
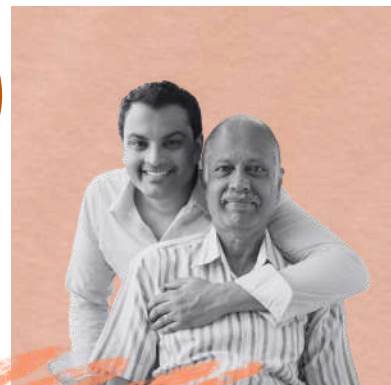


September 2025

CULTIVATING SYSTEMS CHANGE THROUGH DIRECT SERVICE

The power of service-advocacy
organizations working with families



Prepared by Innovation Network
Kayla Boisvert
Cory Georgopoulos
Rebecca Perlmutter

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was led by Innovation Network. The report was written by Kayla Boisvert (research lead and independent consultant), Rebecca Perlmutter, and Cory Georgopoulos. Virginia Roncaglione (independent consultant) advised on the project. The research team had significant support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the research advisory committee:

- **Miranda Yates, Trene Hawkins, Jeanette Elstein, and Christine Fu**, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- **Dionne Dobbins**, Start Early
- **Khadijah Williams and Helah Robinson**, LIFT
- **Juliana Esguerra**, Hispanic Unity of Florida
- **Rima Meroueh**, ACCESS
- **Marjorie Sims**, Ascend at the Aspen Institute

The research team is grateful for the contributions of many experts who shared their insights and supported the research. See [Appendix B](#) for a list of participants who contributed to this report, as well as the [exploratory report](#) and [executive summary](#) for a list of those who contributed at the inception of this project.

This research also led to the development of several other resources (see [project website](#)):

- Family-Serving Organizations doing Systems and Policy Change Work: [Exploratory Report](#) and [Executive Summary](#)
- [From Service to Systems: A Model for Hybrid Organizations Building Power](#)
- [Amplifying Parent Voice and Priorities in Systems and Policy Change: A Snapshot about LIFT](#)
- [Implementing a Guaranteed Income Pilot in Baltimore to Improve the Lives of Young Families: A Snapshot about CASH Campaign of Maryland](#)
- [Convening Across Sectors to Solve the Benefits Cliff in Tennessee: A Snapshot about The Martha O'Bryan Center](#)

Preferred citation:

Boisvert, K., Georgopoulos, C., & Perlmutter, R. (2025). Cultivating Systems Change through Direct Service: The Power of Service-Advocacy Organizations Working with Families. Innovation Network.

Funding:

This study was commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

A THRIVING ECOSYSTEM

What we've discovered is that when you build the right relationship between a policy advocacy group and an organizing-service group, they can have a symbiosis that makes each stronger than they would be separately.

– Interview with systems change leader



A vibrant and thriving systems and policy change ecosystem requires the convergence of a diversity of people, organizations, and ideas. **This includes family-serving organizations (FSOs) that integrate their missions of providing direct service to address families' immediate needs and catalyzing broader, long-term changes to ensure that systems and policies equitably support and uplift them.** These service-advocacy hybrid FSOs have a unique role to play in fostering connections between families and systems change leaders given their longstanding relationships with communities, their deep systems and policy expertise, and their holistic approach to service.

These service-advocacy hybrid FSOs and the families they work with are engaging

in systems and policy change through a broad range of activities to influence legislation, regulations, policy, practices, funding, relationships, power dynamics, narratives, mental models, and behaviors of key actors in the ecosystem.

And they are having a tremendous impact. They are catalyzing funding and policy changes, increasing visibility and sparking dialogue on key issues, and fostering relationships between diverse partners. They bring a nuanced understanding of how policies and systems are affecting families and how they can be improved, and they translate that in a way that reaches decisionmakers. **Importantly, they shift the balance of power within the ecosystem so that families' experiences and voices lead the change process.**

BRINGING SERVICE AND ADVOCACY TOGETHER

Organizations with a mission of delivering services to communities have long been involved in catalyzing systems and policy change. In fact, many organizations view this work as an essential ‘service’ they provide to their families. Systems and policy change can mean a range of activities to influence legislation, regulations, policy, practices, funding, relationships, power dynamics, narratives, mental models, and behaviors of key actors in the ecosystem. When defined broadly, the majority of ‘service’ organizations (50% to 95%, depending on the study) engage in different forms of systems and policy change work. (For more background on direct service organizations’ engagement in advocacy, see our [exploratory report](#) for this research).

