Accordingly, state leaders have significant leverage in making consequential changes when they are empowered and willing to look internally at their own agencies — and across to those of their state colleagues — to understand their systems' roles in impeding progress. Governor Dayton and, more recently, Governor Tim Walz, along with their administrations, have focused on ways to change state systems so they can better serve families, working to create a culture and structures to support cross-systems work, to drive equity conversations, and to change the state government's relationship to communities.

> **In this particular movement for systems reform in human services, there were a lot of seeds of ideas. Yet how do you create the right levers for sustainable change? In that regard, the public sector became a really central strategy partner.**
>
> **JODI SANDFORT**

MAKING SYSTEMS VISIBLE: KEY MECHANISMS

In pursuing systems change to advance better outcomes for children and families, Governor Dayton and his successor, Governor Walz, each utilized leadership strategies that have proved to be invaluable for bringing systemic barriers into view, and for facilitating new approaches to mitigating or removing these barriers.
Key among their strategies have been:



COMMUNICATION

announcing an aspirational, population-level goal as a top administration priority from day one, and using the influence of the governor's office to continue to promote this priority.

SHARED GOVERNANCE

investing in interagency governance bodies at multiple levels, and charging leaders from across state government with identifying and working together to address barriers to goal achievement.

EXPECTATIONS OF CABINET MEMBERS

requiring top political appointees to show the impact of their agencies' actions and proposals (for example, legislative or financial) on children and families.

FLEXIBLE FUNDING TO ENABLE INNOVATION

identifying sources to cover the cost of the many dimensions of interagency work that are outside the allowable parameters of programmatic funding.

CREATING FORUMS FOR LEARNING AND RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

working with external partners as designers and facilitators and engaging career professionals across state agencies in convenings for in-depth exploration of root causes, for trust-building, and to articulate possible paths forward.

The Dayton administration laid the foundation for taking 2Gen to the next level in Minnesota in several important ways. First, in terms of building collective capacity, the administration involved top appointed leadership and staff of the state's child-facing agencies — Human Services, Housing, and Education — in almost two years of convenings focused on interdisciplinary approaches to achieving results for children, priming them for further cross-systems work.

Second, as issues impacting child well-being surfaced that required state government action, the Dayton administration took the opportunity to support work that went beyond small-scale changes, instead targeting larger systems that could address root causes. After a troubling high-profile case of child maltreatment came to light in 2014, Governor Dayton appointed a Task Force on the Protection of Children. When recommendations from the task force moved to implementation in 2015, a senior career professional in the Department of Human Services (DHS), Jamie Sorenson, was presented with a significant opportunity to find ways to address disparities in the child welfare system.

Because career professionals in state government typically have longer tenures than political appointees, often spanning multiple administrations, they can play a unique role in bridging across multiple initiatives over time and building longer working relationships with colleagues. In his role as division director for Child Safety and Permanency, Sorenson oversaw one systems-reform initiative to better protect children. That experience subsequently led to conversations between Sorenson and two of his division director colleagues — conversations that helped give birth to the Minnesota 2-Generation Policy Network and the Whole Family Systems Initiative.

> In those recommendations [of the governor's task force] there was a recommendation for allocation of funds called **disparity grants**, and it was to be monies used to create services and infrastructure that would better serve those kids and families who are overrepresented in the [child welfare] system and not achieving equitable outcomes. In Minnesota, that's primarily American Indian children … and then children and families of African heritage. We did a cycle of those grants through an RFP process, and then in conversations with other directors in Children and Family Services, Cindi Yang and Jovon Perry, we really looked at this initiative, and all of us recognized that we're touching the same families, and what we see families experiencing is a lack of access to critical economic resources, and housing, a lack of access to child care, and that those things are related to child well-being. It just seemed to make sense to see if we couldn't do something … that brought those different areas of focus and services to address varying needs **together**.
>
> **JAMIE SORENSON**

Developed over two decades of experience in the nonprofit and public sectors, Sorenson's leadership approach reflects a commitment to systems change that addresses outcome disparities for Minnesota's children of color. Bringing learnings from implementation of the disparity grants, Sorenson would later join his fellow division directors at DHS in a second phase of innovative 2Gen work under the state's next governor, Tim Walz.

While a whole host of leaders in state government have played important roles in advancing systems change in support of 2Gen, whole-family approaches, many would point to Jovon Perry as a central figure — a champion with vision and an equal share of persistence. Currently serving in a division director role at DHS, heading the Economic Assistance

and Employment Supports Division, Perry's depth of experience extends to years working at the local level in the nonprofit sector, providing direct services to families experiencing poverty. Perry describes that experience and what it taught her this way:

> When you're working at the local level in communities, you're looking at families face-to-face, you're engaged in trying to do the best that you can to create some sort of sense out of the policy web that exists, which really complicates your ability to administer services in a way that creates a continuum for families. Often the result is just trying to do the best you can to get as many resources to them as possible to help in crisis situations. And then, after crisis situations, things start to level out a little bit and they get their heads above water and you're trying to help them to sustain … but the truth is, it's a repeat cycle that families are up against because of the systemic barriers that are in play. This perpetual systemic cycle is what led me to state service, because at the time I was this very young, naive leader who really wanted to look behind the proverbial curtain and … say, "Hey, can you just change the way things are so that people can actually get ahead and thrive, and their families can thrive?"
>
> **JOVON PERRY**

Through her work across DHS and with other state agencies, Perry became aware of work happening at the national level that provided new framing, new language, and a compelling conceptual model for what she and many others at the state level were trying to move toward in Minnesota:

> And then I learned more about how the nation, and policymakers, were describing the work that we were doing at the local level as "2Gen" or "whole-family focused." Ascend did such a great job, in 2014 and 2015, with the gears, having that visual. No matter where you are in our American society, all families – no matter their makeup – really need access to these core gears, these core resources, in order to thrive. Knowing the resources needed for all families to thrive deeply resonated with me and jump-started the work that I endeavor to do with many other people at the state to get us moving in that direction.
>
> **JOVON PERRY**

Thinking back on the impact of Governor Dayton's World's Best Workforce initiative — and his calling together of state agency leadership and staff to address barriers and really get at outcomes for children and families — Perry recalls:

> We were having conversations kind of in circles … the housing folks were saying, "We really need housing in order to create stability." And the economics folks like me were saying, "We really need cash," and "People need money in order to create that stability." … We were just missing each other, and the truth was we needed all of it. Our conversations continued outside the meetings. Mostly this stuff happens in the hallways in-between meetings … And we thought, "Nope, this isn't it, this isn't working." We're competing against each other, instead of saying, "We need to be directly having these conversations with communities, and with families," and we need to find ways to integrate, and collaborate, and co-create the response.
>
> **JOVON PERRY**

Drawing on shared experiences working across programs to address issues facing children and families, and armed with the language and tools of the renewed 2Gen movement, in early 2016, Perry and a number of her fellow leaders in DHS began having exploratory conversations with staff at the state's Management and Budget (MMB) office and those working with the Children's Cabinet.[9]

What was ultimately to become the Minnesota 2-Generation Policy Network was conceptualized in those early conversations around several core ideas:

- Bringing those in state government who make policy and programmatic rules together with local organizations implementing 2Gen approaches.
- Using grant funding in new ways to:
  - Enable local communities (grant-funded pilot sites) and state leaders to participate in a learning network together;
  - Co-create innovative 2Gen approaches that could mitigate systemic barriers families face — and in so doing, serve families better; and
  - Support the prototyping of these new approaches and ongoing shared learning, allowing for failure.
- Creating a continuous feedback loop between local sites and state officials, lifting up experiences that could inform and shape policy and systems change.

