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# A Whole-Family Approach to Workforce Engagement

By Kerry Desjardins

**H**uman service programs and social policies frequently focus only on adults or only on children. This is true of many programs and policies explicitly aimed at families. A two-generation approach to human services is one that focuses on the needs of parents and the needs of children together, out of recognition that children do better when their parents are healthy and stable, and that parents do better when their children are healthy and stable.

While the terms two-generation or multi-generation approach are commonly used, APHSA's Center for Employment and Economic Well-Being prefers the whole-family label to accurately describe the most productive approach to human services and workforce engagement; this term is more inclusive and considers the extended family context, including challenges and resources of family members outside of the assistance unit, including nonresident or non-custodial parents, adult siblings, extended family members, and kin. The whole-family approach recognizes

the importance of the roles these individuals often play in supporting family stability and well-being.

Many of the safety-net programs for low-income families include work requirements, in some instances, or opportunities for family members to voluntarily engage in various programs aimed at increasing their employment and earnings. These work-oriented efforts are critical components to moving them to a path of self-sufficiency, well-being, social integration, and greater opportunity. However, being a working caregiver presents a number of challenges, and the nature and circumstances of the work can have significant impacts, positive or negative, on a child's well-being and future. Studies show that stress and dissatisfaction at work negatively impact relationships and parenting style. At the same time, stress and concerns at home can negatively impact work performance. Both need to be addressed by attaching families to necessary work supports, including transportation, child care, and ongoing job counseling and case management.

## The Argument for a Whole-Family Approach to Workforce Engagement

A whole-family approach to workforce engagement not only reviews the parent or caregivers needs, but also considers the needs, challenges, and resources of family members outside of the traditional assistance unit. Noncustodial parents (NCPs), adult siblings, and other working-age family members besides parents often contribute to household income. In fact, most low-income families, including single-parent families, do have more than one potential wage earner. Addressing the employment needs of the entire family is important because low-income families often need more than one wage earner to secure an adequate household income. By utilizing a whole family approach to workforce engagement, we can encourage and support the gainful employment of all potential wage earners in a family, which increases the likelihood that they will successfully increase their income and self-sufficiency.

Unfortunately, many current policies and practices fail to consider and address the whole family. Workforce programs are typically funded based on individual eligibility and individual outcomes and are not rewarded for their work with families. Therefore, there is little incentive for programs to address the employment needs of the entire family, or the impact of a participant's employment on their household. For example, the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program places strong emphasis on work activities that count toward work participation rates

rather than those which lead to meaningful outcomes that strengthen each unique family. As a result, parents may feel pressure to accept jobs or work assignments even when the working conditions create instability or another situation where they cannot adequately meet their children's physical or psychosocial needs for healthy development. In order to preserve and promote healthy families, while simultaneously ending needy parents' dependence on public assistance to support their children, the TANF program must have the flexibility to meet the varying needs of individual families, by conducting individual assessments of their unique barriers to sustainable, gainful employment opportunities, and strengthening their capacity to balance work and family responsibilities.

### Engaging Noncustodial Parents—a Key Element of the Whole-Family Approach

While a whole-family approach can have many dimensions, one of its key elements is engaging absent NCPs both economically and socially, where possible, in their children's lives. When child support policies and practices lack a whole-family approach, the resources and needs of noncustodial parents can be overlooked. Noncustodial parental employment has significant implications for low-income families with children. On average, child support payments from the absent parent represent 40 percent of additional income for poor families. New family-first payment rules provide this income to those who have established paternity, have a child support order in place, and receive collections, usually through the Title IV-D child support program. Child support payments represent one of the largest wage supplements for low-income working families and a critical add-on to families receiving cash assistance.

Unfortunately, many NCPs, including a disproportionate share of those whose children are living in poverty, have low incomes themselves. They are often unable to pay child support orders that constitute a large percentage of their already

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limited income. Efforts to enforce child support without offering low-income NCPs supports and incentives can drive them underground or to informal work arrangements and job-hopping when wage-withholding orders cause their disposable income to fall below their living expenses.

Some states and localities have established programs for noncustodial parents (most often fathers) to improve their parenting skills, increase their earnings and employment, and encourage them to pay child support. More than half of states have work programs with active child support agency involvement that serve NCPs; however, these programs tend to be local. Maryland is a notable exception. Maryland's statewide Noncustodial Parent Employment Program, funded using TANF dollars, links NCPs who cannot afford to pay child support to job training, educational opportunities, and work experiences. Between 2007 and 2014, the program enrolled more than 17,500 NCPs in job training and job readiness programs to help them find and retain employment. Collectively, those parents made \$97 million in child support payments, much of which was disbursed to former recipients of TANF cash assistance.



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Another state that is proving to be a leader in engaging low-income NCPs is Texas. Texas' Noncustodial Parent (NCP) Choices program targets low-income unemployed or underemployed NCPs who are behind on their child support payments and whose children are current or former recipients of public assistance. The NCP Choices program is not statewide, but is operated by 17 of the state's Workforce Development Boards. Like Maryland, Texas' NCP Choices program is funded with TANF dollars. The results of the program have been outstanding; 71 percent of participating parents entered employment, and 77 percent of participating parents retained employment for at least six months. Between 2005 and 2015, program participants paid more than \$202 million in child support.

Direct-service programs for NCPs can be an effective method of engagement, but New York has proven that policy changes can be as well. For years, New York has offered an Earned Income Tax Credit to NCPs who stay current on their child support

payments. The Noncustodial Parent New York State Earned Income Tax Credit is just one of a number of state initiatives to address the needs of low-income NCPs in an effort to help them be more involved in the economic and social well-being of their children. It has proven to be one of the nation's most effective tools for increasing labor force participation of low-skilled workers, and an efficient means of supplementing the income of low-wage workers.

### Conclusion

Employment is one of the surest and most long-lasting means for working-age individuals and their families to achieve self-sufficiency and economic well-being. Human service agencies, along with their workforce development partners, the economic development community, the education and training system, and other stakeholders, play a critical role in supporting our customers' success in the workforce. The implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and impending

reauthorizations, such as the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the TANF program, hold the potential to enable workforce programs to better serve the employment needs of the entire family. In the meantime, implementing a whole-family approach to workforce engagement requires deliberate collaboration and creativity in utilizing multiple funding sources. Human service agencies must lead their partners in utilizing a whole-family approach to workforce engagement efforts in order, most effectively, to support the success of low-income working families, and to empower them to achieve self-sufficiency, economic mobility, and broader family well-being. Learn more about a whole-family approach to workforce engagement by visiting APHSA's Center for Employment and Economic Well-Being website<sup>1</sup>.

### Reference Note

1. <http://www.aphsa.org/content/APHSA/en/pathways/center-for-workforce-engagement.html>

The banner features the APHSA logo on the left, which includes the text 'American Public Human Services Association'. To the right of the logo is the title 'Job Bank and Career Center' in a large, bold, blue font, with the subtitle 'Connecting Talent with Opportunity in the Human Services Industry' below it. The background of the banner is a photograph of a busy office or public space with many people in silhouette, some holding briefcases, against a bright, hazy light source. At the bottom of the banner, there are two columns of text on a dark blue background. The left column is for 'EMPLOYERS' and lists services like 'Post and Search Resumes' and 'Manage Candidates via Access to your Recruiter Account'. The right column is for 'JOB SEEKERS' and lists services like 'Post and Search Jobs' and 'Access the Resource Center for Resume and Career Building Tools and Techniques'. Both columns conclude with the instruction 'Start Today by Visiting Online at http://aphsa.careerwebsite.com/'.