

A 2GEN APPROACH IN WISCONSIN

A STATE CASE STUDY FOR SYSTEMS LEADERS & POLICYMAKERS



DEAR COLLEAGUE,

In February 2024, Ascend at the Aspen Institute hosted *Ascending in Wisconsin* in downtown Milwaukee to bring together a diverse group of over 120 local civic and policy leaders, public sector leaders, community-based organizations, and parent experts. These leaders, primarily from the state of Wisconsin, spent a day and a half focused on strengthening outcomes for families [using two-generation \(2Gen\) or whole-family approaches](#).

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) **Secretary Emilie Amundson** captured the sentiment of the convening and this case study by emphasizing the importance of centering the voices of families: “Don’t stay in your lane. Build your network outside of the voices and spaces that are most comfortable for you.” Secretary Amundson works alongside the [Parent/Caregiver Equity Advisory Cabinet](#) (PCEAC) to shape the direction of the state’s initiatives for families, including the [Wisconsin Shares Child Care Subsidy Program](#) and [Birth to 5 Strategic Plan](#). These initiatives not only rely on the feedback of PCEAC members, but they also unlock opportunities for cross-agency innovations. Reflecting this commitment to learning and collaboration, the secretary was joined by 12 staff members from DCF as participants at the convening. This work is an example of the tremendous 2Gen opportunity in Wisconsin, more of which is outlined in this report.

Ascending in Wisconsin was designed by a planning committee, largely made up of [Ascend Network Partners](#), who helped develop the convening agenda, nominated Parent Advisors, and reviewed this case study. Engaging parent voices and ensuring our work is informed by local leaders and parents is central to Ascend’s mission and one of five guiding principles for 2Gen approaches. A cohort of seven Parent Advisors was recruited to provide input on the convening design and to share their expertise as speakers and facilitators on 2Gen component areas most salient to them.

Convening sessions highlighted the need for collaboration and centering recommendations from families to navigate complex issues such as advancing equity, barriers to data collection, aligning systems, and rethinking measures of success. These themes align

well with the findings in this case study, which highlights opportunities for the state of Wisconsin to further its commitment to stronger outcomes for all families.

Throughout this report, state leaders and partners reflect on indicators of progress and on strategies for 2Gen approaches to take hold and spread across the state. We hope readers walk away with a better understanding of the importance and potential impact of 2Gen approaches at the state level and of the associated systems change work involved in creating the conditions for these efforts to succeed and proliferate at the community level.

We are grateful for the partnership of Karen Key, president & CEO of Heller Key Management Consulting LLC, who helped author this case study. We extend a special thank you to our [Ascend Network Partners in Wisconsin](#) for their work and partnership with families to advance 2Gen approaches. The Ascend team is proud to count four extraordinary leaders in Wisconsin as Ascend Fellows: [Erin Arango-Escalante](#), founder and principal at All Children Thrive and former administrator of the Division of Early Care and Education, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families; [Dr. Dipesh Navsaria](#), associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, and founder of Reach Out and Read Wisconsin; [Cary Waubanasum](#), an assistant professor of social work at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, as well as a researcher focusing on uncovering and challenging ongoing colonialism in social work and child welfare and reclaiming Indigenous lifeways; and [Henry Wilde](#), co-founder and CEO of Acelero Learning and former deputy secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. These leaders have contributed in significant ways to the story you are about to read; we gratefully acknowledge their contributions to this work.

Sincerely,




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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

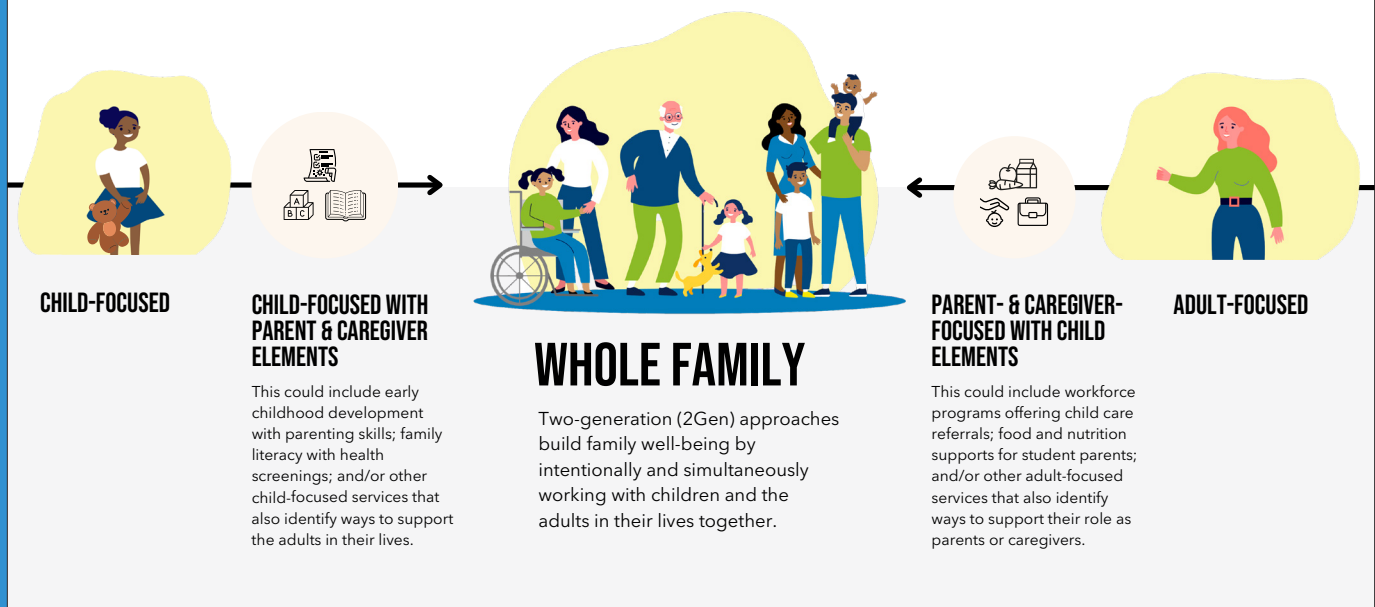
The American Dream as expressed in our culture includes a vision of a nation where all people can live well and thrive. That enduring dream remains elusive for far too many children and families. Millions of families in households with low incomes are confronting an ever widening wealth gap¹ and navigating a myriad of issues, from lack of access to affordable housing and child care to a widespread mental health crisis. This is especially true for young families, families headed by single mothers, and Black and Hispanic families. Yet across all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, there are local leaders embracing a two-generation approach (2Gen) to advancing economic mobility, education success, and health and well-being.

TWO-GENERATION / WHOLE FAMILY APPROACHES

Many public sector human services programs and systems were created to address a single societal problem or issue impacting a subset of the population; and many of today's programs across the United States reflect that legacy, continuing to focus exclusively on children and their development or on adults' needs and goals. Although a growing body of evidence suggests outcomes for children and adults in families are consistently better when their

needs, wishes, and dreams are addressed together, the structural lag of our systems has impeded forward progress. This persistent lag means legacy programmatic and funding silos — designed separately and, as a result, incompatibly — stand in the way of the integrated whole family approaches that have the potential to improve population-level family well-being. The imperative is clear: systems and structures must be redesigned to

FIGURE 1: Two-Generation approaches center whole families





Erin Arango-Escalante, Dr. Randy Stoecker, and Eugene Crisler at the 2024 Ascending in Wisconsin convening. Photo by RJ Harris Photography for Ascend at the Aspen Institute©

reflect the reality that the lives of family members and the outcomes they seek are inextricably interconnected.

The past decade has seen a growing movement to advance the use of two-generation² (2Gen) approaches that build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working with children and the adults in their lives **together**. Systems and structures that have jurisdiction over programs and funding are learning in real time that much of the expertise needed to create flexible, adaptive programs that remove barriers to family social and economic success lies with families themselves.

The term 2Gen is used intentionally throughout this case study to describe approaches that provide opportunities for, leverage the strengths of, and engage whole families—notably, children and the adults in their lives. However, it is important to underscore that in different communities, particularly Indigenous communities and communities of color, a multi-generational or seven-generation framework resonates. As the 2Gen approach takes root and grows

in all areas of the country and within every social and political context, it must remain responsive to cultural and political dynamics and demographics to build upon each area’s history of working with children and families.

WISCONSIN

Known for its natural beauty and as a leading place where families can live well and thrive, Wisconsin’s overall quality of life bears little resemblance to the realities of the state’s African American, Latinx, and American Indian families and communities. Wisconsin shares with Minnesota, its neighbor to the west, the unwelcome distinction of being one of the worst places in the country for people of color to live.³ The state’s history, its widely held civic values, its geography and demography, its complex political origin stories, and its current realities all help contextualize and add meaning to the state’s 2Gen story. It is a story of work across Wisconsin to change systems and structures to achieve population-level family well-being, using truly two-generational, holistic approaches.

1 Horowitz, J. M., Igielnik, R., & Kochhar, R. (2020, January 9). *Trends in income and wealth inequality*. Pew Research Center’s Social & Demographic Trends Project. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality>

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

3 Fello, J. (2023, March 2). *Study ranks Milwaukee 4th worst place for African-Americans to live*. TMJ4 News.

THE 2GEN MOVEMENT IN WISCONSIN

We see communities across the country, including Wisconsin, embracing a 2Gen approach to create conditions in which all families can thrive. At the start of his second term in 2006, Governor Jim Doyle seized the opportunity to deploy the power of the governor's office to change the shape of state government itself, in order to serve and advance the well-being of children and families together. With a new state agency overseeing virtually all child-, family-, and adult-facing human services and adjacent programs under one leader, Wisconsin began to use a 2Gen approach even before the philosophy achieved greater prominence and investment nationally in the 2010s.

Through the years since, and across different administrations and changing political realities, Wisconsin's human services leaders — in state and county governments, as well as in the nonprofit sector — have been creative and responsive to the state's preference for local control and action, leveraging available resources to create hyperlocal laboratories for whole family practice — even in the midst of a pandemic and the hardships it caused. These leaders have been mindful of the enduring and unacceptable stark disparities in life outcomes for Wisconsin's children of color and children experiencing poverty, and have endeavored to use an equity lens and to center the voices of their families experiencing poverty.

THE PARTNERSHIP OF STATE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND LOCAL LEADERS FROM RURAL AND URBAN, CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL AREAS OF WISCONSIN OFFERS READERS A LIVING MODEL OF ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP THAT HAS REAL APPLICATIONS FOR PURSUING THIS WORK IN VARIOUS CONTEXTS.

Building on ground-up, hyperlocal innovative approaches developed in small Wisconsin towns, mid-sized suburban communities, and across urban neighborhoods, recent and current gubernatorial administrations have worked hard to center child and family well-being. They have done so by bringing together separate programs and systems in one state agency and under one cabinet-level leader to maximize impact. Today, Wisconsin's efforts reflect a high level of work to advance 2Gen approaches in alignment with the state's culture, history, and current context. These efforts include:

- braiding funding streams to enable innovative 2Gen approaches to keeping families together by mitigating environmental barriers and burdens;
- funding pilot sites that align with a statewide ethos of local control by supporting hyperlocal design and innovation, enabling proof of concept and achieving positive outcomes for and with families; and
- building broad community engagement and support to take on and develop new data-driven approaches, such as the Collective Impact approach, to tackle pressing local manifestations of systemic barriers to child and family well-being.

REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY AND THE PATH FORWARD

Wisconsin's 2Gen approach to date has brought its most significant systemic barriers into clear sight. The story also illuminates the systems change strategies that have emerged as the most significant and essential to moving this work to the next level. Throughout this case study, state leaders and partners reflect on indicators of progress and on strategies for the long game of transformational systems change to make it possible for 2Gen approaches to take hold and spread across the state.