LEVERAGING THE PACTT OPPORTUNITY: GENESIS OF THE 2-GENERATION POLICY NETWORK AND THE WHOLE FAMILY SYSTEMS INITIATIVE

As the group discussed these ideas, they became aware of a new 2Gen grant-funding and peer-learning network opportunity for which states could apply: the Parents and Children Thriving Together: Two-Generation State Policy Network (PACTT). Launched through a collaboration of the National Governors Association and the Center for Law and Social Policy, PACTT was designed to advance 2Gen state policy strategies and to "create system change — through regulatory, administrative or legislative means — that alters how families are served by and engage with state government."[10] While the potential grant amount of $90,000 would be modest relative to the cost of the initiative the Minnesota leaders had in mind, the group saw value in the PACTT opportunity and decided to apply together. Minnesota was selected as one of the five PACTT states in October 2016. Following through on the group's early concept, Minnesota's application built local community implementation sites into their PACTT strategies — the only state selected to do so.

Using the two-year PACTT grant and associated technical assistance and peer learning as a springboard, this small group of state leaders moved quickly to put in place the remaining components needed to launch the new Minnesota Two-Generation Policy Network (hereafter, the "Network") as an initiative that would allow them to pursue their shared vision and purposes. To incorporate a grantmaking dimension that would enable local service providers to participate as pilot sites, flexible state dollars were needed to fund the initiative, and Perry was able to find and draw on flexible TANF dollars for this purpose.

COHORT 1 GRANTEE MEMBERS

North Side Achievement Zone
Olmsted County
Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood
White Earth Nation

Consistent with the group's original thinking, local communities were conceptualized not simply as grantees, but as partners in the Network and in the learning cohort[11] from the outset.

9 Led by the governors in 33 states, a Children's Cabinet is typically a shared governance structure – a cross-agency coordinating body that fosters collaboration and aligns resources around children. In Minnesota, Children's Cabinet members are commissioners of child-facing state agencies.

10 Gaines, A.C., Bonino-Britsch, M., & Matthews, H. (2019). *Parents and children thriving together: A framework for two-generation policy and systems reform.* National Governors Association & Center for Law and Social Policy. https://www.nga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Thriving.pdf

11 The cohort launched in 2017 is commonly referred to in Minnesota as Cohort 1. A second cohort of grantees was launched in 2019 under the renamed Whole Family Systems Initiative.

The four communities that were invited and ultimately joined the initiative all had a history of generative partnerships with state agencies. Three communities were "Transformation Zones" — key projects for Minnesota's Race to the Top — Early Learning Challenge grant program. The fourth was a county agency with a proven track record with the state. By design, all grantee organizations worked in communities with significant racial and ethnic diversity with health and education disparities, and all were service providers working with young children and families.

As the work got off the ground, the Network formalized its composition and staffing and brought in an academic partner to provide external guidance, support, facilitation, and training. Engaging with the Future Services Institute (FSI) at the University of Minnesota (UMN)'s Humphrey School of Public Affairs was a key decision. FSI's founder, Professor Jodi Sandfort — then also the dean of UMN's School of Public Policy — describes herself as "not a traditional academic." Sandfort brought with her a career-long dedication to systems change in human services, founding FSI with a mission of advancing human services into the 21st century.

STATE AGENCY PARTNERS

Minnesota Departments of
- **Education**
- **Employment and Economic Development**
- **Health**
- **Human Services**
- **Housing Finance Agency**
- **Office to Prevent and End Homelessness**

Coordination by staff of the Minnesota Children's Cabinet and Minnesota Management & Budget

Another crucial decision the Network made during its first year pertained to grant duration. Unlike many state agency grant programs, these grants were designed to span five years[12] in recognition of the nature of this systems-change work — co-creating and prototyping programmatic innovations, engaging in ongoing learning, and ensuring learnings are fed back to state officials — is not accomplished meaningfully in a one- or two-year timeframe.

2017 NETWORK AND COHORT 1 LAUNCH

2017 was a developmental year for all those involved in the Network, who met together often to formalize a collective vision and strategies, as well as to think through the structure of the pilot program. Although seven state agencies joined the Network as partners, DHS would serve as the de facto state lead on the project, with DHS staff deeply involved in implementation. Because the grants program would use a nontraditional, partnership-based approach to grantmaking rather than a transactional one, each of the four local sites would have a site team, with staff from DHS and FSI working alongside staff on the ground.

Designed to stay together throughout the five years of grant implementation, each site team would be comprised of four key roles, with staff of Network partners fulfilling complementary responsibilities and functions:

TEAM ROLE	SOURCE	FUNCTION
Project coordinator	Local site	Manages and runs grant project
State site lead	State agency	Connects local work to state policy areas
Innovation lead	Future Services Institute	Supports site-based work through facilitation, research, and program development
Evaluation lead	DHS evaluation team	Learns from site work and shares learnings across sites and to state agencies for action

12 A one-year planning grant for 2017, plus four years of program funding (2018–2021).

Each site was also expected to work with a core team of advisors made up of local community partners. The 2017 planning year culminated with local sites submitting implementation work plans aligned with the core approaches and principles they had developed together with their state colleagues.

In sum, pilot projects were designed to:

- **PUT FAMILIES AT THE CENTER** of identifying needed changes and influencing new approaches.
- **PROTOTYPE CHANGES TO SERVICE DELIVERY** to better serve whole families.
- **BUILD GENERATIVE PARTNERSHIPS** between local, county, and state partners.
- Place a high **VALUE ON LEARNING AND ITERATION.**
- Surface state-level changes that need to occur, identifying pressure points and lifting them up to the state to remove systemic barriers and advance systems change.

2GENERATION POLICY NETWORK VISION:

The state of Minnesota will have families that thrive, services that are integrated to support children and families, and systems that support integration and effectiveness. At the core of this are families that have health, economic assets, social capital, career pathways, and nurturing learning environments.

FOUR CORE STRATEGIES OF THE NETWORK

1. Align state policies and practices that could better support family stability.
2. Invest in approaches to service delivery and fund program innovations to inform future 2-Gen policies and practices statewide.
3. Engage and communicate with a broad range of audiences to build public awareness of 2-Gen policies and practices.
4. Evaluate the above three strategies to improve partnerships, policies, and practices.

THE ROLE OF SISTER INITIATIVES

The Dayton administration's emphasis on interagency, cross-systems work; on achieving better results for children; and on advancing racial equity created the conditions for multiple initiatives to be launched — or, as Network manager Jane Tigan described the time, for "a thousand flowers to bloom." These initiatives had the potential to mutually reinforce each other and to surface learnings that could be used across programs, divisions, and agencies. Sometimes described as "sister initiatives," these efforts brought together political appointees (commissioners and assistant commissioners) and senior career leaders at the division director level — most often from the state DHS, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), and the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) — to tackle systemic barriers to child and family well-being from a number of different angles. The DHS Disparity Grants program of 2015, led by Child Safety and Permanency Division Director Jamie Sorenson, was an influential early effort.

MINNESOTA EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS REFORM CORE TENETS

VISION: By focusing on children facing racial, geographic, and economic inequities, all children in Minnesota will be born healthy and able to thrive within their families and communities.

MISSION: Create an equitable system that supports pregnant and parenting families with young children. To do this, families, communities, and government agencies will partner to eliminate structural racism and inequities that exist in access, policies, programs, and practices.