Likewise, some **systems change leaders—like funders, traditional advocacy organizations, decisionmakers, and others—have been supporting direct service organizations to do systems and policy change work for a long time.** One systems change leader explained that their organization launched a program specifically to fund joint work between policy and grassroots organizations, in response to noticing that traditional policy groups are often disconnected from the communities impacted by the policies they are advocating for. Several systems change leaders we spoke to explained that supporting FSO systems and policy change work is often an integral part of their vision and approach to supporting communities. They do so in order to gain better insight into and address communities’ needs, believing that joint work between policy and grassroots organizations amplifies impact and builds power. They provide funding and technical assistance, and they facilitate connections with decisionmakers. They see their own limitations inherent to their positions within the ecosystem, and they appreciate the expertise that communities and organizations with lived experience bring to the table.



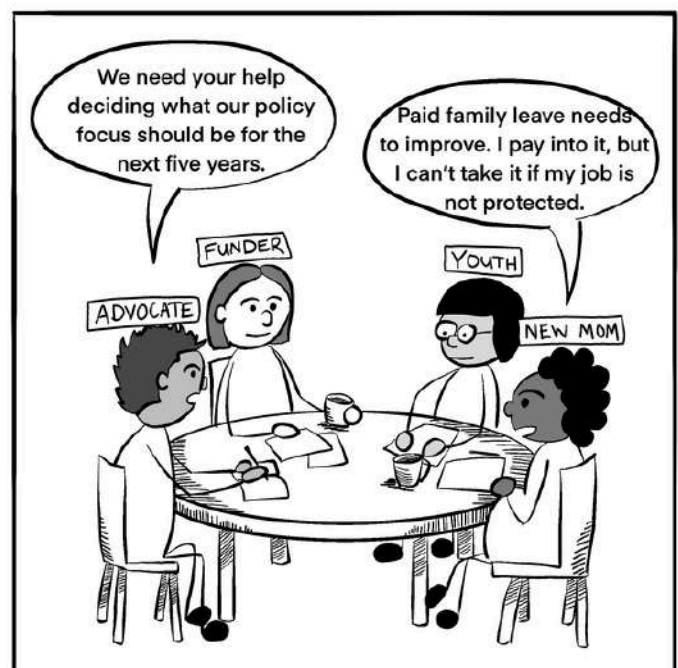
We were often not invited to the table. And then we thought, 'You know what? We're going to build our own table.' And that, I think, is indicative of the fact that you're not taken seriously.

– Interview with FSO leader

Despite FSOs' longstanding engagement in the systems and policy change ecosystem, they often feel tokenized, overlooked, and undervalued by other systems change leaders, like funders, traditional advocacy organizations, decisionmakers, and others. FSOs share that they have not been credited properly for their work, have been excluded from the proverbial 'table', and have faced funding restrictions or limitations for their systems and policy change work.

There is a need to create the conditions for FSOs and their family partners to be able to participate fully, to ensure a vibrant and thriving systems and policy change ecosystem. This means that traditional power holders in those spaces should critically examine their assumptions and roles, and better follow the lead of families and those closest to them.

Tokenization or partnership in policy advocacy?





THE RESEARCH

This report is the culmination of a two-year research project funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that aims to **shift mindsets and narratives around FSOs' expertise and role in policy and systems change work**. This research is based on the assumption that FSOs are well-placed to advocate for systems and policy change that better meets the needs of and represents the lived experience of families given their direct connections through their services and programming.

The primary research shared in this report—which builds on a [literature review and exploratory interviews](#)—takes an appreciative inquiry and storytelling approach that centers the expertise of leaders of FSOs, their partners, and the families and parents they work with. Between February and June 2025, we collected stories of successful examples of systems and policy changes that 15 different FSOs contributed to. We asked about the problems they were addressing, how they catalyzed change, who they partnered with, and how they centered families.