By looking to the places where there is an enduring commitment to this transformational work, other states and communities can learn from and build on these efforts, catalyzing change and accelerating momentum. Our hope is that readers will 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 2Gen 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 has produced this publication, along with a [companion case study on Minnesota](#), to document the work and tell the story of how 2Gen took hold and spread in two states. They complement Ascend's case studies about 2Gen approaches within government agencies in [Colorado](#), [Maryland](#), [Tennessee](#), and [Washington, D.C.](#)



Parent leaders at Knapp Elementary School participate in a weekly parent leadership meeting.

WISCONSIN



From left: Cigdem Unal, Sheila Cruz, Tamara Johnson, and Secretary Emilie Amundson at the 2024 Ascending in Wisconsin convening. Photo by RJ Harris
Photography for Ascend at the Aspen Institute©

Located in America’s upper Midwest between two Great Lakes, Wisconsin is best known for its storied history as a 20th-century industrial powerhouse, for its vast farm lands, and for the great outdoors. Although it’s dubbed “America’s Dairyland,” a traveler through Wisconsin would discover a much more varied landscape and more ways of life than the state’s slogan and Wisconsinites’ “cheeseheads” nickname would suggest.

Most of the state’s population of 5.9 million live along the shores of Lake Michigan,⁴ while the less densely populated areas feature vast forests, smaller lakes and rivers, and farms that grow a variety of crops and raise livestock. While very rural in terms of geography, one quarter of all the state’s residents live in ten Wisconsin cities — 10% in Milwaukee alone⁵ where manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology are the dominant industries. Rural areas are characterized by very small communities where the economy is most often centered around either agriculture or tourism, particularly in the northern portion of the state. In terms of race and ethnicity, the population of Wisconsin is 6.2% African American, 7.6% Latinx, 3.2% Asian, and 1.2% American Indian.⁶ Many white Wisconsinites are part of German, Norwegian, and Swedish heritage populations descended from Northern European immigrants.

Wisconsin is also home to 20% of the U.S. population of Hmong people, originally resettled as refugees from Laos in the 1970s. It has the third-largest Hmong population (59,238) after California (101,179) and Minnesota (91,311), and Hmong make up the largest Asian ethnic group in the state, accounting for 33% of its total Asian population.⁷ Wisconsin is the homeland of 11 federally recognized, sovereign American Indian tribal nations.⁸ The state is divided into 72 counties, and 32 of those counties (45%) are considered rural in terms of population density.⁹ When looking at the state as a place to live, and in terms of the opportunity to live well, Wisconsin ranks relatively high across multiple measures. According to World Population Review, it ranked eighth in 2023 for best quality of life in the United States. The ranking reflects: When looking at the state as a place to live, and in terms of the opportunity to live well, Wisconsin ranks relatively high across multiple measures. According to World Population Review,¹⁰ it ranked eighth in 2023 for best quality of life in the United States. The ranking reflects:



- **Education** — The state’s schools are among the best-performing in the nation, ranking sixth in a *U.S. News* analysis,¹¹ with the 10th-highest high school graduation rate.
- **Cost of living** — Cost of living is lower than the national average, as is population-level poverty.
- **Employment** — Unemployment sits at 2.9% in the state, lower than the national average.

4 Wisconsin. (2024, February 7). In Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wisconsin&oldid=1204710671>

5 Wisconsin Demographics. (2024). *Wisconsin cities by population*. https://www.wisconsin-demographics.com/cities_by_population

6 QuickFacts. (n.d.). Wisconsin. U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/WI/PST045222>

7 Klaas, R. (2024). *Hmong in Wisconsin: A 2020 statistical overview*. Applied Population Laboratory, University of Wisconsin-Madison. https://apl.wisc.edu/publications/hmong_chartbook_2020.pdf

8 The term American Indian is used throughout because it is the descriptor most often chosen by members of Wisconsin tribal nations.

9 Jones, M. & Ewald, M. (2017, May 17). *Putting rural Wisconsin on the map: Understanding rural-urban divides requires a complex spectrum of definitions*. WisContext. <https://wiscontext.org/putting-rural-wisconsin-map>

10 World Population Review. (2023). *Quality of life by state 2023*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/quality-of-life-by-state>

11 *Best States: Education*. (2023). U. S. News and World Report. <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/rankings/education>

While these population-level rankings and associated outcomes paint a very positive overall picture of the state as a place to live and raise a family, the reality for some of Wisconsin's communities of color is starkly different. For example, across key outcome measures associated with well-being — from educational attainment to health, housing, employment, and criminal and civil justice — children and families of color fare far worse than white Wisconsinites. A few data points illustrate this disturbing reality:

- African American Wisconsinites are 11 times more likely to be incarcerated than white Wisconsinites.¹²
- Mental distress is about twice as frequent among Hispanic (17%), American Indian (14%), and African American (15%) residents as it is among white residents (8%). (see footnote 11)
- The mortality rate from diabetes is 3.3 times greater for American Indians than for whites. (see footnote 11)
- The median African American household income of \$39,000 is slightly more than half (52%) that of white households.¹³
- Wisconsin's racial disparity in unemployment rates is the worst in the country: In 2018, the Black unemployment rate in Wisconsin was nearly three times that of whites, according to American Community Survey data.¹⁴

This stark contrast was captured in research done at the University of Wisconsin that points out African American Wisconsinites not only fare far worse than their white neighbors, but also worse than African Americans in other states. The nonprofit journalism newsroom Wisconsin Watch cited this research in a 2020 article that states:

A 2019 report by COWS, a nonprofit think tank based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, finds that Wisconsin's white residents have 'relatively good' economic, health, and educational outcomes, while Black residents fare worse than Black people nationally. This leaves extreme disparities between white and Black residents and has led to drastically different lifelong realities for Wisconsin residents, depending on who they are and where they live.¹⁵

Also worth noting is the extent to which Wisconsinites of color live and work in just a few geographic areas, largely as a result of past policies and practices such as redlining and housing covenants that restricted where individuals and families could buy or rent homes. Even today, nearly 90% of Wisconsin's African American population lives in Milwaukee or five nearby counties, all of which are located in southeastern or southern Wisconsin. While less dramatic, almost two thirds of Latinx¹⁶ and American Indian Wisconsinites live in these counties as well.¹⁷

12 Wisconsin Community Resilience and Response Task Force. (2021, January). *A just recovery for racial equity in Wisconsin*. School of Medicine and Public Health, University of Wisconsin-Madison. https://uwphi.pophealth.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/316/2021/02/A-Just-Recovery-Racial-Equity_FINAL.pdf

13 Health Compass Milwaukee. (2023, March). Households/income data for state: Wisconsin. <https://www.healthcompassmilwaukee.org/demographicdata?id=52§ionId=936>

14 Powell, T. (2019, November 12). Wisconsin's unemployment disparity between blacks & whites is worst in the United States. WUWM 89.7 FM. <https://www.wuwm.com/news/2019-11-12/wisconsins-unemployment-disparity-between-blacks-whites-is-worst-in-the-united-states>

15 Blado, K. (2020, September 19). White Wisconsinites must reckon with the deep racial inequities in our state. *Wisconsin Watch*. <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/09/white-wisconsinites-racial-inequities-wisconsin-racism>

16 Wisconsin Department of Health Services. (2022, March 24). Hispanic/Latinos in Wisconsin: Overview. <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/minority-health/population/hispanlatino-pop.htm>

17 Wisconsin Department of Health Services. (2022, March 24). American Indians in Wisconsin - Overview. <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/minority-health/population/amind-pop.htm>

WISCONSIN'S CULTURAL AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Wisconsin's political and cultural context can be thought of as a tapestry of distinctive threads, with both progressive and conservative ideologies and movements from the state's history woven into the fabric we see today. Asked to describe this context in a way that would help readers understand how 2Gen approaches have unfolded in Wisconsin, Ascend Fellow Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a professor of pediatrics, human development, and family studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, commented: "You have to remember this is the same state that gave us Fighting Bob LaFollette and the Progressive Movement, and also gave us Joe McCarthy and the Red Scare." Today, Wisconsin is classified as a purple state, with governing power divided between a two-term Democratic governor and Republicans who control both chambers of the state legislature.

Looking at jurisdictions, most rural Wisconsin counties are conservative, while urban counties — including the large population centers of Milwaukee and the state capital, Madison (Dane County) — are liberal, culturally and politically. Work that advances 2Gen approaches to family economic and social mobility happens in every part of the country and with leadership from both major political parties, and Wisconsin is no exception. That said, because elected officials generally reflect the beliefs and norms of local residents in their approaches to public sector human services, 2Gen approaches in conservative, liberal, and moderate parts of the state tend to be designed and implemented differently to fit and garner support in local communities.

THE IMPACT OF GERRYMANDERING

In recent years the Wisconsin political landscape has been shaped by gerrymandering, the practice of redrawing electoral districts to gain an electoral advantage for a political party, in this case the Republican Party. Wisconsin's state legislative maps are widely considered to be among the most gerrymandered in the U.S. In 2011, Republicans redrew the districts in such a way that an impenetrable majority was locked in place. In the State Assembly, Republicans have consistently won at least 60% of the seats, sometimes with less than 50% of the statewide vote.

The impact of gerrymandering is relevant because the current map of legislative districts favors rural areas of the state over urban areas, leaving the more diverse people and communities in Wisconsin cities underrepresented. The makeup of the Wisconsin legislature impacts what legislation pertinent to children and families can be enacted and where budget dollars are allocated.

Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/gerrymandering>

Emilie Amundson, secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, offers some reflections on the ways Wisconsin's smaller, more conservative communities approach the work of engaging with families:

“At the local level, I think Wisconsin is really defined by these very small, insular communities that have a history and a pride in supporting their own. That’s something I hear when I go out: ‘We’re a small community. We know our families, and we know what they need.’ ... And it cuts both ways, because it’s also that pride in local control — so, wanting the state to kind of stay out of the way and just let counties or local communities do what they need to do.”

In many parts of the state, this ethos and self-concept — neighbor helping neighbor, caring deeply about children and families — is coupled with fiscal conservatism, and so the ways in which 2Gen approaches work upstream on prevention and early intervention are often attractive. Secretary Amundson explains:

“Whether it’s ‘let’s strengthen family,’ full stop, or ‘let’s strengthen family so we can save money by eliminating benefits programs,’ I feel like that’s probably the starting place for a lot of community-based organizations. When we see communities really embrace [2Gen], it may be because there is a back-end fiscal element to it — sort of like ‘an ounce of prevention.’ I think for a lot of county leaders, there’s also this realization [that] it’s so much cheaper to invest in these front-end ideas around strengthening family and around prevention so we don’t balloon our community’s juvenile justice system or our child welfare system. So, I think that’s probably what I’ve seen most, is sort of a dual approach on those two drivers.”

Reflecting on the values that motivate communities across the state to embrace whole family approaches, Secretary Amundson offers:

“When I’ve been really inspired by how a community or a community organization is embracing the whole family, it does feel like it’s simultaneously this responsibility of, ‘Hey, this is the place where I’m living. This is a place where I want to raise my kids,’ and therefore, ‘We want to make everything, the entire community, as strong and good as we can.’”