As the Network started up in 2017, that same year also saw the launch of another systems-change initiative within Minnesota state government — the Early Childhood Systems Reform project (ECSR) — that would make important contributions to profoundly reorienting state systems serving young children in ways that would prove synergistic with the Network's approaches and aims. ECSR was launched in response to well-documented, starkly disparate outcomes for Minnesota's young children along racial lines — disparities that persisted despite decades of state efforts at improving the overall early childhood system. ECSR represented a break from past reform efforts in two major ways:

- **CENTERING RACIAL EQUITY** — from the outset, the project acknowledged historic structural racism as a root cause of many of these outcome disparities.
- **PUTTING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES AT THE CENTER OF THE PROCESS** — the project and its processes were structured to include a large group of community members representing the state's racial, cultural, and geographic diversity, who could bring lived experiences to the conversation and engage in naming problems and developing solutions together. This kind of approach, called Human-Centered Design,[13] is a central tenet of 2Gen systems reform.

ECSR was an intensive 18-month process that involved the governor's Children's Cabinet and senior career professionals from the state DHS, MDH, and MDE in a series of meetings and sustained conversations with the community — conversations that were often very difficult. The project was funded with Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) dollars administered by DHS's Child Care Services Division, led by Director Cindi Yang. Like Perry, Yang had come to her role with the state from a career doing grassroots work in the nonprofit sector; ECSR was one of her first major projects in the division director role, and it put her into conversations about 2Gen approaches with both Perry and Sorenson that ultimately led to their close collaboration around launching Cohort 2 in 2019.

While the work of all those involved in ECSR produced a number of deliverables, the project's enduring impact centers on the mission, vision, and goals the stakeholders developed together. As Amanda Varley, who currently leads the state's Preschool Development Grant systems-change work, describes it, "Early childhood systems reform established a shared vision, mission, and goals across our state agencies." Varley and her team adopted the ECSR vision and mission for their work and incorporated the ECSR goals into Minnesota's Preschool Development Grant application in 2019.

13 For an in-depth explanation of the ways human-centered design can be used in a human-services context, see: Ong, S. J. & Sandfort, J. (2019, September). *The human-centered design process: The Future Services Institute's experience in Minnesota's human services fields.* Future Services Institute. https://futureservicesinstitute.org/s/HCD-brief-draft-final.pdf

TOP SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES TO CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

As these systems-reform efforts advanced, systemic issues emerged that were impeding equitable progress towards population-level child and family well-being. Those frequently cited cluster into two issues from which other consequences cascade:

- **ADMINISTRATIVE SILOES.** Programs created at different times and for different purposes typically feature separate funding mechanisms, IT systems, rules, and regulations, making it hard for:
  - Service providers to serve families holistically.
  - Families themselves to navigate multiple intricate sets of eligibility requirements, rules, and interfaces in order to move towards thriving.
  - State government career professionals to see beyond the very specific technical knowledge and programmatic focus of their daily work to recognize issues that span across systems, and to move past limiting beliefs about what is possible.
- **STRUCTURAL AND SYSTEMIC RACISM** built into state systems and processes resulting in a lack of consideration of who benefits from state actions, nor account for disparate racial impacts. This set of barriers is in turn reflected in:
  - Failure to center lived experience of diverse communities in designing, evaluating, and reforming state programs.
  - Community groups' lack of trust in state government.
  - Inadequate feedback loops between community and state government that prevent the translation of group experience into policy and practice change.

Ariel Ventua-Lazo, an Ascend Parent Advisor, and his children. Photo by Sammy Mayo Jr. © The Aspen Institute.

FROM 2-GENERATION POLICY NETWORK TO WHOLE FAMILY SYSTEMS: EVOLUTION OF MINNESOTA'S INITIATIVE

Dominique Baker, an Ascend Parent Advisor, with her sons. Photo by Dan Bayer. © The Aspen Institute.

As Network pilot sites moved forward with implementation in 2018, a race for the governor's seat was underway. Incumbent Mark Dayton opted not to seek re-election after two terms, and the race resulted in the election of Tim Walz and his running mate Peggy Flanagan, who were sworn into office on January 7, 2019.

On the ground in the four Network pilot site communities, site team members worked together with community members and cross-sector partners, using human-centered design methods to generate prototypes of specific service-delivery improvements that would make it possible to better serve whole families.[14]

COHORT 1 MINI-PROFILES

In Minneapolis, the Northside Achievement Zone (NAZ) focused their grant-funded work on a barrier identified by families who were receiving economic supports from the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP), and who were also flagged by Hired, a local employment services provider and NAZ partner. Parents who had succeeded in enrolling in job training or in landing a new job had found the enrollment period for applying for needed child care assistance was closed. Working closely with Hired and its referring partner, Hennepin County, the NAZ site successfully prototyped presumptive eligibility for child care assistance. The partners also prototyped aftercare for families leaving MFIP who, because they were still experiencing poverty, continued to need supports. As envisioned, NAZ shared their learnings with both county and state administrators who, in turn, made changes to processes to further lower this barrier for families.[15]

Savannah Steiger, an Ascend Parent Advisor, and her family. Photo by Morgan Look. © The Aspen Institute.

Olmsted County, home to the city of Rochester — the state's second-largest metropolitan area — came to the Network with a long track record of innovation in administering programs for children and families. The county's Community Services agency, directed at the time by Paul Fleissner, brought a number of programs to the Network that were already underway and taking a holistic approach to working with families, with a special focus on parents facing high barriers. The Olmsted County team's grant-funded work produced a prototype of a brand-new assessment tool for case workers to use with families, called the Integrated Services Assessment Tool (ISAT). The site team shaped the tool using families' input and insights developed in partnership with FSI, with the goal of improving the dynamic and the course of families' working relationships with family-services professionals from their first encounter. A major departure from a traditional approach to client intake, ISAT was designed to be client-facing and easy to use, allowing families to self-assess their well-being across 14 different life domains on a five-point scale from "in crisis" to "thriving," supplemented by caseworker input.

14 For more detailed profiles of Cohort 1, see: Sandfort, J. R., Sarode, T., & Hendriks, H. (2020). *Expanding innovations that support whole families: State-level developments in Minnesota during 2018 and 2019.* Future Services Institute. https://futureservicesinstitute.org/s/Sandfort-2020-FSIReport005.pdf

15 To learn more about NAZ's presumptive child care eligibility prototype, see: Minnesota 2-Generation Policy Network. (2020, February). *Presumptive eligibility for child care assistance: A 2-Gen Network prototype.* Minnesota Department of Human Services. https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-8025-ENG

Rooted in four of the city's communities of color, Saint Paul Promise Neighborhood (SPPN) came to Cohort 1 with programming that offered pathways to college and career success for children, and with a commitment to offering a culturally rooted experience for families. Working with local partners, SPPN prototyped a culturally specific whole-family experience called The People's Fellowship (TPF). Two core nine-week programs involved parents and children in skill-building and experiences that supported families' connection to African identity and community. TPF's model aimed to address multiple barriers standing in the way of families participating in workforce education and training programs — such as economic precarity and lack of access to child care — by providing a wage subsidy for parent participants.

White Earth Nation, a sovereign nation of the Ojibwe people located in north-central Minnesota, has a long tradition of valuing the interconnectedness and well-being of multigenerational families.

Faced with federal policy that has historically aimed to destroy Indians' cultural identity and to separate families, Tribal leaders who administer government-funded programs endeavor to do so in ways that re-center the community's culture and values. As a Network member and local site, White Earth Nation sought to build on an innovative tool that had been developed by and for the community: an integrated data- and care-coordination system called WECARE. In the same way that traditional programmatic intake assessments fail to offer families opportunities to explore and access an array of services and supports across programs and agencies, traditional data systems fail to support integrated service delivery for whole families. White Earth Nation built on the success of WECARE, prototyping enhancements to make the system work better for families.