We dove deeper on these success stories in three organization snapshots: [LIFT](#), [CASH Campaign of Maryland](#), and [Martha O'Bryan Center](#). And we supplemented the FSO research with interviews with five systems change leaders who contributed reflections on how they and their peers can better support the full participation of FSOs in the ecosystem. For a full methodology and list of participants, see [Appendix A](#) and [Appendix B](#).

In the first section of this report, we describe the myriad systems and policy changes that FSOs contributed to. In the second section, we illustrate four approaches that describe different ways service-advocacy hybrid FSOs are catalyzing these changes. In the third section, we examine the conditions necessary for achieving these successes. Finally, we pose a set of questions for systems change leaders who want to more meaningfully partner with FSOs and center the families they work with to catalyze family-centric changes.

CATALYZING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

We are unique in our model. We do have a tight blend in how our organization is structured. We represent individuals and have community advocates. This informs the deep policy and advocacy work we do. This blend is something unique we contribute. A lot of organizations only do one or the other. We are able to ensure they inform each other.

– Interview with FSO leader

FSOs are deeply connected to the communities that they work with. Many are led and staffed by people from those same communities. They engage with families as a unit, within wider systems. They are often family-centric, rather than issue-centric, meaning they take a holistic approach to harnessing the strengths and addressing the needs of families.

Service-advocacy hybrid FSOs intentionally create information sharing channels between their service and advocacy functions, often seeing the two as mutually reinforcing and critical to helping families build the lives they want. **This is what makes FSOs so effective at catalyzing systems and policy changes led by families themselves.**

FSOs have catalyzed significant changes in a wide array of sectors important to families, including childcare, education,

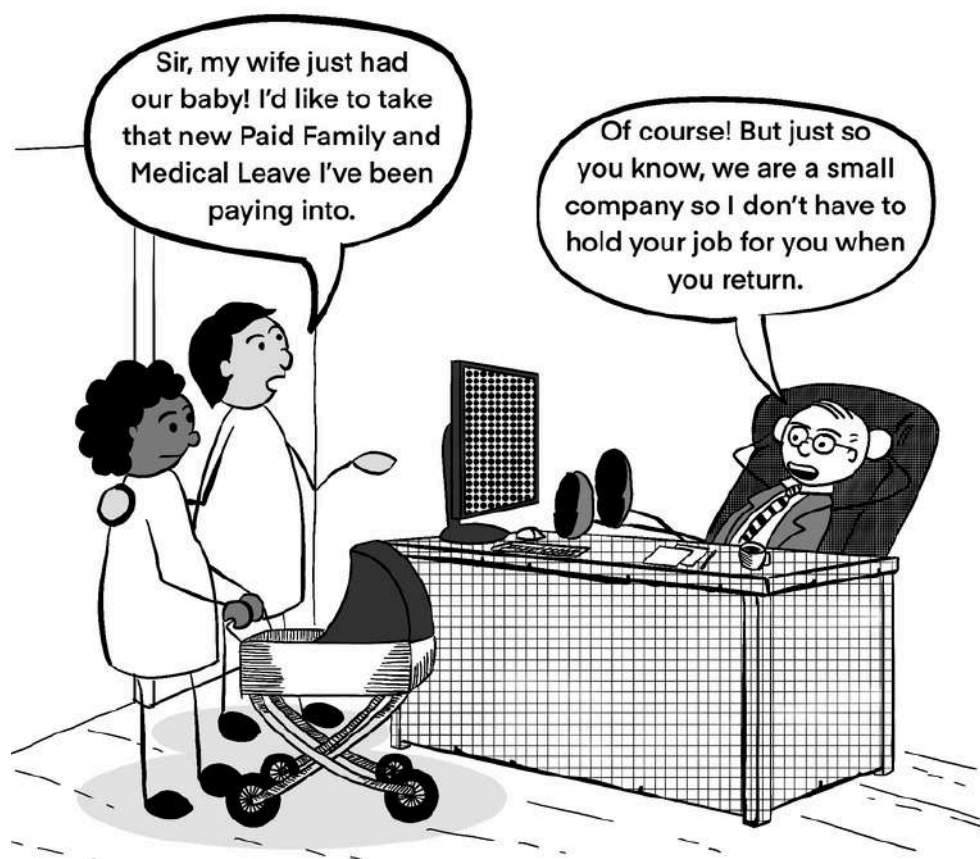
employment, housing, food security, immigration, family and medical leave policies, tax policy, civic engagement, and more. Many FSOs have successfully advocated for programs, policy, legislation, and funding for cash-based assistance like guaranteed income or expanded provision of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Child Tax Credit. They contributed to all types of systems and policy change successes, from shifting narratives and mindsets to improving and informing policy implementation. And these changes have led to direct impacts for families, including increased access to services or benefits, a sense of connection and community, and important outcomes like increased financial security, decreased student withdrawal rates from higher education, and more.