WISCONSIN'S CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Children under the age of 18 make up 21% of Wisconsin’s total population, nearly identical to the national proportion of 22%. Looking at the state as a whole, data pertinent to child poverty shows Wisconsin as faring better than 75% of all states in the nation. The state’s child poverty rate (13%) is lower than the national rate of 16%, and the percentage of young children under 6 experiencing poverty (13%) is below the national average of 17%.¹⁸

However, here as elsewhere, underneath population-level data lies the reality of deep racial disparities impacting children and families in Wisconsin and across the country. The poverty rate among African Americans in Wisconsin is more than two-and-a-half times the overall state poverty rate, and three to four times the white poverty rate. Wisconsin’s Latinx, Asian, and American Indian communities experience poverty at more than twice the rate of its white communities.¹⁹ One in three Black children in Wisconsin lives in poverty, a rate that is 3.5 times higher than that of white children. African American infants in Wisconsin are three times more likely to die before reaching their first birthday than white infants.²⁰

18 KIDS COUNT Data Center. (2023, November). Children in poverty by age group in Wisconsin. Annie E. Casey Foundation. <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/5650-children-in-poverty-by-age-group?loc=25&loc=2#detailed/2/51/false/2048,1729,37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867/8121/12263,12264>

19 Smeeding, T. M. & Thornton, K. A. (2020, October). Wisconsin poverty report 2018: Still in the doldrums. Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin-Madison. <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/resource/wisconsin-poverty-report-2018>

20 Blado, K. (2020, September 19). White Wisconsinites must reckon with the deep racial inequities in our state. *Wisconsin Watch*. <https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/09/white-wisconsinites-racial-inequities-wisconsin-racism>

PARTNERING TO SUPPORT FAMILY WELL-BEING: WISCONSIN'S PUBLIC AND HIGHER EDUCATION SECTORS

Nine states — California, Colorado, Minnesota, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia — have structured their public sector human services to be county-administered.²¹ Wisconsin is one of two states, along with Nevada, to have a “hybrid” model in which public sector human services are partially administered by the state and partially administered by counties. In Wisconsin, the Department of Child and Family Services (DCF) is a state agency, but it decentralizes administration to the local county level. As a result, many of the services and supports offered to Wisconsin families are supervised by DCF, including child care and child safety and permanency, as well as economic supports through the TANF-funded Wisconsin Works (W-2) program.

Wisconsin is a state where residents hold certain concepts about civil society and their public institutions sacred, and one of those hallowed concepts is that of local control. **Michael Ford**, director of the Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and an elected member of the Oshkosh Common Council, describes the ideal of local control this way:

“Local control is a foundational governing concept in Wisconsin. Our system of dual federalism, in which the state is responsible for issues of statewide concern and local government is responsible for issues of local concern, is designed to place decision-making authority at the level of government closest to the people impacted by those decisions.”²²

While local control arguably does not always function this way, the ethos is deeply woven into the state’s cultural fabric and is an important factor in the strategies policymakers use in seeking to spread evidence-based, impactful practices like 2Gen approaches.



Darin Wellons, an Ascend Parent Advisor, and his family.

Wisconsin also has a distinctive approach to its state budget in terms of how revenue from taxes is allocated. The state budget is proposed by the governor and then voted on, line by line, by a legislative body called the Joint Committee on Finance. This process focuses mostly on the use of what is called General Purpose Revenue, or GPR. The GPR is the state’s largest and most flexible source of funds, derived almost exclusively from individual income tax and sales tax. Historically the state government has shared a portion of its revenue with counties and municipalities via an amount appropriated by the legislature. However, the amount of shared revenue remained stagnant for decades prior to a recent 2023 change.

The single largest funding source for Wisconsin county governments is local tax revenue, including revenue from property taxes. Since counties provide health and human services, this source of funding, typically

21 Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2018, March). *State vs. county administration of child welfare services*. Children’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/state-vs-county-administration-child-welfare-services>

22 Ford, M. R. (2022, January 5). ‘Local control’ of government is a hallowed idea in Wisconsin. Here’s what we can do to give it real meaning again. *Wisconsin Watch*. <https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/solutions/2022/01/05/local-control-hallowed-idea-wisconsin-how-give-meaning/9102928002>

referred to as the “levy” or “county levy,” makes up a large part of the DCF’s human services budget. In recent years, the state legislature has also enacted strict restrictions on the amount counties and municipalities can raise their local levy, making it difficult to find dollars to fund new services.

Because county-delivered human services in Wisconsin are a decentralized system with a great deal of local control, implementing systems change statewide is less a matter of mandates, and more a matter of sharing emerging and best practices and partnering to support local innovation. Ascend Fellow **Henry Wilde** leads Wisconsin-based [Acelero Learning](#), one of the leading providers of Head Start programming in the country, and served as deputy secretary of DCF from 2008-2010. Wilde says this about how county administration of programs works:

“Every county is different. For instance, there’s an elected county executive in Wisconsin’s eight most populous counties. That’s different because ... there are always politics involved. And then departments at the county level are free to mix and match and organize in a bunch of different ways — and in fact, because the economic constraints differ by county, they really have to. They obviously have guardrails that are in state law, but there’s a lot of flexibility in how counties work.”

Wendy Henderson, former administrator of DCF’s Division of Safety and Permanence, captures the challenges inherent in this kind of structure, but also highlights the benefits that can be seen when innovation is conceived of, supported, and led at the local level:

“I think one of the beauties of being a state-supervised, county-administered system is that anything we might dream up, somebody’s doing it already. Brent Ruehlow [the county Health and Human Services director] in Jefferson County is incredible about blending funding, leveraging local community connections, and being able to do just really some amazing things on behalf of families. So, it’s a really great learning lab, and it’s a great way to be able to try some different proofs of concept in different parts of this state. I think that doing ... a full-

scale rollout can be a little bit more challenging — because in child welfare and youth justice, for example, the workers who are out in the field are not state workers. It’s all county workers. And so, to get change to really take hold, we need to have that complete buy-in from the 72 different county directors.”

Because 2Gen approaches represent a change in the ways services to children and families have traditionally been delivered, adopting these approaches requires buy-in from key leaders within the systems delivering services, and that in turn requires an evidence base. In addition to the available national research, policymakers and practitioners in Wisconsin rely on the state’s institutions of higher education as academic partners in determining which approaches to pursue and in evaluating the impact and outcomes of new approaches. Wisconsin is home to a renowned public university system with University of Wisconsin-Madison as its flagship campus. UW-Madison is also a [land grant university](#). **Dr. Dipesh Navsaria** explains the distinctive role his university plays in the state:

“We have a strong tradition of public land grant universities here in the Midwest, and ... this idea that the public university in Wisconsin should be there to serve the public of Wisconsin ... Not only should we be out there as a state university helping people with milk production and cattle, ... but we also have people thinking about family systems [and] family support. And how is it that we can do that? A lot of that is done through this public university extension mindset.”

Navsaria goes on to connect the role of the university to another important concept in Wisconsin culture, The Wisconsin Idea:

“It’s this notion that the boundaries of the state are the boundaries of the university. And that works in both ways; ... that we as the university are here for Wisconsin, but also Wisconsin is here for us. ... It’s not that we are [the state university] in a sort of unidirectional ivory tower sort of idea, but that ... we also learn from and are enriched by the people of the state outside the university in different ways.”

In addition to his work as a pediatrician and a professor of pediatrics, Navsaria holds a joint appointment at the School of Human Ecology — an institution, he points out, which evolved out of what had been the university’s Department of Home Economics and, in his view, is a source of thinking and scholarship that are historical antecedents to 2Gen:

“People ask, ‘What’s the difference between human development and family studies (HDFS) and developmental psychology?’ And the answer is, developmental psychology is about the individual and about how they develop, and HDFS is that, but it’s also about family systems, and it’s about the connections between people. ... So, this was the Department of Home Economics, which is largely where women were encouraged to go if they wanted college education. And yes, it was a traditionally female-centric kind of area. So, I would argue that with places ... like the School of Human Ecology, that is well over a hundred years old here... I would argue that some of the thinking about 2Gen work — again, not called that, but thinking about it in that way — probably came from home ec schools and higher education that largely served women [and] evolved over time to think about, ‘How is it that we think about the places where people live?’ and how we can influence that, and how they connect with one another, and what evidence exists around supporting them.”

Jefferson County Human Services Director **Brent Ruehlow** thinks about his team’s whole family, 2Gen approach as shaped and defined by evidence, with the ongoing support of academic partners:

“The University of Wisconsin at Madison has a graduate Master of Social Work program, and we utilize students from there for yearlong placements. ... We’ve had a long-standing relationship with them, and that works out great because we’re allowed to hear about cutting-edge research and utilize their university library. ... We believe in evidence-based practices here. And something we say a lot is, ‘We’ve got to follow the science — what’s working?’ And if it’s not working, we need to be careful about doing

that. It’s like, if I’m going to the doctor to have a knee surgery, I certainly want them to use the best possible tools and the best pathway that’s most research-based, right? So why wouldn’t we do that with the families that we work with? I hope as the state of Wisconsin, [and] as a nation, we continue to follow this pathway.”

SERVING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES: HIGHLIGHTS FROM STATE HISTORY

More than 9,000 years before the arrival of Europeans, American Indians lived throughout the land now called the state of Wisconsin and had established a complex trade network that extended to both the Atlantic and the Gulf coasts. For millennia, American Indians in Wisconsin have maintained strong family ties and cultural traditions — a rich cultural heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation by tribal elders and that centers on the importance of multigenerational families.²³ The earliest roots of 2Gen philosophy in Wisconsin trace back to these tribal nations.

Wisconsin’s first wave of mass European immigration occurred in the first half of the early 19th century and brought children and families from Germany, Norway, Finland, Denmark, and Italy. These immigrants brought with them new ideas and approaches, including a German innovation in early learning, the kindergarten. Established by a German immigrant, Margarethe Meyer Schurz, the first kindergarten in the United States opened in 1856 in Watertown, Wisconsin.

The mid-to-late 19th century saw Jewish, Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, and Slovakian families immigrating to the state. Most settled in Milwaukee, where these communities experienced the highest rates of infant mortality, poverty, and crime in the state, and lived in congested housing conditions. Immigrant families were served by the burgeoning Progressive Era settlement house movement, whose model and programs were important precursors to 2Gen philosophy and practices. Settlement houses served the needs of whole families together, offering social clubs, instructional classes

23 Wisconsin Department of Health Services. (2022, March 24). American Indians in Wisconsin: History. <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/minority-health/population/amind-pophistory.htm>

such as sewing and cooking, a night school for adults, recreational sports, and classes for children. Settlement houses provided services ranging from basic material needs to child care services. Advocacy for the state's children and families has its origins in the Wisconsin Conference on Charities and Corrections, which is in fact the oldest multi-issue child and family advocacy organization in the United States. Since its founding in 1881, the organization, now known as [Kids Forward](#), has focused on “improving conditions for families and children through policy change, expanded public investments, and public education that lead to improvements in outcomes and practices in the delivery of publicly funded health care, education, workforce development, and social services.”²⁴

Across the United States, the period following World War II saw the enactment of legislation aimed at eradicating poverty, including what was arguably the nation's first 2Gen federal program: Head Start. This program was designed to work with young children and their parents together to support children from birth to age 5 around early learning and development, as well as health and family well-being. From its outset, the Head Start model has understood family participation and actively engaging parents as keys to strong child outcomes. The Head Start footprint in Wisconsin dates back over 50 years.

In the 1980s, a young Wisconsin-based policy professional named [Julie Kerksick](#) (who would later work on a landmark research intervention in the 2Gen space, the [New Hope Project](#)) took her children to child care in her Milwaukee neighborhood. Kerksick remembers:

“Our children were part of local child care efforts. And I remember there was a particular child care center called Carter's that no longer exists, but the two founders were Black educators who really wanted to bring their skill in education to child care. So Carter's used to bring us together at night and have [us] work on math programming for parents so that we could help our kids do their homework! But it wasn't only that. ... This was all

computer-based. ... So, in the mid-1980s it was a big deal to go and sit in front of a computer screen and ... see what your child was being exposed to and see how you could support your child. And ... there were many low-income children and families in the center. ... One of the lessons of 2Gen was to meet parents where they are, because they're too busy for you to try to get them to come to yet another new place and program.”