Working side by side with White Earth Nation human services professionals changed state government staff members' perceptions of what was possible:

WECARE became a great example at the state for where we want to go with evolving state technology systems into integrated services systems. WECARE bridged technology, resource navigation, and participant engagement into an integrated, culturally specific service model. The model illuminated possibilities for structuring a state technology-modernization roadmap designed to integrate services. State technology and policy staff visited White Earth Nation to view demos of WECARE and witness the model in practice. We learned firsthand what it looked like to work with families in an integrated way, both in terms of technology systems and culturally specific approach and practice; we would have never had that, that mindset in developing the state's technology modernization roadmap… without engaging with community.

JOVON PERRY

Ascending in Minnesota Parent Advisors: Linda Wilson, Aaronica Jackson, Amorita Demitrius, Deja Broadway, Stormy Littlewolf, Amanda Schermerhorn, Allyson Johansen, and Nekey Oliver (left to right). Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

ENGAGING THE WIDER COMMUNITY OF MINNESOTA PRACTITIONERS

While the Network could only provide funding to four sites, many nonprofit and public-sector service providers expressed interest in learning more about systems change using 2Gen, whole-family policies and practices. Leveraging the Network's core strategy to "engage and communicate with a broad range of audiences to build public awareness of 2Gen policies and practices," FSI organized a number of statewide convenings and summits — among them, the Redesign for Whole Families summit — that brought together leaders from across sectors and from many communities, helping participants see themselves and their organizations as members of a 2Gen community, and as an integral part of the systems-change work. State staff also spoke frequently at convenings of other state agencies and nonprofit networks, and provided training to county departments and nonprofit practitioners who expressed interest in using or deepening their use of 2Gen approaches.

FSI also took the lead in developing 2-Gen Principles to Practice — a tool for local program managers working in family-serving organizations who are interested in implementing 2Gen approaches. The tool walks managers through a process for assessing a program or policy in terms of its alignment with 2Gen principles. Following self-assessment, the tool takes users through a series of steps and offers reflective questions to guide them in taking further action to actualize 2Gen principles in their work.

SELECT LEARNINGS FROM COHORT 1 STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

Designed to function as a learning community of state staff, partners, and grantees, the Network's first two years of implementation yielded valuable learnings that informed what became a second round of grants and a second cohort. Although the Network was largely successful in terms of prototyping programmatic innovations and elevating systemic barriers and issues, those involved reported that the cohort experience could have benefitted from more time to consider ways to adjust approaches as they were being implemented. Overall, the staffing model for site teams was perhaps too lean; state leads and site leads reported needing more time to do all that was required of their respective roles. The design of Cohort 2, launched in 2019, was revised to reflect the integration of these learnings.

THE WALZ ADMINISTRATION: NEW OPPORTUNITIES AT THE STATE LEVEL

As year two of implementation got underway, the newly sworn-in Governor Walz and Lieutenant Governor Flanagan set to work creating their Cabinet and charging members with a vision and priorities for state government. The Walz administration built on Governor Dayton's efforts around child well-being and cross-systems work in many ways, and also introduced important priorities and approaches that opened up ways to extend 2Gen and to deepen its impact.

Erin Bailey, who came to the state government to head the new administration's Children's Cabinet, described the leaders this way: "The governor of Minnesota is a teacher, parent, and coach, and the lieutenant governor has been a lifetime children's advocate. This is a space that they're personally passionate about." From her vantage point as the new executive director of the state's interagency body dedicated to advancing child well-being, Bailey witnessed the way the administration approached the opportunity to use interagency structures to drive change:

> They really have believed in interagency structures and have been generous with their own time in order to drive that work. I worked closely with them on the relaunching of the Children's Cabinet … They wanted a big tent. The structure they set up enables commissioners to come together once a quarter and engage with the governor directly on children's issues. He chairs the Children's Cabinet here, which is different than in a lot of other states.
>
> **ERIN BAILEY**

From day one, Walz made his priorities clear: Minnesota would have a government centered on child well-being and on achieving a vision of One Minnesota — a state where everyone can thrive. By issuing Executive Order 19-34, titled "Placing Children at the Center of Government," Walz spelled out the challenges facing the state around inequitable outcomes for children; broadened the Children's Cabinet's focus beyond early childhood to explicitly prioritize whole-family approaches; and established a revitalized Children's Cabinet to facilitate and coordinate this work across agencies, given the reality that:

> The work of improving outcomes, promoting equity, and bridging the opportunity gap is not the work of one state agency. It is a mission for all and a collective effort that requires coordination, collaboration, innovation, and focus across agencies to apply a data-driven, results-oriented approach to align programs and activities with children and families at the center.
>
> **GOVERNOR TIM WALZ**

The governor quickly began demonstrating these priorities, using the opportunities afforded him by virtue of his position to talk about the One Minnesota vision, and letting his commissioners know that every legislative proposal must be packaged around its impact on children and families. The message: build strategies around children, not around agencies, and work to build relationships across agencies and divisions.

ONE MINNESOTA CORE TENETS

MISSION: Improve the lives of all Minnesotans by working collaboratively to implement policies that achieve results.

VISION: Minnesota is the best state in the country for children to grow up in – those of all races, ethnicities, religions, economic statuses, gender identities, sexual orientations, (dis)abilities, and zip codes.

Attendees connecting at the Ascending in Minnesota convening. Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING ACROSS LEVELS AND ROLES

Leadership in state government essentially comes in two forms. In Minnesota, commissioners and assistant commissioners are political appointees who head state agencies, serve at the will of the governor, and often leave their posts at term's end. In contrast, career staff are hired through a non-political process and have a tenure that often spans multiple administrations. Both kinds of state leaders play important, albeit different, roles, according to differences in their time horizons, the scope of their power and influence, and their level of content or programmatic expertise and experience.

To foster and sustain interagency efforts, some structure was needed — and the Children's Cabinet made sense for that role. It could engage political appointees in discussions around priority topics, elevate innovative efforts and areas of concern, garner support and resources to address problems, and increase investments in efforts that were proving valuable. The Walz administration's strong support for the Children's Cabinet yielded an essential next level of attention and investment in cross-agency efforts focused on children.

At the same time, career professionals who headed child-facing divisions of state government also needed the opportunity to spend time with colleagues within and across state agencies to be able to see the interconnectedness of issues, discuss and iterate possible solutions, confer, plan, and share learnings. In response to this need, Minnesota created an Interagency Leadership Team (ILT) composed mostly of division directors, with some additional key staff. For the 2-Generation Policy Network and its next iteration, the Whole Family Systems Initiative, the ILT has proved to be a valuable space. Colleagues who would not have otherwise met have gotten to know each other and have formed working relationships that create a kind of connective tissue across silos.

BUILDING ON THE MINNESOTA 2-GENERATION POLICY NETWORK: NEW NAME, NEW COHORT

With strong support from the new administration and lessons learned from Cohort 1, core Network partners FSI, the state DHS, and MMB moved forward with the next phase of their work, renamed the Whole Family Systems Initiative (WFS). Its next cohort was larger in size, selected through a new and very different RFP process, and funded by not one but three separate funding streams.

The WFS team looked together at how to truly integrate an equity approach across every dimension of the initiative. Cohort 1 sites were all serving communities experiencing inequities; selection of Cohort 2 sites would focus even more intentionally and deeply on working across the state in communities with the deepest disparities.