FAMILY-CENTRIC POLICY CHANGES

The FSOs we interviewed shared numerous legislative and policy ‘wins’ that they contributed to. But most important is the way that these wins **truly reflect the needs and desires that families themselves express and ensure that systems equitably serve families**, especially those that are most often marginalized by the systems they are embedded in.

We are day-to-day hearing from low-paid workers on our helplines, through our clinics. And we’re hearing patterns and trends and stories of families left out of employment protections, paid leave, etc. Or in theory they’re covered, but they face huge barriers in accessing those rights. It’s an important missing piece to amplify those stories, inform policy change, fill those gaps. That feedback loop is an important piece of work.

– Interview with FSO leader



FSOs have made significant contributions to:



Expanding inclusion criteria for benefits and protections

One FSO worked to expand the definition of ‘family’ in Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) policies—from only nuclear families to chosen families. One FSO helped ensure immigrant families were able to receive the Child Tax Credit, while another helped expand eligibility for job protected leave. Another FSO helped pass the Pregnant Workers’ Fairness Act, which expands existing protections to require accommodations for pregnant people.



Expanding duration and amount of public benefits

Several FSOs contributed to expanding the duration and amount of the Child Tax Credit, while another helped to increase income replacement from 60% to 90% for PFML.



Improving administration of policies

One FSO contributed to changes that allowed families to apply for PFML benefits and disability benefits in advance of beginning leave, so they would begin receiving payments at the start of their leave and wouldn’t experience a gap in their income.



Addressing loss of benefits and the ‘benefits cliff’

Several FSOs addressed the ‘benefits cliff’—the loss of benefits when people find employment or increase their income. One FSO also helped to remove employment requirements that caused people to lose Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits when they lost their job. Another organization helped eliminate ‘asset limits’, which prevented families from saving money during tax time because they would lose public benefits if their assets grew greater than \$2,000.



Aligning policies with their equity goals

One FSO aligned a job protection policy with PFML so that people who took leave were able to return to their jobs. Another made changes to the national census so that Middle Eastern or North African was listed as a separate race category. A third shaped recommendations to inform rate reimbursement and requirements for childcare to ensure it is inclusive of the needs of low-income families, families of color, and immigrant families.



Maintaining and increasing funding

Several FSOs worked on funding. One worked to prevent cuts to the Emergency Rental Assistance Program, while another sought to prevent reductions to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. At least two FSOs contributed to moving funding to affordable childcare, including by proposing higher tax rates.



Strengthening local and institutional policy

While many of the FSOs worked on state and federal policy, some of the FSOs also worked to change policy at the local and institutional level. One FSO worked to ensure students could receive college credit, even if they hadn't passed standardized testing, while another co-sponsored a bill to get priority class registration for student parents in higher education due to their different scheduling needs. One FSO worked to unanimously pass a community ID program so immigrant residents could have an ID card.



ENSURING PAID LEAVE BENEFITS REACH EVERYONE

In 2002, California became the first state to enact a Paid Family Leave Program (implemented in 2004), allowing employees to take several weeks off and receive a percentage of their income while bonding with a new baby and/or caregiving for a seriously ill family member. Despite the state being on the cutting edge of PFML, throughout its implementation there have been certain gaps identified that fail to reach those who need it most. [Legal Aid at Work](#), a non-profit legal services organization that supports low-income families in California, heard through their legal helplines that employees of midsize and smaller companies—disproportionately people of color and low-wage workers—were not guaranteed to have their jobs protected while on leave. Oftentimes, when they tried to take time off to bond with a new baby or provide caregiving, they were fired or told there was no work for them when they tried to return. Legal Aid at Work worked with families, policymakers, and other partners to expand eligibility for job protected leave. In 2020, the legislature passed SB 1383, which lowered the employee threshold for job-protected leave from 50+ employees to only 5+ employees, resulting in 6 million more Californians having access to job-protected family leave.