Ten years later, Kerksick served as executive director of the New Hope Project, a nonprofit, community-based demonstration program implemented in two Milwaukee neighborhoods between 1994 and 1998 that worked with adults and families experiencing poverty. The guiding principle of the project was that anyone who works full time should not experience poverty. Kerksick explains further:

“We set out to do an intervention that affected adults, many of whom, and even sometimes most of whom, were also parents. But we set out to do something that would help adults take care of themselves and their family. And we had a ... very strong belief that the best way to help kids is to help their parents be able to take care of them. ... So, part of the New Hope effort was to try to support adults to have access to jobs, to make sure that jobs paid — and if they didn't pay enough, then tax credits and other government assistance would fill the gap. But in doing that, we truly believed that we were going to be having a positive impact on children.”

New Hope offered a package of work-based supports that included subsidized jobs, earning supplements, affordable health care, and child care. As described by research partner [MDRC](#), “New Hope was unique in that it offered one package — administered conveniently in one setting — containing a suite of benefits and services that parents could take up and use according to family needs and preferences.”²⁵ While the project's logic model did state the belief that children in the program would improve across measures, the original contract with outside evaluators did not include followup on children and their well-being. After obtaining additional funding

24 Kids Forward. (2023). Mission & History. <https://kidsforward.org/about-kidsforward/our-mission>

25 Huston, A. C., Miller, C., Richburg-Hayes, L., Duncan, G. J., Eldred, C. A., Weisner, T. S., Lowe, E., McLoyd, V. C., Crosby, D. A., Ripke, M. N., & Redcross, C. (2003, June). New hope for families and children: Five-year results of a program to reduce poverty and reform welfare. MDRC. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_457.pdf

to underwrite the followup for the families with children, [the study](#) yielded evidence of positive impacts on children as well as adults:

There were some positive impacts on adolescents related to aspirations, behaviors in school, fewer suspensions for boys, things like that. So, part of that was because the basic economic model meant that in some cases, parents could work less than they were already working because of our wage supplement, and child care, and health insurance. They might not work three jobs or two jobs. They might work one, ... And so that allowed parents to be more available. ... If you're trying to do things for children who are exhibiting signs of distress, or falling behind, or antisocial, or whatever it is, if you're doing that without the actual context — but more importantly, respect for and involvement of the parent — ... [it will not work].

In addition to the whole-family approach demonstrated by the New Hope Project's work at the intersection of workforce programs, cash assistance, and concrete supports, the 1990s in Wisconsin saw a shift towards a 2Gen orientation in the state's youth justice system. Reflecting back on the origins of 2Gen approaches from the perspective of his own career, [Brent Ruehlow](#) offers:

“In college, I spent some time working in residential treatment, and there was not a lot of focus in the '90s on the entire family system. The youth was removed in those days. ... They got treatment, but likely they were returned

home to the same conditions that led to the removal. Over time, what we certainly learned is that we need to all work together to enhance that entire family system. ... My career started in youth justice, and we looked at what the youth's needs were, but eventually we added family work. ... We needed to understand family systems work and that we all affect one another implicitly and explicitly in a family. That has been a great change in the child welfare system.”

As public sector and nonprofit organizations in Wisconsin worked to engage with families holistically — as family systems — in the 1990s, those efforts were undertaken separately under the leadership of local program directors and public officials. One set of family-serving local nonprofits that proliferated in the late 1990s was the network of Family Resource Centers (FRCs) that trace their roots to the settlement house movement. Serving as local hubs and one-stop shops for family support — including parenting supports such as skills training, job training, substance abuse prevention, mental health services, housing support, crisis intervention services, literacy programs, and food and clothing banks — FRCs play an especially important role in rural areas of the state where there is significant stigma associated with seeking assistance from public sector programs.

NEW HOPE PROJECT (1994-1998) KEY FINDINGS



EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME

Parents in the New Hope group worked more and earned more than did parents in the control group. The program reduced poverty rates.



PARENTS' WELL-BEING

Although New Hope had few effects on levels of material and financial hardship, it did increase parents' instrumental and coping skills. Program group members were more aware of community resources, such as where to find assistance with energy costs or housing problems. They also reported better physical health and fewer signs of depression than did control group members.



PARENTING AND CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

Although New Hope had few effects on parenting, it did increase children's time in formal center-based child care and after-school programs. Even in Year 5, after eligibility for New Hope's child care subsidies had ended, children in New Hope families spent more time than their control group counterparts in center-based child care and after-school programs and correspondingly less time in home-based and unsupervised care. New Hope also increased adolescents' participation in structured out-of-school activities, such as youth groups and clubs.



CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES

At the end of both Year 2 and Year 5, children in the New Hope group performed better than control group children on several measures of academic achievement, and their parents reported that the children got higher grades in reading and literacy skills. New Hope also improved children's positive social behavior.

THE 2GEN MOVEMENT IN WISCONSIN



Marley Corbine, an Ascend Parent Advisor, and her family.

At the turn of the 21st century, the quality that most enabled Wisconsin to advance the well-being of children and families — its pride in local control — was also its greatest challenge. The New Hope Project, a truly innovative model for serving families experiencing poverty holistically, had emerged from a Milwaukee-based nonprofit. Communities — many rural — took the programmatic FRC model and adapted it to their own needs, wants, and cultures, and a local county youth justice agency was shifting its approach to include working with whole families.

And yet, these kinds of innovations were not emerging consistently across all the systems touching children and families, nor were they spreading and scaling in ways that would allow them to move the needle on troubling outcomes. In 2000, despite existing public sector and community efforts, Wisconsin's children and families living in poverty were experiencing persistent and often worsening outcomes across multiple dimensions of well-being, from access to healthy food and health care to housing instability. These life outcomes were in turn dramatically worse for Wisconsin's children and families of color.

The work required to turn the curve on poor outcomes for children and families is, by nature, about systems change, and changing a state's child- and family-facing systems can either block or facilitate pathways to social and economic success and well-being for its families. In 2001, six-term governor Tommy Thompson stepped down, and a year later, Wisconsin elected a new governor, Jim Doyle. Ushering in a new administration offered a fresh opportunity to leverage the power and leadership of the state government to drive structural and systemic change.

While his first term in office was dominated by fiscal issues, upon his reelection in 2006 Governor Jim Doyle took a momentous step toward systems change by shifting the structure of the state government itself, which made centering Wisconsin's children and families possible. Ascend Fellow **Henry Wilde**, who served in the Doyle Administration, describes what happened this way:

“The governor took parts of what was the Department of Health and Family Services and the Department of Workforce Development and constructed a Department of Children and Families. ... The governor's basic view was that if we hope to best serve children, we need to serve their families, and these programmatic pieces should fit together. And so he took the child-focused programs such as Child Welfare, Child Care Licensing, and Child Care Quality, and moved them into a single department. But the department also included TANF and Child Support, which I think one would historically think of as [about] adults.

And that vision — a Department of Children and Families versus, effectively, a Department of Health and a Department of Labor — wasn't just symbolic. It was a hugely substantive move, because it meant that those programs had the same leader. The people who were trying to improve those programs and address meaningful issues affecting Wisconsin's most vulnerable families were required to think about those programs together. ... I think in Wisconsin, that was a big, very concrete, very specific step — and different, I would say, than in other states, where cabinet agencies specific to early childhood education exist. ... We don't have that here. We've got Children and Families, which cuts across in a really powerful way. That is not to say coordination is required — Medicaid, FoodShare, and unemployment, as examples, still sit elsewhere in state government — but the degree to which the “whole picture” for the Department of Children and Families was 2Gen-focused was significant and systemic.”

Crafting the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) out of multiple state agencies truly reshaped the state structure itself to create an agency that could serve children and adults in families together. As Wilde suggests, this action also enabled Doyle to appoint an agency leader to whom division administrators and the entire agency workforce could look for inspiration and guidance on how to do their work differently and achieve different outcomes. To lead the newly formed DCF, Governor Doyle selected Reggie Bicha, then-director of a county human services department (and Ascend Fellow).

It was Bicha who ultimately recruited **Julie Kerksick**, a longtime advocate and leader working with Wisconsin families experiencing poverty, into the state government. Kerksick reflects back on the governor’s strategic action and his decision to select Bicha:

“In 2008, Reggie was the inaugural secretary for the newly formed DCF. And part of the rationale for bringing some programs together from what had been social services, welfare programs, and health programs ... was that they wanted to see more integration and understanding of whole family as opposed to isolated programs to fix people and kids. But my feeling is that the vision that Governor Doyle had in choosing Reggie, and the vision that Reggie used with me to bring me into government ... had to do with really needing this more holistic effort — the vision of trying to work with the whole family and move needles based on evidence-based programming.”

Bicha was Wisconsin’s first state leader who embraced what we now call a 2Gen approach to drive systems change. He set expectations that all DCF divisions would examine their programs and processes through a whole family lens and find ways to address problems and remove barriers families faced by working together across silos. Bicha moved whole family approaches into the foreground of DCF leaders’ thinking, and as Kerksick noted, successive administrations with very different governing philosophies have continued to advance the 2Gen approach. It has become embedded within the DCF over the last 15 years.

In 2019, Tony Evers became Wisconsin’s 46th governor, bringing with him the perspective and lived experience of a lifelong educator who had taught science and served as a school principal, district superintendent, and Wisconsin’s superintendent of public instruction. Evers has been quoted as saying he has “always believed that what’s best for our kids is what’s best for our state.”²⁶ DCF Secretary **Emilie Amundson**, whom Evers appointed, describes the vision of the Evers Administration as “all children will be safe and loved members of thriving families and communities.”

Secretary Amundson set out to make that vision real by weaving 2Gen approaches into DCF’s leadership and management from the outset:

“We focused the mission and vision of our agency back on thriving families and communities. ... We’re not just administering programs here — we’re trying to strengthen the fabric of community and of family. And that was the shift that I wanted my divisions and teams to make: to think about families where maybe we would’ve just thought about the recipient of a program, or the children in the child welfare system. We’ve spent a lot of time in the leadership team talking about 2Gen [and] the opportunities we have within our agency’s discretion to put the family in the center of our policymaking conversations.”