In identifying sources of flexible funding within DHS that could be used to fund pilot sites, the team not only sought a larger total dollar amount to support more sites, but also sought to draw funds from different programmatic areas, each of which addressed some dimensions of child well-being. DHS Division Directors Perry, Yang, and Sorenson had all been a part of conversations that led them to the same conclusion. Their respective divisions and programs were all working with many of the same families — but doing so separately, and without the kind of coordination and collaboration that could make services far more effective. The burden of figuring out how to access a complex array of different services and supports was still falling either to state agencies and service providers, or to those who were the most stressed and least resourced to undertake these tasks — families themselves.

Danielle Horton speaking at the Ascending in Minnesota convening. Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

Cohort 1 had been funded by a single DHS division: Economic Assistance and Employment Supports (led by Perry). Cohort 2 would draw funding from three divisions, adding dollars from Child Safety and Permanency (Sorenson) and Child Care Services (Yang). Grants would be made to eight sites[16] and would total $17.2 million over five years (2019-2024). By drawing funding from three divisions, the grantee sites would be able to develop new approaches that could address multiple dimensions of family well-being, without being slowed or stopped by administrative complexities and barriers. To accomplish this, state leaders had to be willing to shift the administrative burden onto themselves and their staff, taking on major hurdles in the contracting process in unprecedented ways.

16 Cohort 2 was originally comprised of eight grantees, but now includes seven grantees after one grant was ended by mutual decision.

WFS STATE-LEVEL INNOVATIONS: TRANSFORMING THE FUNDING MODEL AND RFP PROCESS

Reflecting on what it took to bring three funding streams from three divisions together, braiding them to create a single grant program, Sorenson recalls that he and his two fellow division directors undertook the "messy work" of figuring out how to do things differently:

> We learned very quickly that we could not pool our funds, because the funds that we'd use for this initiative, some of them are federal, some of them are general funds, some have a very specific focus. Some of them have different expenditures, completion dates, so on and so on. But what we could do is we could do contracts together. And so, we've got these unified contracts that are made up of our three areas of policy and practice. And then the funding stream behind those is just really, really messy. So, I think it was our willingness to really sit down and think through this and think how we could do it. And to see if together we couldn't better try to meet the needs of kids and families.
>
> **JAMIE SORENSON**

To succeed at braiding funding streams required a tremendous amount of time and effort behind the scenes, working very closely over many months with the state's contracting department to understand the intricacies and create a viable solution. Ultimately, the three division directors and a contracts attorney devised a unified contract to which all three would be signatories. For pilot sites, this meant all conditions and requirements were contained in one contract. In some cases, a site's grant dollars would include funding from two or three divisions; in some cases, from only one. Sorenson explains:

> So, for example, we've got a cluster of contracts that we did, and there's a few agencies where my funding doesn't support the contract – and there are a few agencies where Cindi Yang's funding doesn't support the contract, yet Jovon and Cindi and I are all signatures on the contract. And it was a contract that we did together – and we had to piecemeal the funding in the background so that the work of the contracted agency aligned with the requirements of our funds.
>
> **JAMIE SORENSON**

In other words, the grant award to a given pilot site whose work did not involve a child care or early childhood dimension would not include braided funding from Yang's Child Care Services Division, but the contract would still include Yang, Perry, and Sorenson as signatories. This kind of approach is exceedingly rare in Minnesota state government, and it required the three colleagues to move past the pull of a tried-and-true, "this is how we do things" culture. Reflecting on what it took, Yang remembers:

> The leaders have to be willing to share – I think that's really critical. Having a mindset of truly human-centered collaboration and identifying what the outcome is that we want to see was really critical to the three of us being able to come together to say, yes, this is what we're willing to do. So, having those really hard conversations, but having shared leadership.
>
> **CINDI YANG**

Before launching Cohort 2, the WFS team needed to implement another potentially transformational change: redesigning the RFP process through which local organizations would learn about, explore, and apply for grant funding. Traditionally, state procurement processes tend to be cumbersome and complex to understand and successfully navigate. Larger, better-resourced nonprofit organizations and county agencies with more specialized finance and legal capacity are better-equipped to successfully bid on state contracts. That experience gives them a competitive advantage for future bids, which has the unintended consequence of disadvantaging smaller, more grassroots organizations — many of them from communities of color. In other words, the RFP process itself is often a systemic barrier that creates inequitable outcomes.

If the team wanted to work with sites in communities experiencing deep disparities, and they wanted to select them equitably, simply issuing an RFP and interacting with prospective applicants in traditional ways wouldn't work. FSI's Jodi Sandfort, who had experience working in philanthropy, worked with partners on the team to think differently:

> For the second round … we did a lot … to help the state government try to do a different kind of RFP process that was focused more like foundations do – on relationship-building. The public sector obviously needs to have different kinds of controls in place because it's public dollars, but they don't need to treat grantees as cogs in a wheel. For example, they can lean into using site visits as a learning opportunity. Yet, overall, it was a very, very time-intensive process. It took them a year to get the public funding blended and the contracts issued.
>
> **JODI SANDFORT**

The state team rebuilt each step in the process to make it more navigable and more equitable. Organizations interested in applying for a grant were offered more options — including video submissions — for how they could tell their stories. All three division directors made the major time commitment of traveling across the state together for several weeks to do site visits with applicants — an unprecedented level of engagement with potential grantees. The cadre of grant reviewers was broadened and selected to ensure representation of diverse communities.

In addition to FSI, the team was working with another external partner, the BUILD Initiative, that brought deep experience in state systems change and in applying an equity action framework to the work. BUILD's Sherri Killins Stewart advised the team on the RFP transformation, encouraging them to engage with communities and with leaders, to analyze root causes together, and then to shift practice around the RFP process. The results were clear: the team engaged a more diverse set of vendors than ever before to do the whole-family systems work.

After a year of groundwork, in late 2019 and early 2020 the Minnesota DHS issued Whole Family Systems Grants, totaling $17.2 million over five years, to eight organizations[17] throughout the state to "uncover and address the systemic influences related to racial, geographic, and economic inequities, and to support coordination across the programs and systems that serve children and families."[18] Cohort 2 grants[19] were awarded to:

1. Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (St. Paul)
2. Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College (Cloquet)
3. Intercultural Mutual Assistance Association (Rochester)
4. Minneapolis American Indian Center (Minneapolis)
5. NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center (Minneapolis)
6. Northwest Indian Community Development Center (Bemidji)
7. People Serving People (Minneapolis)
8. City of St. Paul

17 Cohort 2 was originally comprised of eight grantees, but now includes seven grantees after one grant was ended by mutual decision.
18 Minnesota Department of Human Services. (2020, February). *Whole Family Systems grantees.* https://mn.gov/dhs/assets/whole-family-systems-grantees_tcm1053-419884.pdf
19 For a description of the WFS pilot sites and their grant-funded work, see Footnote 18 and http://futureservicesinstitute.org/cohort-2-sites

COHORT 2: INNOVATING AND LEARNING IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

As Cohort 2 was just getting underway in early 2020, no one could have imagined the massive societal disruptions that were just around the corner. In early March, the nation reeled from the impact of a pandemic spreading an unknown and deadly pathogen. Much of society locked down, while people providing essential services, including grantee organizations, attempted to press on in meeting existing and emerging needs. Barely two months later, the city of Minneapolis was the site of a horrifying episode of homicidal police violence against a person of color.

When George Floyd was murdered, an otherwise helpless witness recorded the traumatic scene, and those images and videos quickly spread around the state, the nation, and the world, sparking outrage and massive protests. Several Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 sites are Minneapolis-based and their staff and families they serve, like so many across the state, were profoundly impacted by the tragedy and by protests.