SHIFTING NARRATIVES + INCREASING VISIBILITY

FSOs shared many examples where they contributed to shifting narratives and increasing visibility of key issues that families care about and are affected by. This was often done by sharing successes of policy changes or program outcomes. By shifting narratives, FSOs also hope to contribute to further policy changes on wider scales.

In many cases, FSOs helped to increase awareness among families about issues that affect them. One FSO increased public awareness of eligibility to receive the Child Tax Credit among people who don't file taxes through campaigns, roll outs, translations, and websites. Other FSOs raised awareness of immigrant rights, the importance of voting and of representation in the Census, and fostering a post-secondary and college-going mindset among high-school students.

FSOs also raised awareness of issues among government officials and other institutions and organizations. For example, one FSO helped shift the mindset of a local housing authority towards a greater focus on equity when redeveloping public housing.

FSOs also raised the profile of issues that are important to families at the regional or national level, based on their work at the local level. Several FSOs that focused on guaranteed income or other forms of cash-based assistance not only supported programming and policy in their city or state but took what they learned to spark interest from funders, media, and government on a larger scale, contributing to national dialogue.





SHIFTING NATIONAL NARRATIVES ABOUT WHAT MAKES A 'FAMILY'

In 2016, [A Better Balance](#), a national organization that promotes family justice in the workplace, and its many partners started winning a 'model definition' of family across PFML and other paid leave laws across the nation. This meant expanding how family was defined, from the outdated stereotype of the nuclear family to a more inclusive and realistic definition that includes extended relatives, domestic partners, and chosen family. The use of an inclusive definition of family in 15 state and local paid sick time laws and 7 state PFML laws over the last ten years were all tremendous wins.

But those wins also represent a larger narrative shift that recognizes and appreciates the diversity of what today's families actually look like in the legal

sense. The narrative shift took off in LGBTQ rights spaces, and it brought in diverse perspectives on the need for inclusive family definitions across movements and sectors: disability rights, criminal justice, domestic violence, immigration, women's rights, reproductive justice, racial justice, and more. To prompt public discussion and recognition of the many forms families can take, A Better Balance intentionally combined their policy and legal work (providing legal support and drafting language for legislation, generating research and talking points, etc.) with narrative change work, dedicating the resources and time to uplift stories of families of all shapes and sizes in meaningful ways and bridging conversations across different movements and sectors.

An inclusive definition of 'family' in Paid Family and Medical Leave means:



CONNECTING FAMILIES + DECISIONMAKERS

Several FSOs shared examples where a key outcome of their systems and policy change work was **strengthening relationships between key decisionmakers and families affected by the issues**. As one organization explained, a key factor in successfully passing a community ID program was the support of the county commissioner. A favorable political environment and support of key leaders is an important condition in achieving changes that benefit families. It is often necessary to bridge the divide between those leaders and the families their policies will impact.

For some FSOs, this was achieved by strengthening the skills of families to advocate for themselves and participate in systems and policy change work directly. Two FSOs we interviewed have been building parent fellows/parent leaders. The FSOs helped parents increase their capacity to share their own stories and advocate for policy change that matters to them.

For others, this meant bringing key systems actors together with families, to learn from and support each other, through testifying at hearings or in meetings or conferences. One FSO hosted a national conference to bring industry leaders together with student parents to ideate new ways to accelerate economic mobility for families. Several FSOs held meetings with policymakers so parents could directly share their own stories, and families were engaged within coalitions or speaking at rallies. Several of the FSOs we spoke to also removed barriers to participating in these direct conversations with decisionmakers by covering costs of attending conferences, providing childcare, and facilitating introductions.

Several funders and systems change leaders we interviewed emphasized that when FSOs brought families together with decisionmakers, they were able to shift their mindsets, including helping them see the importance of hearing directly from families themselves.



While I really do think the policy expertise from dealing with people is the top FSO strength, they also have an ability to bring people to the table who otherwise don't get in the room.