Secretary Amundson has used the levers of state government strategically to enable and fund whole family practice, to lift up local innovation and successes as proofs of concept, and to build public will and support:

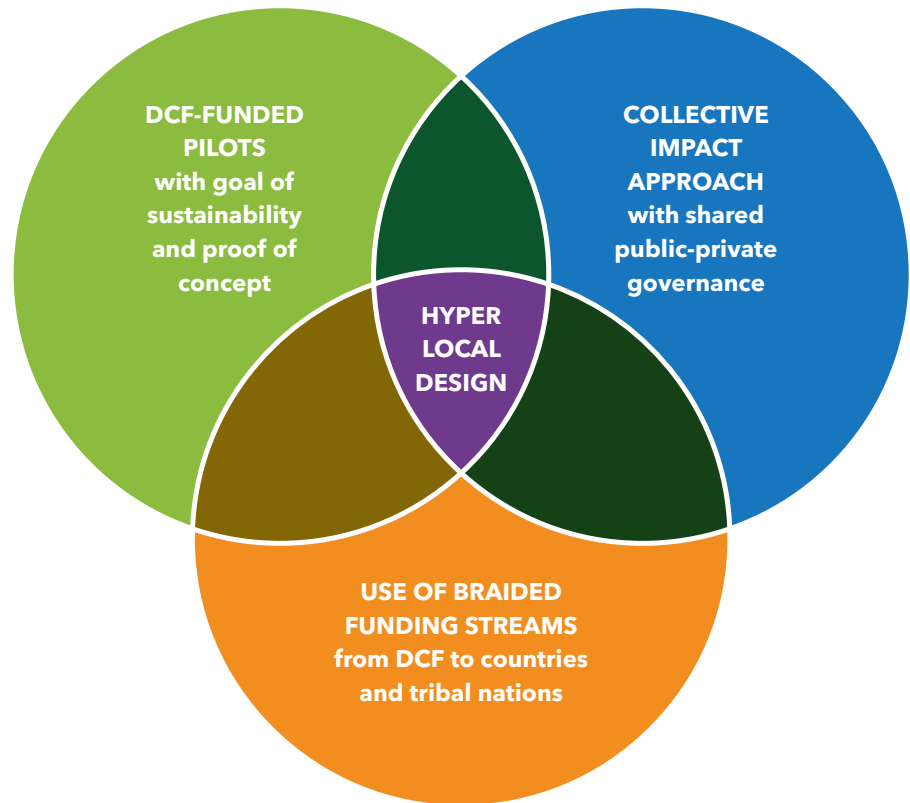
“I think it really is across all of our programs. It’s really an orientation between the state and the counties ... to shine a light on emergent best practices. And we’re really a state that shies away from the mandates and instead we’re always a state that really tries to uplift local innovation. As somebody who’s worked in the state for their whole career, ... that’s where all my gray hair comes from. Because it would be much easier for me if I could just mandate ‘everybody has to do this’ instead of building local coalitions and local political will. And yet I do really believe that when that happens in some of these bright spots, it’s rooted firmly. It’s not AstroTurf. It’s real.”

²⁶ Tony for Wisconsin. (2022, June 27). Education. <https://tonyvers.com/education>

WISCONSIN 2GEN APPROACHES AT A GLANCE: WHAT WORKS

There are countless settings and contexts in which the application of whole-family approaches could contribute to improved outcomes for children and families. In Wisconsin, these efforts are most likely to gain traction and be sustained when they reflect two characteristics: hyperlocal design and leadership, and support as needed from state government. Figure 2 illustrates how Wisconsin has taken action to expand permissions, fund pilots, and implement other supports according to the 2Gen principle of aligning and linking systems and funding streams.

FIGURE 2: Three effective approaches to 2Gen in WI



BRAIDING FUNDING STREAMS TO ENABLE 2GEN

Preventing Child Removal Through a Whole-Family Approach: The Story of Targeted Safety Support Funding

Preventing child removal by working with families under stress makes sense in terms of child safety and family well-being. At the same time, this work cannot be undertaken without [leveraging both existing and new resources](#). Four years ago, DCF Safety and Permanence leaders developed a program and a funding source available to all counties and tribal nations that makes it possible to partner with families, identify and provide concrete supports, and keep children safe at home. Division Administrator [Wendy Henderson](#) describes the program this way:

“The Targeted Safety Supports Funding program is a blend of TANF and IV-E dollars, and it can be used for anything that it would take to keep the child home. So, for children who are in the child welfare system, who are on a safety plan or a protective plan being served in their family home, this is the funding source. ... It can be used for anything — from housing and child care to cash assistance, to transportation, to paying an aunt to come over during bathtime, dinner, and bedtime to make sure [the home is safe during that] stressful time in the evening. So, it’s extremely flexible. The outcomes have been fantastic. What we’ve found is that the vast majority of families just need a little bit of extra support. I think over 90% of the families that receive this intervention don’t end up having a child removed from their home.”

Targeted Safety Supports Funding (TSSF) is notable for the way DCF has been able to braid funding sources in such a way that local jurisdictions have exactly what practitioners always wish for but have difficulty obtaining: truly flexible funds, to be used in ways that are tailored to each family. TSSF also fits with and supplements the ways each local

agency and its county board are allocating funds from their county levy. Henderson continues:

“Our base Children and Families allocation was always available for these types of services and supports, as was county levy. But [TSSF] has provided a dedicated funding source for some of the items that perhaps places weren’t able to find a budget for. We’re seeing more places that are more willing to pay for rent, for example, using TSSF funds than they would have been using our regular children and families allocation or their levy, because it’s a discrete, identified funding source.”

TSSF funds have a dedicated purpose of allowing agencies to work with the holistic needs and wants of families; and at the same time, it aligns with and complements established local priorities and approaches such as local control. TSSF funds are highly sought after and counties continually ask the state for additional TSSF investment, according to Henderson. DCF leadership hopes to establish TSSF as an evidence-based practice for preventing child removal within the federal [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#). Reflecting on the next steps in this journey and on the real meaning and implications of this program, Henderson circles back to the reality that much of what families need most — economic and concrete support — has become less available over time:

“We’re trying to get creative and figure things out, to the point where we have Child Welfare going to the federal government and asking for economic and concrete supports to be approved as an evidence-based practice for preventing child removal. And sure, it works. But it was never child maltreatment — it’s just poverty that we’re trying to fix. And so I think we have a long way to go. I think that 2Gen piece [needs to be] really baked in. ... The dissolution of support for families, from a structural perspective, has really forced us from the state side to really look at how we support families as a whole when they don’t have that basic safety net that they used to.”

STATE-FUNDED, COUNTY-LED PILOT PROGRAMS

FAMILY KEYS: STABLE HOUSING AS A PREVENTION STRATEGY FOR FAMILY SEPARATION

For one in 10 cases where a child is removed from the family home by DCF in Wisconsin, the reason cited is housing insecurity — and many more families in the child welfare system are dealing with housing challenges. In 2020, during the pandemic-related eviction moratorium, approximately 30% fewer children were separated from their families due to housing insecurity — meaning when housing was stable (due to policy mandates), fewer children were taken into foster care.

DCF’s Safety and Permanency Division seized this learning to partner with three counties and pilot an approach called “Family Keys” that would provide stable housing to families in the child welfare system. Henderson describes what happened during the pandemic and after:

“As we watched the data on the child welfare side, we saw that removals because of inadequate housing went way down during the eviction moratorium, and that started to creep up again once that moratorium closed. We used that as a justification to bring forward some resources to try to pilot housing as an intervention for child welfare to try to prevent removal.”

The state agency brought funding and created a model where county human services leaders could come up with a hyperlocal design that would be supported by and fit their local community:

“We brought three counties to the table with us. This began in 2022, and it was a mix of the financial support and then also the relationships. Each county brought whatever key partners they needed to have with them at the table to make this successful, [for example] their local community action agencies, the United Way, landlords, and local housing agencies. And essentially what they did was they each created their own intervention, which used a housing model to try to prevent removal for families who would’ve been at risk of family separation because of a housing situation. And each one is doing it a little bit differently, which was kind of the whole point.”

THE “LITTLE HOUSE” PROJECT

The way Jefferson County implemented Family Keys illustrates the power of pairing local ingenuity, savvy, and knowledge of community with state government support and funding. **Secretary Amundson** cites the county as an exemplar, not only of Family Keys but also of 2Gen practice:

“Jefferson County is in the I-90/I-94 corridor between Madison and Milwaukee. It’s pretty rural and it’s pretty conservative. ... If you were to ask me, ‘What’s a part of the state where they’re really a hotbed of 2Gen,’ I would point you to Jefferson County. Their Human Services agency purchased two homes to house families when they are experiencing destabilization — as part of the child welfare system. They have two houses where they can just move families right in and wrap around them with care. And that’s such an innovative practice right there. And yet, because it’s local, it’s folks you see at the grocery store that are pitching these ideas. It’s not the state telling them to do it. ... They’re just out there doing what’s good for their community.”

Director **Brent Ruehlow** and his team took a hard look at the local housing shortage, which mirrors the reality across the state:

“Like many communities in many counties, Jefferson County really struggles with a lack of housing. ... These are folks who are employed, they don’t have felony restrictions, and they’re still not able to secure housing. When we looked at some of our families in the child welfare system, if they had a stable home after targeted intervention was complete, we didn’t want something like a physical location to hold [up reuniting them] with their children. This led to our various housing initiatives.”

Knowing the local context, which included tremendous care across the community for Jefferson County families and also concern for fiscal matters, Ruehlow looked around the physical environs and came up with an idea that would make Family Keys funding really work for families currently in the child welfare system and for the community:

“In-home safety interventions have been proved to be safe. Additionally, this is fiscally responsible, as we shared our best practice outcomes with our budgetary partners. Keeping in mind that this is best for children and families, we looked at a home that the county owned here in town, and through the work with our county administrator, we were given the ability to utilize that dwelling for our families. We made a variety of improvements to the house. Next, we started to examine which families would most benefit from using that house, along with embedded services. We set up a lease for our local house, and we moved a family in who was able to reunify with their children in a short period of time. This house allowed children to be with their parents every single day, close by to wrap needed services and resources around the family. Therefore, we have less children in care and now at home with a parent. We’ve now utilized our “little house” in downtown Jefferson for many unique situations, infusing it with services and giving families a roof over their head, while allowing mom and dad to be with their children.”

FAMILY KEYS PILOT SITES: HIGHLIGHTS

Hyperlocal in design and implementation:

Each community team drafted their own proposal to “do what it takes” to stabilize families experiencing housing insecurity in their community

- Emerging local innovations surfaced
- Landlord risk mitigation supports
- Additional emergency funding for individuals who did not otherwise qualify for current housing assistance

Families stayed together and were reunited faster

- Child welfare professionals have reported this approach has allowed them to find other ways to keep children safe when an out-of-home placement would have otherwise been necessary
- Some families have been able to reunify more quickly when housing was the last identified barrier for their family
- Over 90% of the families served reported that they felt they had a choice in their housing solutions

<https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/newsletter/09-11-family-keys>

The “little house” project showed that removing the stressor of finding stable housing made a demonstrable difference in enabling families to take steps toward their own stability and well-being — and Ruehlow and partners took it a step further, removing the fear of being displaced after a period of time:

“We were able to spread this philosophy that if we can get a home for families, we can take one thing off their plate. When you think of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, families in need can then really focus on alcohol or drug treatment and mental health treatment and care for their children, without the worry or pressure of housing. And that’s the promise we make them: If they’re going to stay in services and work hard, we’re not going to uproot them just because they’ve seen success. And sometimes that means we use the model with grandma and grandpa, or an aunt and uncle in these housing situations, so it hasn’t always been a biological parent, but it has been either a relative or even kin relationship that allows them to be ‘home.’”

By creating a pilot program that fit the culture and circumstances of the community and by showing real outcomes, Ruehlow and his team generated enough support to sustain the project after the pilot period: “Our county administrator, county board, and human services board were all very, very supportive of this endeavor.”



Higher Expectations' community focus group gathers to review their strategic plan.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT APPROACH

Work to change the social and economic conditions that impact families is complex, and making meaningful progress requires the involvement of multiple systems and sectors collaborating on structures and processes. In the case of state-funded local pilot projects, the role of “backbone organization” falls to the entity with a fiscal relationship with state government — that is, county government. In other circumstances, the impetus for community-wide collaboration on issues affecting Wisconsin families comes from outside government, often from the nonprofit sector.