In response to all these circumstances, the WFS team and cohort partners adapted together. Jeanne McGovern-Acuña, who became the full-time WFS manager in 2021, served in 2020 as the site lead for two Cohort 1 sites. From her perspective:

> All of the sites did wonderful jobs in how they pivoted. FSI was very deeply involved, and the division directors and the different program managers at the time were really responsive to community needs, which was no small thing. And we were responding to these partners we'd signed up with, and we heard from them, and they said, "We can't do the work the way we are intending. We want to do it like this." So, there were changes in how their implementation plans happened. A lot of the work then went online if it could. Planning took longer than anticipated because the core team partners that each site brought together, who were partners in the work, were busy actually putting out fires and crises. So, thinking about change, working in the middle of crisis – they were able to hold both well.
>
> **JEANNE MCGOVERN-ACUÑA**

Continuing a practice undertaken with Cohort 1, the team held quarterly meetings for Cohort 2 members — opportunities to share learnings, think through challenges together, and lift up barriers they'd encountered for state consideration and action.

In April 2022, support for Cohort 2 transitioned from FSI to the BUILD Initiative, a national organization that helps state leaders create policies, infrastructure, and connections across agencies and organizations to advance equitable programs and services for young children, families, and communities. Because of the organization's long-standing relationship with Minnesota state leaders, BUILD was uniquely positioned to support WFS. For more than six years, BUILD has been working with state leaders to strengthen Minnesota's early childhood systems.

The focus of BUILD's WFS work was to identify and document opportunities to shift policy and programs to benefit family well-being. In this work, BUILD collaborated with state leaders and WFS grantees across Minnesota to identify and address systemic influences related to racial, geographic, and economic inequities and to support coordination across the programs and systems that serve children and families. In 2017, BUILD developed an Equity Action Framework tool and used it to train DHS leaders, staff, and contracted sites in applying an equity lens with communities most impacted by disparities, and to increase their access to opportunities within state programs and services.

As a part of this relationship, BUILD provided equity training during quarterly sessions for Cohort 1. They also facilitated a six-session, equity-focused "community of practice" for Cohort 2 before sites submitted their implementation plans.

EMERGING INNOVATIONS FROM COHORT 2 PILOT SITES: SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS

By 2022, pilot sites had moved into implementation mode and past the worst of pandemic-related challenges, and promising whole-family programmatic models began to emerge. A few highlights are offered below:

Weaving together whole-family approaches and culturally specific programming, the Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College leveraged its Ojibwe language immersion program in new ways – not just for college students, but for young children whose parents were pursuing postsecondary education or employment training. The site established its Grandma's House prototype to engage tribal elders with their grandchildren and adult children, sharing their language and cultural heritage in a rich, home-like environment. In support of their economic well-being, and in recognition of the lived expertise elders shared, pilot site families were paid a stipend for their participation.

To address the disparities children from Latinx families face between birth and age 5 as a result of systemic failures, Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio (CLUES) chose to prototype a whole-family approach to early child care and early learning. State officials hoped to learn from the CLUES model as they began partnering with Latinx parents to create a new category of community-based solutions to better meet families' needs.

The Minneapolis American Indian Center (MAIC) began developing prototypes to end or reduce a longstanding child welfare practice applied disproportionately to American Indian families: the immediate removal of infants when a positive drug test is obtained for mother or child. Community members raised concerns that this practice interrupts bonding between infants and their mothers, producing long-term negative consequences. With intensive case management and the development of a safety plan, MAIC hoped more babies and mothers would be able to stay together, changing life courses and outcomes for both. MAIC also began capturing American Indian mothers' stories about their poor treatment in hospital settings, for use in trainings around systemic racism.

Gloria Perez, Tawanna Black, Dr. Christina Ewig, Aaronica Jackson, and Deja Broadway speaking on a panel at the Ascending in Minnesota convening. Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Minnesota's 2-Generation Policy Network and Whole Family Systems Initiative have produced a rich array of valuable publications for practitioners and policymakers interested in whole-family approaches and systems change. The adjacent box includes relevant resources, while a comprehensive list is provided in Appendix B.

IMPACT ON STATE POLICY

To successfully change systems to support equitable family well-being requires a feedback loop between local service providers and state officials. McGovern-Acuña offers:

> I think the beauty of what we are doing [is that pilot sites] are still providing services like they have been, but now they have the state's ear in a very different way than they've had before. We're getting these feedback loops, and we can take [them] to other places in DHS and to the Interagency Leadership Team … where these ideas are then taken to other state agencies: "Here's what we're hearing from families. What about this?" It's a different type of work that these sites are doing with us. … There's a lot of things that come with working with the state, but they know that they can email or call up and say, "Hey, we're thinking about this," or "Can you tell us more about that?" Or, "What's this policy about, and how do we affect change in this policy?" So, it's a different kind of work that we're doing in a different kind of way. If you look at the history of what we've done at DHS, even [from] 2016 to 2022, those six short years have seen a lot of pivotal changes in the structures and how we think about the work.
>
> **JEANNE MCGOVERN-ACUÑA**

Lorena Barton and her son. © The Aspen Institute.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO WHOLE FAMILY POLICY AND PRACTICE

- A direct service perspective 2Gen
- Principles to Practice tool for program managers

EQUITY-CENTERED SYSTEMS CHANGE: KEY METHODS

- Human-Centered Design
- Culturally specific, collaborative program evaluation

Another key to achieving this kind of systems change is ensuring that feedback loops exist not only between local sites and the state, but also between local sites and people in the community. To truly center lived experience in the design and redesign of state programs, professionals at every level need to hone and use their listening skills. Killins Stewart describes this as "quotes, not notes" — that is, the idea that "you've got to listen to the people that you say you're trying to benefit."

An example from the work of Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College illustrates the impact feedback loops can have, both on state policy and what's possible on the ground. The Grandma's House program involves participation from Fond du Lac Tribal elders, some of whom live across the Canadian border. To participate in program meetings, these elders were traveling to the U.S. — a hardship. Program staff asked DHS leaders to make the elders' participation less burdensome. Perry describes the situation this way:

Because they're so close to the Canadian border and Tribal land crosses both national borders, Tribal elders were traveling back and forth. Elders, who are necessary for the preservation of language and culture, wanted to receive reimbursement for their travel to engage in the efforts. At that point, we thought we could never provide reimbursement of travel costs [across a national border], because that's the way it's always been – the current practice. … Policy staff began looking for state policy prohibiting reimbursement, and we couldn't find it at the state level [or] the county level. We asked our federal partners, and no policy existed at the federal level preventing reimbursement for this expense. So, all these years we were never able to do this, and all of a sudden, it's completely fine. [The] lesson learned was the importance of pushing against our ways of thinking and questioning the interpretation of policy and practice, and understanding where the lever is.

JOVON PERRY

While funding international travel struck most state officials as a prohibited activity, state leaders researched the question to determine if there was, in fact, any prohibition in statute or rule — and determined there was none. These kinds of perceived prohibitions, when unexamined, can make program administration unduly difficult on participants. By using this feedback loop from community members to local organizations to the state and back, a barrier to whole-family practice and involvement was removed.