Two such collaboratives to tackle systemic issues facing children and families were initiated in Wisconsin cities and are co-led by nonprofit organizations the United Way of Dane County (Madison) and Higher Expectations Racine. Both are advancing systems change and producing outcomes, each with a decade-long history and track record. And both use a structured form of collaboration called “[collective impact](#)” — a philosophy and approach first articulated in a 2011 article by John Kania and Michael Kramer, published in the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

Collective impact is the commitment of a group of leaders and organizations from different sectors to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem, using a structured form of collaboration. The concept of collective impact hinges on the idea that in order for organizations to create lasting solutions to social problems on a large scale, they need to work together around a clearly defined goal and coordinate their efforts. The approach of collective impact is contrasted with “isolated impact,” where organizations primarily work alone to solve social problems. Collective impact is based on organizations forming cross-sector coalitions to make meaningful and sustainable progress on social issues, with shared goals, shared accountability, and a backbone organization to manage administrative and fiscal matters.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_impact

2GEN APPROACHES COMPLEMENT COLLECTIVE IMPACT EFFORTS

Collective impact and 2Gen approaches have aligned goals and can be used simultaneously. 2Gen approaches focus on centering the voices and outcomes of individual families, or “how” organizations and leaders work with families to identify and support their goals. Alternatively, collective impact strategies assess outcomes within a sector or at the population level. Communities can benefit by using a 2Gen approach and collective impact together, guaranteeing that family voice and recommendations are leading the design and implementation of direct-service programs and, at the same time, deepening community-wide support and accountability for a common agenda.

UNITED WAY OF DANE COUNTY: BRINGING CROSS-GENERATIONAL SUPPORTS TO CHILDREN UNDER FIVE AND THEIR FAMILIES

Home to the Wisconsin State Capitol and University of Wisconsin's largest campus, Dane County is widely seen as a very prosperous area with an affluent and highly educated population — an impression that both describes and at the same time obscures the realities of local residents and communities. The median household income in Dane County is 20% higher than the statewide median, and the proportion of residents who have attained at least a bachelor's degree is a staggering 50% higher than statewide. Taken alone, those data points would fail to reveal that the county's poverty rate (10.4%) is virtually identical to that of the state (10.6%).²⁷ For local families experiencing low income, the pursuit of stability and well-being is made even more difficult by an acute shortage of housing — local housing prices are among the highest in the state, and the cost of rent takes up 50% of earnings among lower-wage workers.

Dane County government leaders have a 20-year track record of focusing the agency on reducing the number of children in poverty, with a particular focus on early childhood. However, the impetus to convene a common table around 2Gen approaches to this work can be credited to a convergence of concern and commitment from Dane County Human Services leadership and from United Way of Dane County.

United Way Senior Director of Community Impact **Lauren Martin** remembers that United Way's involvement came out of its long history of investing in early childhood:

“[We recognized] that our investments and our work in early childhood really have always been 2Gen. All work that you're doing with children around child development, you're working with the parents. A lot of our investments over the last 15-plus years have been in home visiting programs within our community. ... Knowing that in all the work in home visiting, you're working with the parents, and obviously parents and children exist in families.

Then we began thinking and asking ourselves, how are we investing in those families? In terms of the work not being in silos, but being able to really bring resources closer together to help families.”

The origins of Dane County's 2Gen collective impact model and approach as it exists today can be found in earlier collaborative work: the designation of service areas called “early childhood zones” in order to provide holistic, wraparound services to families in specific neighborhoods with high rates of family poverty. Martin explains:

“About 10 years ago ... Dane County Human Services and our United Way executive director came together around school readiness — how kids were getting support before they entered the school system. And they started what we call the early childhood zones. ... It was an effort at matching wraparound services and expanding capacity for families who were participating in in-home visiting to meet their needs around employment, housing, and mental health.

It was really a two-generation, collective impact effort that started, and we've been participating in that for a long time. The county was matching funding with United Way so additional capacity was provided, and we were able to — and still do — provide different parts of the funding to provide those supportive services. What it did was enable any family who lived in certain geographic areas that were feeding into certain elementary schools, and had kids under the age of five, to access home visiting and then also have access to a housing support subsidy and some additional employment and education specialists. ... We were layering those services and working together across different funded agencies, different funded programs, and working to build collective impact.”

In 2014, United Way convened a delegation of 40 stakeholders to study and then set strategies with a focus on alleviating poverty. The delegation homed in on deepening approaches that were geographically based and holistically supporting families with kids under the age of five. “That doubled down on the initial effort that

27 Census Reporter. (2002). Dane County, WI. <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/05000US55025-dane-county-wi>

had already been started with the early childhood zones and really got it some bigger support and reach,” Martin says. The delegation released a report in early 2016 that stated: “Supporting early childhood development, family-sustaining jobs, affordable housing, and a comprehensive, two-generational family support system are key factors in alleviating poverty in Dane County.”²⁸

Through this and other convenings, United Way used tools [provided by Ascend](#) to engage community partners in thinking differently about how they provided services. Martin remembers:

“We held a couple different learning sessions with our partners. We invited everybody who was working with families [with kids under age five], providing that child-focused service, and then I invited some of the employment and housing providers to represent the adult-focused part of the work. We came together and we used some of the tools from Aspen ... and then we brainstormed: What are the needs of the families as a whole? What are the needs of the parents who have kids under the age of five, from each of their perspectives, whether they were a housing program or an early childhood program? So, asking the early childhood programs to think about, what are the needs of the parents who you’re working with? Do they need a job? Do they just need a connection to ... transportation? ... I remember we had big flip charts, and they created lists, and then we also went around and had everybody build on the needs identified. For example, we’d ask, ‘What organizations ... provide the needs that you identified right on that sheet for the child or the parent?’ And then you could see the connections happening in the room and people starting to talk to each other — ‘Oh, our parents need that, and I didn’t know you guys were doing that!’ or having the time and space to say ‘How could we meet those needs together?’”

These sessions proved pivotal as partner organizations that were functioning in silos began to see possibilities beyond simply making referrals to each other. “It’s not like they hadn’t thought about it, or been doing it when they had capacity, but it’s necessary to provide space and the time

to make those connections,” Martin says. “And perhaps they’ve thought about it, and they’ve made a referral one time, but hadn’t really thought about how their programs could be organized to be working jointly together.”

What emerged from these sessions was an innovation in United Way’s grantmaking approach to leverage funding in ways that enable and facilitate collaboration rather than reinforcing silos. In 2016, United Way of Dane County began offering a collaborative application through which organizations working with families with children under five could apply to work together in new ways, using 2Gen approaches:

“We offered a collaborative application ... and you had to have an early childhood component — one of the outcomes needed to be around child development, age-expected development. And then you needed to have another component that helped provide a service that the family or adults needed. So, the 2Gen part — you either need to have some education services, housing, mental health. ... Through that process, that was really the start of our investing in 2Gen, where we’re investing in these collaborations that are really multi-generational — working with the same families simultaneously on different goals and resource needs. We have four collaborations that came in at that time, and we’re still investing in them.”

The current application process involves agencies coming together, selecting a lead agency, applying together to provide wraparound services, and entering into a memorandum of understanding around joint reporting of outcomes. The application process queries the applicants to articulate the ways working as a collaborative will be different from working separately, and includes questions exploring issues of equity. The collaboratives include an early childhood provider, a housing provider, and a mental health provider. Now in their fifth year working together, the collaborative partners report that working in this way allows them to specialize in what they’re good at rather than trying to be all things to all families. And as Martin points out, “The other part of the theory of change is that it makes it easier on families.”

28 Elbow, S. (2016, February 26). ‘Strong Roots’ plan challenges Dane County to adopt multi-faceted strategy to alleviate poverty. *The Cap Times*. https://captimes.com/strong-roots-plan-challenges-dane-county-to-adopt-multi-faceted-strategy-to-alleviate-poverty/article_c4da351b-220d-5155-a197-ac45cc59ecb4.html

The collaborative work in Dane County uses a collective impact model with shared governance. A leadership team — composed of the backbone organization, funding organizations, and agency partners focusing on home visiting, housing, mental health, employment, and education — meets bi-monthly to consider policy and budget issues and to consider process and practice recommendations made by the project change team. As funders, Dane County Human Services and United Way have oversight and accountability roles, but as Human Services Division Administrator Connie Bettin puts it, “We’re not going to make unilateral decisions, knowing that if we pull that thread, it loosens or impacts the partnership — so I’m very aware of that.” Bettin offers that the biggest barriers to this kind of approach for any county are competing priorities and the associated lack of time for thinking creatively about models like 2Gen — it’s often more expedient to make decisions in a silo.

Collaboration does take time and energy, but these key partners agree that the outcomes have been extraordinary:

- 93% of families improved parent-child interaction or increased knowledge about parenting.
- 86% of the children screened were at age-expected development.
- 79% of the children who needed an intervention or appropriate supports as a result of the developmental screening got the referral and got their connection.
- 88% of the children were reported as meeting their developmental milestones.
- 96% of families maintained stable housing.

United Way Vice President for Community Impact **Jody Bartnick** sums up the reality that equity in family well-being includes but isn’t limited to achieving equitable outcomes on key metrics:

“True equity is that every individual and every family needs something different to be successful, and so how are we approaching that work to make sure that we really are reaching the child? The caregiver? ... Whatever the family makeup looks like, knowing that equity is at the

forefront, and that everyone has access to what they need to be successful ... and that everyone lives the lives they want to live, not the life they have to live.”

HIGHER EXPECTATIONS FOR RACINE COUNTY: PARTNERING WITH COMMUNITY TO TRANSFORM SYSTEMS THAT PRODUCE PERSISTENT RACIALIZED UNDEREMPLOYMENT

Racine County, located south of Milwaukee on Lake Michigan, is home to the fifth-largest city in the state — the city of Racine, where 40% of the county’s residents live and which has consistently had Wisconsin’s highest level of unemployment for decades. While that data point mainly evokes images of shuttered factories and calls to mind adults experiencing periods of unemployment, low-wage jobs, and joblessness, the reality undergirding that data point reveals generations of families impacted by structurally racist barriers — and a compelling opportunity for whole family policies and approaches to advance systems change.

When Racine native **Jeff Neubauer**, a former state assemblyman and WI Democratic Party chair, concluded his career in Wisconsin politics and joined his family business in his home city, he quickly experienced a challenge that would surprise most casual observers: He had trouble hiring for his company’s many open positions. Through involvement with the local business community, Neubauer learned that he was not alone. There were good jobs paying decent wages available in Racine, and public transportation to get to work. So Neubauer and other business leaders pulled together a shared effort in 2008 — but five years later, they still weren’t moving the needle on employment, and they concluded that another approach was needed.

Looking for new thinking and data-driven solutions, Neubauer says he stumbled upon **StriveTogether**, a national network and model that focuses on building strong civic infrastructure to connect people, ideas, and resources in order to drive systems transformation. StriveTogether works in communities across the United States to achieve equitable outcomes for every child, from “cradle to career.”

STRIVETOGETHER'S 7 CORE OUTCOMES

Kindergarten Readiness

Early Grade Reading

Middle Grade Math

High School Graduation

Post-Secondary Enrollment

Post-Secondary Degree Completion

With Neubauer as a catalyst, a group of business owners, senior-most leaders from K-12 and higher education, the city's mayor, and the county executive convened and decided to adopt the StriveTogether approach, pulling the lens back and working on outcomes from birth through adulthood — but with a twist that reflected their intimate knowledge of the community and hyperlocal innovation. Racine County's StriveTogether partnership would reverse the order of StriveTogether's seven core outcomes, working from career to cradle. Neubauer explains:

“The idea was, we were going to start with the jobs that we were having a hard time filling — teachers, police officers, construction workers, nurses, engineers, advanced manufacturing, truck drivers — and then work our way back down through the supply chain and reverse-engineer it to say, ‘Okay, where do nurses come from? Let's go talk to those people.’ And they said, ‘We want to produce more nurses, but we need students who want to do it and who are properly prepared.’ So then we went to the high schools, and they said, ‘We would like that too, but we need students who can do algebra in eighth grade and who can read on grade level by third grade, because the students who can't are five times more likely to drop out of high school, much less become nurses.’ And then we went to the elementary schools, and they said, ‘Yes, but it would be so helpful if children showed up for kindergarten who were prepared to learn how to read and who had some degree of emotional and social development so they were ready for school.’ So, we took the seven outcomes from the StriveTogether network and we reversed the order. And that's where our vision of a fully capable — and that's the key word — and employed

Racine County workforce came from. ... But really what it was about is ... creating economic mobility, or achieving system transformation to achieve an equitable outcome.”

Neubauer has been a leader in this work for a decade, serving as co-executive director of Higher Expectations, a nonprofit that serves as a backbone organization for this community-wide collective impact effort. Reflecting on progress and challenges, he offers the following:

“What happens in this work frequently is that most of the people who do this work, and who invest blood, sweat, and tears into it, are educators or social activists or social service folks. And they're great on the kindergarten readiness up through high school, and maybe into postsecondary, but many of them have never worked in a for-profit company. And they have a very different orientation than people who run those organizations. Sometimes it's different politics, sometimes it's just different views on what a performance-based organization looks like. In any case, that jump from the sixth outcome, secondary completion, to the seventh outcome, ‘employment on a path to self-sufficiency and economic mobility’ — that's a big jump. And that's where I spend the bulk of my time and where my passion resides”

Higher Expectations partners include a very supportive city mayor and county executive — public officials who Neubauer finds understand the issues and are committed, innovative, and willing to push the envelope. As with elsewhere in the state, county government has access to the most significant pool of resources through the county levy. Working with the county executive, Higher Expectations has taken on grade-level reading and birth-to-three literacy, creating a new strategic plan with the school district and integrating that plan with a new early learning initiative, all funded out of the county levy. Importantly, as Neubauer and leaders in Dane County all expressed, the collective impact model as originally conceived had a design flaw: It did not build community voice and power-sharing into the approach, and therefore does not sufficiently center issues of racial and social equity. To address this deficiency, a human-centered design process is now being used in this work, underwritten by county funding.

To move the needle on StriveTogether’s seventh outcome — “employment on a path to self-sufficiency and economic mobility” — Higher Expectations has found the work needs to rest on a metaphorical three-legged stool: child care, transportation, and job training and education, all brought to where people live, in ways that are understandable, and provided by people from the community who model job success. Neubauer goes on: “And the only way that I have seen that work ... is to have a success coach, a mentor, a guide — a person who works with a small cohort 10 to 20 people at a time and recruits them and brings them into the process and gets them to the places where they need to go.”

Generating interest in a nursing career, for example, is one step — but for participants to start to obtain the educational requirements likely involves enrolling in the local community college, and that is no small barrier. To do this effectively means to “take them down to Gateway Technical College, enroll them, and figure out all the nuances of how to get them their education at the least possible cost, which in their case would probably be free.” Pointing people to the college is not sufficient, Neubauer says. “Then they have to figure out how to do all that stuff while they’re trying to feed their kids, do their janitorial job, pay their bills, and everything else. And that’s a huge and complicated barrier. So, you need that function — that person who is in the existing system and can navigate for people and advocate and help them through the process.”

EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE A KIDIA BURNS

Kidia Burns works as a computer numerical control (CNC) operator at a local Racine company, Pioneer Products — a skilled job for which there are many open positions. An African-American woman and single mother of five children, Kidia now works as a Success Coach through county and Chamber of Commerce funding to recruit people from her community to become CNC operators. Jeff Neubauer, co-executive director of Higher Expectations, notes, “She does a pre-screening with them. Do you have child support issues? Okay, let’s go down to the court and talk to them about that. Do you have child care issues? Okay, let’s go talk about the childcare vouchers. Do you have transportation issues? Okay, well, if you don’t have a car, and the bus schedule doesn’t work we’ve got this Commute to Careers thing through the county ... and she’s got a whole list, right? And she goes through that with people to work that stuff out, and then she gives them tutoring before the 12-week program ever begins. And so, you need a Kidia — you need that person.”

KEY LEARNINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PATH FORWARD



ADVANCING CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING WITH 2GEN APPROACHES: SYSTEMS CHANGE STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS SYSTEMIC BARRIERS

On the journey to transform systems to achieve equitable child and family well-being, it is to be expected that barriers will emerge that slow or impede progress. Wisconsin leaders — including public sector officials, academics, nonprofit practitioners, members of the business community, and, crucially, families themselves — have identified and named key obstacles and have shown ingenuity, creativity, persistence, and resilience in generating strategies to move the work forward. The top systemic barriers identified cluster into four domains that help make clear where leverage points may be found to drive solutions.

LEVERAGE FEDERAL FUNDS TO RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Systemic Barriers:

- Acute statewide child care and housing shortage

Because the political dynamics at the Wisconsin State Capitol have made leveraging stable, ongoing state funding to address social issues extremely problematic, and because state agencies operate in the context of local control, local leaders must look for creative solutions to overcome these obstacles and drive systems change. To undertake 2Gen work with families that impacts one or more of the six domains of family well-being, Wisconsin state and county leaders have hit upon a strategy that pairs county leaders' deep knowledge and understanding of the communities they serve with state leaders' authority to fund pilot programs, often leveraging federal funds that do not require state legislative action to access and utilize. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, the federal government provided hundreds of billions of dollars in emergency funding for state, local, territorial, and tribal governments as part of the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), as well as through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. State government emergency funding was provided — with appropriate controls, and at the same time in such a

way as to provide significant flexibility — allowing state governments to use their knowledge and experience to best assist their communities as they recovered from the pandemic. The pandemic created extremely difficult conditions for Wisconsin families and for public agencies, jurisdictions, nonprofit organizations, and businesses. Governor Evers and Secretary Amundson leveraged these vital funds to build on DCF's practice of local piloting to seed innovation and emergent best practices, creating grant opportunities at the local level that could be used to meet whole family needs — and demonstrating what would be possible with permanent funding in a post-pandemic Wisconsin.

One example of this strategy is Partner Up — a grant program administered by DCF that, using COVID relief dollars, provided funding to support partnerships between existing regulated child care providers and businesses that would purchase child care slots for employees' young children. This infusion of funding stabilized child care providers, many of whom were at risk of closing their doors during the pandemic.²⁹ **Erin Arango-Escalante**, then-administrator for DCF's Division of Early Care and Education, describes what Partner Up was and the opportunity it presents for proof of concept in support of a permanent post-pandemic program:

“Partner Up is a huge opportunity that came out of [the Child Care division], where businesses were saying, ‘We’re having a hard time recruiting and retaining our workforce,’ ... whether it’s manufacturing, whether it’s a hospital — you name it — particularly in rural areas. And they said [they’re] finding that one of the big barriers to recruiting and retaining staff is child care. And so, based on conversations with a number of counties and municipalities, child care providers, employers, and parents, the state created a program ... where we used a combination of federal Preschool Development Grant dollars, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRRSA), [and] ARPA funding ... and created a \$22 million pilot program. ... The result was that the child care provider wins, because they’re getting

29 Partner Up! Grant Program. (2023). Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. <https://dcf.wisconsin.gov/childcare/projectgrowth/partner-up>



Eugene Crisler and Ascend's Wisconsin Parent Advisors at the 2024 Ascending in Wisconsin convening. Photo by RJ Harris Photography for Ascend at the Aspen Institute©

more tuition, the true cost of care, and the employer wins because they are able to recruit and retain employees. ... We're now capturing initial data where you begin to see an increase in recruitment and retention rates, an increase in productivity, a decrease in absenteeism, and an increase in morale. There's a ripple effect: The parent has stability in care for their child, the child is in high-quality care, the child care program will receive additional revenue, the educator may receive an increase in pay from the additional tuition collected, and the employer has a high-performing employee."

DCF also used federal COVID relief funding to push out economic supports to families experiencing domestic violence at a time when pandemic conditions narrowed options and increased stress and associated danger to children and adults. **Secretary Amundson** shares:

"When we had our COVID relief funding in domestic violence, most states just took that aid and pushed it out on the same categorical formula that was already baked into their system. It was just sort of 'hit the button, everybody gets an increase.' We used it as an opportunity. We knew that was a rare pot of money, where we did not have to ask anybody for permission to spend it. Usually,

we must go before our Joint Committee on Finance, and it becomes this big thing. ... So, we created a program that was absolutely 100% in philosophical alignment with our values to support the whole family when folks are experiencing their toughest day. And we had just an absolutely astounding uptake of 4,000 participants in that program within a month-long period of time. And that was just a jaw-dropping number for us."

DCF Policy Initiatives Advisor **Marianne Hirsch** provides key details about funding this innovative pandemic-related initiative:

"When [ARPA] established a new \$1 billion Pandemic Emergency Assistance Fund to assist needy families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the then-deputy division administrator, Janice Peters, solicited ideas from the [DCF] Division of Family and Economic Security and from the Division of Safety and Permanence on how we might use the funds. Most states infused existing programs with that money. The [federal] Administration of Children and Families awarded \$14.5 million of ARPA funding to us here in Wisconsin. So those of us who crafted ideas knew that we had \$14 million dollars to work with."

Hirsch recalls that she and a fellow DCF staffer each submitted a near-identical concept: “It was a cash assistance program for survivors of domestic violence, so they could either escape a violent situation or, if they were living in a shelter, use that cash assistance to help find safe and secure housing.” This proposal was accepted, and as a result the Living Independently through Financial Empowerment (LIFE) program was created “to help D.V. survivors who were seeking new and safe housing, whether they were in shelters, whether they needed to relocate, and also who were struggling to meet financial obligations, even to stay in their own homes.” Administered through the regional providers of W-2 (Wisconsin’s TANF program), LIFE provided help for eligible applicants who were in a qualifying domestic violence situation and had an income at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. The response was immediate and overwhelming. Ultimately, 4,000 participants each received three incremental cash payments totaling \$3,500.

Hirsch remembers, “Many legislators were asking, ‘How do we know how the money was used?’ We did track that. Funds were used for such things as utility bills, clothing, and security deposits. The vast majority, 89% of the monies collected by eligible applicants, was used for rent or housing. The LIFE initiative reflects Wisconsin’s commitment to two-generational approaches to the economic and housing needs of underserved populations.”

CENTER LIVED EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNITY VOICE

Systemic Barriers:

- Lack of root cause analysis and understanding of complex issues
- Persistent charity mindset
- Employer policies that impeded social and economic mobility

Two-generation approaches seek to achieve equitable outcomes for families, and this practice definitionally requires that families themselves, not bureaucracies, systems, or those with positional power, are at the center of the design of all programs and initiatives. **Secretary Amundson** is committed to this principle and to

ensuring that it is brought to life throughout DCF. She talks candidly about this journey and its importance: “We have developed over the last year and a half a new ... Parent and Caregiver Equity Advisory Cabinet. ... This is our attempt to really center the voices of parents and caregivers in conversations about the zero-to-five space. ... We’re starting to build this muscle. We’ve got, in two different divisions now, a person whose sole job it is to [support] folks with lived experiences, trying to knit them into more policymaking tables. We’ve been really proud over the last four years of bringing folks with lived experience much more tightly into our legislative process [and] cultivating folks who will testify, who will tell their stories, who will remain engaged in all of the legislation that’s coming out.”

Secretary Amundson describes this effort as:

... around appreciative listening, listening to people with experience as something that we’re really trying to build as a department, and yet I feel like we’re not there yet. We have a long way to go, I think, in really getting to that place where I feel like we are truly giving back more than we are getting. We have a liaison in our secretary’s office whose job is connecting in real, authentic ways with the community. And our Division of Safety and Permanence has somebody in the division administrator’s office whose title is “lived experience coordinator.”

During her time as division administrator of Early Care and Education, **Arango-Escalante** brought her own lived experience to this work. She describes it this way:

“I think from a cultural perspective ... it’s part of, actually, my identity... I found out that my family was from Puerto Rico in middle school. I didn’t know. I recognize [now] ... how we benefited from supports for my mom, my grandparents, and myself. We were part of what I would call a 2Gen program. My husband is first-generation, the first of his family born here from Colombia. When we met, I noticed how the family placed importance on their multigenerational connections — from great-great-grandchildren to great-great-grandparents. ... I’ve learned that the 2Gen concept is part of my lived experience and culture, and I bring these principles into my work.”