WFS AND SISTER INITIATIVES: A MULTIPLIER EFFECT

Because Minnesota currently has a number of interagency systems-change initiatives underway, these efforts often work synergistically, each in its own area of focus, and produce a multiplier effect. Amanda Varley, who leads the state's Preschool Development Grant systems-change initiative, describes the interplay this way:

Jovon and I have these sister projects where our funding allows us to come from different angles. So, the Preschool Development Grant is based on children. I was just in a conversation talking about the needs of youth aging out of foster care. And I can look at that and say, that's so extremely important – I would love to help – and my funding doesn't allow me to do that, absent from there being some level of focus on early childhood. And so … we try to be as flexible as possible and know that for children, a family accessing SNAP benefits, or Medicaid, or any of these programs that truly do help the whole family, are so critically important. And from my funding, I need to be able to demonstrate, "Here's the throughline of how it impacts the child," where other whole-family approaches can come at [it] from the parents. So, I don't think I have a philosophical idea of what angle we should get at it from. It's just, how do we all use our resources together to wrap around the entire ecosystem, including communities, too?

AMANDA VARLEY

Leaders of each initiative play a role in the often unseen work to create the mechanisms that bridge siloes and enable whole-family practice. Varley is often cited by her peers as the colleague who persevered to achieve a breakthrough that has made integrated service delivery possible more broadly. It ultimately took Varley and her team 18 months of negotiating to achieve a data-sharing agreement across agencies.

The Children's Cabinet coordinates across initiatives and helps bring attention to important issues and improvements. In her role as executive director, Bailey cites breakthroughs on data sharing as vital progress for child well-being. "In the Joint Powers Agreement, we have a legal document that says that data can be shared between Human Services, Health, and Education for coordination and for referral of benefits." Citing a recent example of the resulting impact, Bailey describes what happened when the state began using Medicaid data to certify children as eligible for the USDA school meals program. Running that data, the state "identified more than 490,000 children enrolled in Medicaid who met the income threshold and requirements for direct certification for [free or reduced-price] meals, yet around 90,000 were not receiving free or reduced lunch last year[20] — that's nearly 10 percent of our student body!" Data sharing enabled the state to lift the burden off families by connecting 10 percent of the state's children to the school nutrition program — an essential support that also relieves other fees for families and increases aid to schools that serve lower-income families. As Bailey put it, "The Medicaid direct certification example is so huge … it's an enormous impact."

Attendees reflecting at the Ascending in Minnesota convening. Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

THE CURRENT STATE OF 2GEN IN MINNESOTA

Six years into the whole-family systems-change journey, the impact on Minnesota is evident. Reflecting on the current landscape, Perry offers: "There's a boom happening — there are lots of people talking about human-centered design, and lots of people talking about 2Gen [and] whole family." As awareness of these approaches spreads and deepens, the work has the potential to move from a time-limited initiative to a more fundamental and permanent reality. Former 2-Gen Project Manager Tigan sees signs that this is beginning to take place: "I think that Minnesota is building off a really strong foundation of the years it takes to do this work. It's not a flash in the pan — it's becoming embedded as a norm. Like, 'Isn't this just the way we do things?'"

In addition to building awareness and support for whole-family approaches, the work to date has demonstrated that difficult administrative barriers can be overcome and can in turn make it possible for local service providers to create innovative and powerful programs for and with families. By centering the work on equity, the WFS team is also showing, rather than telling, that listening to and co-creating solutions with families results in breakthrough programming. WFS's proof of concept has had considerable success.

20 State of Minnesota, Office of Governor Tim Walz and Lt. Governor Peggy Flanagan. (2022, August 15). *Governor Walz announces state will expand availability of free meals to 90,000 new students this school year* [Press release]. Retrieved from https://mn.gov/governor/news/?id=1055-537749

ENVISIONING THE NEXT PHASE

Isis Patterson, an Ascend Parent Advisor, and her children. Photo by Daniel Ebersole. © The Aspen Institute.

To build on the impressive traction the work has achieved to date, state leaders point to several important areas of ongoing and future focus. First is sharing the narrative — the stories of whole-family systems change and its impact — more broadly across sectors and throughout the state. The team's intense focus on relieving the administrative burden on local providers has meant less time devoted to sharing the story of early successes.

More focus on communications has the potential to advance the work in several ways. For stakeholders to embrace and implement these approaches, they must first learn about them and explore them. With 87 counties and 11 Tribal nations playing such a key role in administering programs for families, spreading the word and associated tools is essential. The sustainability of this work also requires securing ongoing funding and putting sufficient staffing in place. McGovern-Acuña sums the situation up this way:

> We have a lot of really dedicated people right now, but it's a small group of people. We have to tend the fire and blow on those embers to really expand it. … We need to be better about getting beyond just the small fire – we need to make that fire bigger, so that all can join us. Do I know how we're going to do that yet? No. And a lot of the work is really emergent, right, and that's what makes it so hard – because we can't see the future. We are journeying, and then it becomes clearer – the next steps, and the next steps. But definitely, we need to tend those embers and we need to fan that flame, and then we need to bring some more logs and really invite more people around.
>
> **JEANNE MCGOVERN-ACUÑA**

The work of reimagining and redesigning state systems — as well as county, Tribal, and local organizational systems — is a massive undertaking involving broad collaboration and persistent effort over time.

Reflecting on the North Star that can guide this work, Perry points to the team's current work to integrate the whole-family and equity frameworks:

> We're utilizing an equity framework along with our 2Gen model within the Whole Family Systems network. That is a framework that really centers around systems change. It looks at the personal, interpersonal, structural, and institutional changes needed – and it's really hard when we get to structural and institutional. What are the equitable changes we must make structurally and institutionally that will shift our system? This is the core of our work. Making these changes will create the difference in the persistent paradox in Minnesota.
>
> **JOVON PERRY**

KEY LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When asked to reflect on lessons learned and on what they would offer to others considering whole-family systems-change work, Minnesota leaders offered the following reflections and counsel.

SYSTEMS CHANGE REQUIRES UNCOMMON LEADERSHIP.

- Leaders must have a deep commitment to the work, grounded in a grasp of why systems must change, plus the ability to see the big picture and to articulate and lead from a vision.
- Leaders must be doggedly persistent in staying the course – through hard conversations, and through long stretches of tedious work behind the scenes. Leaders should:
- Be adaptable with resources, thinking about how we can do things differently from how we've done them in the past;
- Keep pulling on levers to see what will work and what will stick; and
- Stay steady when the going gets hard – as one leader put it, "Bird dog and don't give up."

COLLABORATING IS HARD. GET CREATIVE.

- Giving up resources in a resource-scarce environment is challenging. Explore different ways of funding key components of the work – for example, the WFS project manager position was ultimately located in one DHS division and supported with funding from another.

HAVING THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIPS IS KEY.

- Given how siloed state and county government and local nonprofit organizations remain, it's essential to build new relationships. These relationships are the foundation for understanding multiple programs and structures and how they make decisions. One leader advised: "Invite someone you don't know to lunch."
- Working in relationship involves finding shared interests – and sometimes giving more than you get.
- You can create processes that require relationships to happen. Make partnering an expectation and codify it in formal agreements such as MOUs.

SYSTEMS CHANGE IS CULTURE CHANGE.

- For career professionals in state government, taking on new ways of doing a job requires a mindset shift – from "I can't do this," to seeing themselves differently, as leaders who do have decision-making power.

SHIFT THE BURDEN.

- To really center what's best for communities requires a lot of administrative work – and to make the administrative burden easier at the local level requires state leaders to take on more of the burden themselves.

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN TO FAMILIES – IT'S WORTH THE WORK.

- Develop your listening skills, and work on better responses. Leaders have a responsibility to not just ask, but to make changes based on what they hear.
- "Quotes, not notes."
- Value qualitative as well as quantitative data – work on building and strengthening feedback loops and doing the hard work of understanding root causes.
- Remember that families and communities are partners, not research subjects. Respect and find ways to compensate them for sharing their lived expertise.