Arango-Escalante was instrumental in bringing the Parent and Caregiver Equity Advisory Cabinet into existence through DCF's Preschool Development Grant. Here, she speaks to the cabinet's purpose and process:

“The theory behind this particular cabinet is that you look at the data, and you find the communities that are furthest away from opportunity. Using qualitative and quantitative data, we were able to identify an urban and a rural and a tribal [community] to start with. And we, through a process, identified parents and caregivers, meaning caregivers such as those who are foster parents or grandparents, to join and really cultivate this small group from those communities to share their lived experience, focusing on themselves, their whole family, and also their children — specifically focusing on birth-to-five supports, programs, and services.

It's a cabinet of individuals with great expertise. The cabinet meets quarterly with the DCF secretary and other team members, and their goal is to be an advisor and to connect within their community on key issues they are facing. So, we have one-on-one coaches for each member, pay them \$50 an hour for their expertise, and eliminate any barriers so each member can fully participate. As part of the process, each cabinet member facilitates community conversations and brings information back to the cabinet – it's a feedback loop. Essentially, DCF receives information that directly impacts policymaking from cabinet members that is inclusive of their communities' ideas.”

REMOVE ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS TO EQUITABLE 2GEN APPROACHES

Systemic Barriers:

- Siloed programs and funding streams

DCF takes seriously the importance of identifying and removing any barriers that exist to the provision of whole family services and supports in agency administrative rules or processes and looks at those barriers using an equity lens. Perhaps the best recent example is the agency's work to address inequities in its procurement process. Division Administrator for Safety and

Permanence **Wendy Henderson** describes the barrier and the work to mitigate it this way:

“Through my division, we provide funding to a large range of service providers. We don't just do child welfare — we have domestic violence grantees, and runaway and homeless youth, and all different types of programs. As we think about incorporating more programs that look like the people we're trying to serve, more community-based organizations that are smaller organizations, what we require from a state procurement perspective is really at odds with what we're looking for from a community-based organization. So, we've got a big effort underway here with our Division of Management Services to try to streamline the process, which we've been able to do in some circumstances. We've moved to streamlined applications [in the RFP process] where we can [and] we've been really ruthless in looking at how much we're asking people to produce in terms of documents. You know, there have been periods of time where we're asking for the same volume of writing for a \$50,000 grant as we do for a \$5 million grant, which should never be the case. Those are the kinds of things that can happen in state government when we are really focused on [looking through] an equity lens.”

LOOK TO CONSERVATIVE STATES FOR MODELS OF WHOLE FAMILY APPROACHES TO GARNER LEGISLATIVE SUPPORT

Systemic Barriers:

- State and legislative gridlock and impact on funding levels
- Divisive public discourse around words and concepts
- County innovation is hard to scale

As a former state legislator and party chair, Higher Expectations' **Jeff Neubauer** brings extensive experience and expertise to the work of influencing policymakers in the current environment.

In his work to move 2Gen policy and create conditions that enable economic mobility, Neubauer takes the approach of looking to select states with unified Republican control:



Durrell Davis, an Ascend Parent Advisor, and his family.

“There are a bunch of states south of the Mason-Dixon line who are really focused on economic growth and who are taking the so-called “talent gap” really seriously, and who have major issues with growing economic sectors that can’t find employees — and who are doing all manner of innovative things. And it kills me to realize that Wisconsin now needs to learn lessons from Texas and Tennessee and Mississippi on [an issue like] reading. But they have unified Republican control, and when the business community comes to them and says, ‘Hey, we’ve got a problem here because we can’t get people to work in our oil and gas industry in Houston,’ the Republican legislators and governor go, ‘What do you want us to do?’ And when they come forward with some good ideas that would sound like radical, crazy progressive ideas ... they’re like, ‘This would be good for business.’

I have this construct ... if you are dealing in a lot of the purple states: ... If you’re pitching the Democrats in that state, bring the stuff from Minnesota. If you’re pitching the Republicans, bring the stuff from Texas and Mississippi and Tennessee. And very often it’s the same thing — no single state has a unique corner on what’s working and what isn’t, because no one’s really figured out the answers to all these questions. ...Then, when it comes to places like Wisconsin, the key thing is orienting the pitch and bringing the examples from a state or a

source that the person you’re talking to would be more inclined to listen to. [In Wisconsin], if it comes from Texas or Mississippi, and I can bring business people and legislators from Texas up here to say, ‘Hey, check this out, this is really good,’ then they might be open to it.

But then the fundamental message is that it’s about economic growth. It’s about economic prosperity, it’s about economic mobility, depending upon who you’re talking to. Meeting the needs of business or meeting the needs of underserved communities. And we’re in this incredibly challenging but incredibly fortuitous time where it’s no longer the case that for-profit entities or not-for-profit entities that have to really have a bottom line, like a hospital system, do better by squeezing down wages and abusing employees. That does not help — in fact, it undermines the bottom line.”

While Neubauer’s illustrations focus on advancing legislation related to workforce issues, the lesson arguably applies across the range of 2Gen policy issues. Innovation occurs everywhere, as the work in Wisconsin itself illustrates, and Wisconsin advocates in conservative communities can gain traction for legislation that enables whole family practice by seeking out and lifting up examples from states tackling the issue in question within a similar political context.

REFLECTIONS ON THE NEXT PHASE OF THE 2GEN JOURNEY IN WISCONSIN



Credit: Wisconsin Technical College System.

Secretary Amundson shared how she sees the future of 2Gen in Wisconsin and what the next phase of the journey for whole family work will look like. She began her reflections by using one of the 2Gen programs featured here, Targeted Safety Support Funding (TSSF), as an example:

“We proposed General Purpose Revenue funding for ... TSSF, and it was stripped from the budget. So, we know already that they will not be funding [TSSF] with GPR dollars. We’re already talking about how we can build, through county examples, a coalition of folks from across the aisle that can really help legislators understand what this program looks like in operation, and the cost savings. ... I think it’s actually outside of [budget-setting] times — it’s when folks stop being so hyper-partisan — that I think we get to work on spotlighting local examples and trying to build coalitions around some particular programs. I have a lot of hope for standalone legislation over the next two years that might push us a little bit further into programs that support families. I think that there is some good bipartisan work we can do.”

Secretary Amundson sees especially bright possibilities for building support for family-friendly workplace practices that use 2Gen approaches and offer employers a competitive advantage in a tight employment market:

“This conversation about how we support young families to make sure that our local economies are strong and robust is, in essence, a whole family strategy. If we subsidize the cost of child care for young working families that are above the federal poverty line, but maybe struggling with keeping two members of the workforce in work status because child care is so expensive — if there’s an appetite for that, ... I’m hopeful that might also be a place where we can continue to work. There’s some fertile ground around building family-friendly workplaces that I find really exciting. I feel like I’ve heard from so many

businesses across the state that in this tight economy, the way that they win on competition for high-quality employees is to offer family-friendly policies. And it’s like, ‘Yes, that’s awesome. So, your employees are people — they’re real people from real families.’ And when you think about them in that context, investing in a health clinic onsite, investing in child care or dependent care expense reimbursement, or a transportation voucher... These things become good ideas, because they help you keep your people.”

Leaders within DCF see the impact of Secretary Amundson’s leadership on 2Gen as permeating the agency. Looking across the agency from her position in the Senior Management and Operations Office, senior manager **Margaret McMahon** makes this observation:

“[It’s] from the Secretary’s Office across the agency, Child Support being a perfect example. ... The Secretary and I are going out to visit some child support agencies next week, [including] ... Monroe County, [and] they want to highlight their whole family approach to providing Child Support services. ... And then from the Child Welfare arena, they’re always talking about a whole family approach, keeping kids in the home. I think it’s very clear the momentum is there. Everyone is thinking through or looking at their programs through that lens.”

Addressing the question from her role leading Safety and Permanency, **Wendy Henderson** sees promise — in the years of practice the agency has now had with whole family approaches, and also in the ways access to technology can enable the provision of holistic supports statewide:

“I think the promise is that we are having lots of small successes across the state in so many different programs. Keeping kids with their families, making sure that we’re providing some additional support. So, whereas 10 years ago, our first instinct in the child welfare system was to remove a child and then try to work towards whatever we could do to bring them back, it’s not the first instinct anymore. We have a lot more practice working with kids in their homes and in their families. A lot of the virtual service provision is going to be really incredibly important for families, particularly in our rural areas. And, if we can get them better infrastructure, internet, that sort of thing, because we are able to take some of the “economies of scale” of service provision that used to only be available in large cities, and bring that to rural America, [that] is going to be a real game changer. ... When you think about wrapping services into a family, that’s been a real challenge. And most of Wisconsin is rural, so that’s something we’ve been thinking a lot about. And I think that really leads into the 2Gen approach of not needing to pull apart the family to serve them and then put them back together. I think we’re getting a little bit better about that, and I’m really hopeful for the future.”

The journey to honor, support, and derive inspiration from the interdependence of Wisconsin families continues, forging a path forward.

APPENDICES



Attendees ask questions at the 2024 Ascending in Wisconsin convening. Photo by RJ Harris Photography for Ascend at the Aspen Institute©

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. The conclusions drawn in this case study do not necessarily reflect those of interview subjects.

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Wisconsin Department of
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APPENDIX B

Ascend Network Partners In Wisconsin

ACELERO LEARNING

FAMILY VALUES @ WORK

HIGHER EXPECTATIONS FOR RACINE COUNTY

NEXT DOOR

SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

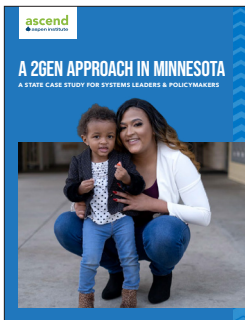
UNITED WAY OF DANE COUNTY

UNITED WAY OF PORTAGE COUNTY

WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM

APPENDIX C

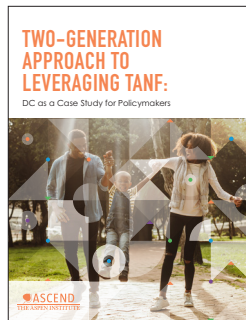
Ascend 2Gen Case Studies



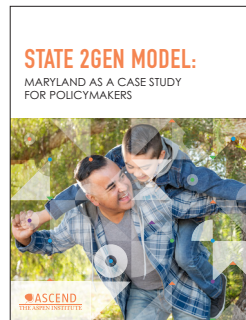
[A 2Gen Approach in Minnesota: A State Case Study for Systems Leaders & Policymakers](#)



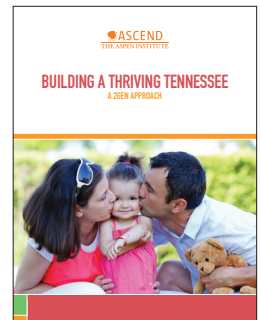
[State Human Services Model: Colorado as a Case Study for Policymakers](#)



[Two-Generation Approach to Leveraging TANF: DC as a Case Study for Policymakers](#)



[State 2Gen Model: Maryland as a Case Study for Policymakers](#)



[Building a Thriving Tennessee: A 2Gen Approach](#)



Ascend at the Aspen Institute is a catalyst and convener for diverse leaders working across systems and sectors to build intergenerational family prosperity and well-being by intentionally focusing on children and the adults in their lives together. We believe in the power of co-creation. We are a community of leaders – well-connected, well-prepared, and well-positioned – to build the political will that transforms hearts, minds, policies, and practices.

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