DESIGNING SYSTEMS IS AN ESSENTIAL AND LEARNABLE SET OF SKILLS.

- Reforming legacy systems to root out structural racism and put families at the center requires new skills and new tools in human-centered design. Remember that commonly used tools like Environmental Impact Assessments were once unheard of. Invest in learning systems design.

ADVOCATE FOR FLEXIBLE FUNDING.

- The work of redesigning systems won't be funded with siloed appropriations. Flexible federal funding (such as the Preschool Development Grant) and state funding (including Minnesota's Disparity Grants) are transformative in their impact on systems change.

Sondra Samuels at the Ascending in Minnesota convening.
Photo by Justin Cox. © The Aspen Institute.

The achievements of Minnesota leaders chronicled here continue to unfold. The work did not begin with all the needed resources in place — or even with all the important questions identified. By choosing to take action rather than postpone, these leaders are making real the vision of a beloved Minnesota senator, the late Paul Wellstone, who once said,

> **The future will not belong to those who sit on the sidelines. The future will not belong to the cynics. The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.**
>
> **PAUL WELLSTONE**

APPENDICES

Drayton Jackson, an Ascend Parent Advisor, and his children. Photo by Chona Kasinger. © The Aspen Institute.

APPENDIX A

Case Study Interview Participants

Ascend at the Aspen Institute, along with the author, wish to express their appreciation for all those who participated in structured interviews as part of the research for this case study. Many of those interviewed were involved in the activities of the Minnesota Two-Generation Policy Network and the Whole Family Systems Initiative as state leaders, site leaders or external partners; others are leaders of Minnesota-based 2Gen service providers and Ascend Network members. The conclusions drawn in this case study do not necessarily reflect those of interview subjects.

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APPENDIX B

Compendium of Minnesota Whole Family Approaches Tools and Resources

Collaborative Evaluation by White Earth Nation and the Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2-Generation Case Study, Issue 2, written by Taylor Vonderharr and Ben Jaques-Leslie, April 2022

Developing a Two-Generational Policy Network in Minnesota: 2017 State Level Developments written by Rachel Kutcher and Jodi Sandfort, January 2018

Expanding Innovations that Support Whole Families: State-Level Developments in Minnesota during 2018 and 2019 written by Jodi Sandfort, Trupti Sarode and Henriet Hendricks, FSI Brief, October 2020.

Future Services Institute, *Redesign for Whole Families Summit 2018* video, Vimeo, uploaded May 10, 2019.

Future Services Institute, *Introducing the Integrated Services Assessment Tool (ISAT)* video, Vimeo, September 24, 2019.

Income variability of families on cash assistance in Minnesota, 2-Generation Administrative Data Brief, vIssue 1, written by Ben Jaques-Leslie, October 2019.

Policy and Practice Barriers Study: A Direct Service Perspective, A project with the Minnesota 2-Gen Policy Network, written by Kristen Boelcke-Stennes, January 2022.

Presumptive eligibility for child care assistance: A 2-Gen Network Prototype, written by Kristen Boelcke-Stennes, February 2020.

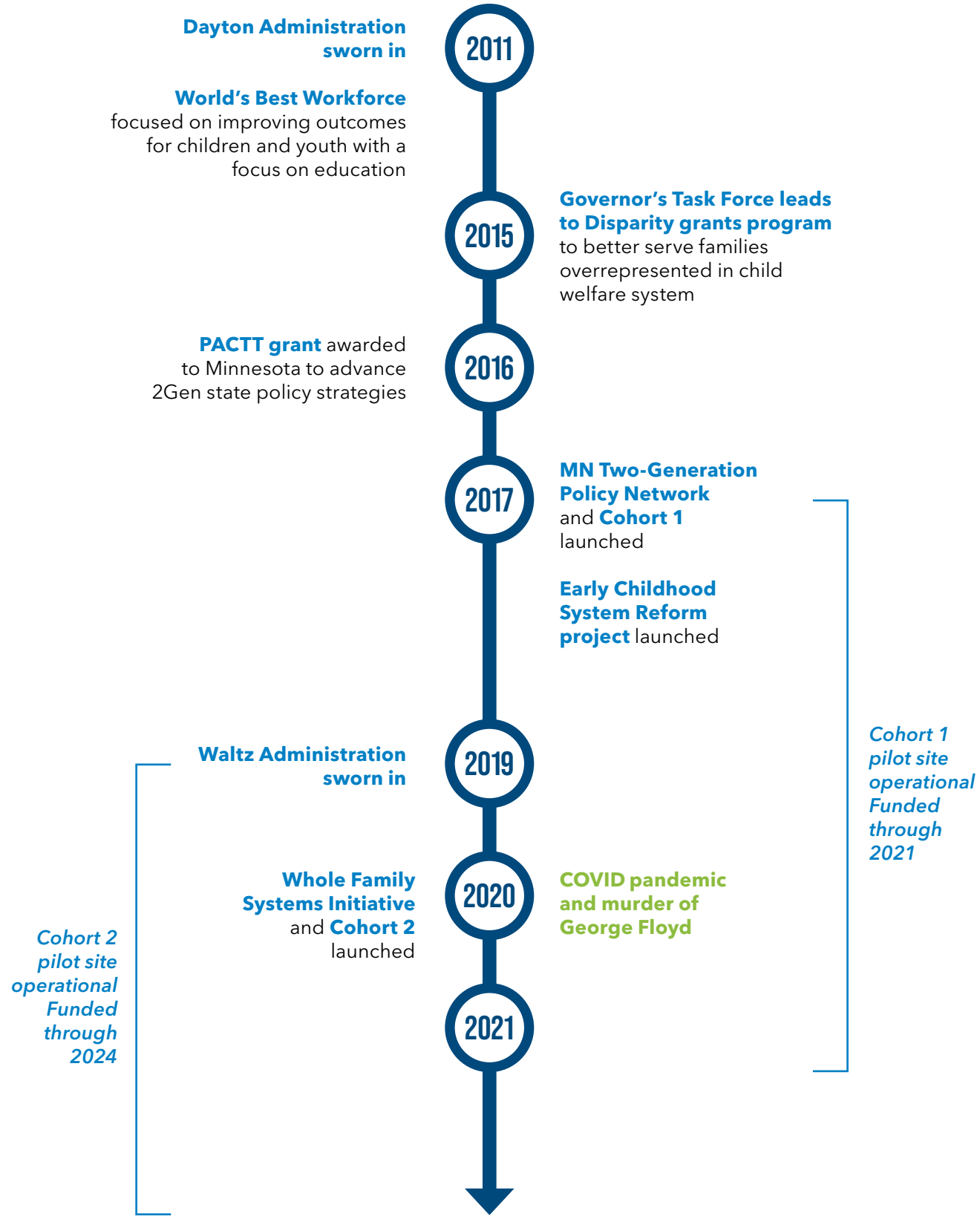
The effect of child support disregard on MFIP grant, 2-Generation Administrative Data Brief, Issue 2, written by Dorina Nikolla, November 2019.

The Human-Centered Design Process: The Future Services Institute's Experience in Minnesota's Human Services Field Written by Sook Jin Ong & Jodi Sandfort, FSI Brief 005, September 2019.

Using master leasing to support Olmsted County families, 2-Generation Case Study, Issue 1, written by Ben Jaques-Leslie, July 2020.

APPENDIX C

Whole Family Approaches Timeline and Initiatives



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