– Interview with systems change leader



BRINGING PARENTS + EDUCATION LEADERS TOGETHER

Parenting college students typically have few opportunities to connect with the people who are making decisions that affect their lives. Likewise, few higher education institutions specifically track data on student parents, resulting in a lack of understanding of their needs. As a result, the policies and structures that govern student life do not adequately address the particular issues that student parents face in their educational pursuits.

In 2024, [Generation Hope](#), a nonprofit providing direct support and national advocacy and research for student parents in college, sought to change this by organizing HOPE 2024, a conference where student parents could come together with higher education leaders, policymakers, nonprofits, and funders to share about their experiences and the challenges they faced. Generation Hope wanted to create a space where these different groups could connect and collaborate on solutions to address challenges and barriers that student parents face while getting a degree. The conference itself was designed with student parent interests and accessibility in mind. An advisory committee of student parents weighed in on discussion topics and identified barriers to attendance.

This work also strengthens Generation Hope's FamilyU program, which provides technical assistance by connecting student parents with education leaders to drive systems change at colleges and universities nationwide. Due to the success of the inaugural conference,

Generation Hope continues to organize the event annually, emphasizing the relationships that are built in the space and the growing influence of student parents in shaping higher education.

Similarly, [Educare](#), a network of schools offering early childhood care and education, wanted to better engage and build the leadership of the parents involved with their network of schools so that they could participate in policy work and have their interests and priorities centered in the conversation on early childhood. To accomplish this, Educare along with partners designed and hosted the Parent Ambassador Institute, where participating parents could learn about the legislative process, advocacy, and connect with policymakers. In 2023, parent ambassadors were able to meet Head Start leadership to advocate for the expansion of eligibility for programs, better resources for kids with special needs, and give feedback on various Head Start regulations.



HOW FSOs CATALYZE CHANGE

From the start we've been clear that direct service is never going to be enough. Real change requires systems and policy change.

– Interview with FSO leader

Some FSOs have integrated their service and advocacy missions since the start of their organization, while for others this is new. But for all of the FSOs we spoke to, systems and policy change is an essential 'service' to improve families' lives.

MOTIVATIONS

One major motivation for FSOs engaging in systems and policy change work is that they closely witness the effects of systems on families. Policies can be good in theory, but in implementation, there may be certain provisions that bake in inequities. Because FSOs hear directly from families, they can spot these problems.

FSOs also recognize that meeting families' needs requires changing the systems they live in. FSOs feel they can have greater impact for a wider population through systems and policy change, compared to only providing a direct

service. One FSO leader explained that focusing on direct service only is like running in a hamster wheel. But beginning to do systems and policy change work disrupts that cycle and allows them to catalyze broader changes that improve families' experiences.

Finally, FSOs notice the absence of certain communities, populations, and organizations at the systems and policy 'table'. They are motivated to engage in that work because they recognize their own ability to bridge the gap. They can bring family experiences, voices, and ideas about what works, why, and how.

To continue to serve families without engaging in systems and policy change work would feel like running in a hamster wheel.

– Interview with FSO leader



SERVICE-ADVOCACY HYBRID APPROACHES

FSOs are engaging in systems and policy change in many ways. The changes they have contributed to—in policy, legislation, implementation, funding, shifting narratives, strengthening relationships, and more—were enabled by being hybrid organizations that intentionally bring their direct service and systems and policy work into conversation in different ways. **The hybrid model allows them to make important contributions that likely wouldn't be possible without both aspects.**

We've identified four main approaches FSOs take to make systems and policy change that is deeply informed by and connected to their direct service work with families. All of the FSOs we spoke to used multiple approaches, and the approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather help to describe the varied ways organizations may engage in this work.

Our former CEO saw an opportunity... that service organizations were constantly responding to changes in policy. So, people lost access to health insurance, and the nonprofits that do direct service had to support families through that. His goal was that as organizations that are not only seeing the impact that policies have on people, but also as having to address those needs, they are actually best placed to advocate with community members as opposed to for community members.

– Interview with FSO leader

Hybrid organizations:



AMPLIFY families' voices through their platform and engage them deeply in the advocacy process in non-tokenistic ways.



CONVENE families and other advocacy actors to work toward shared goals.



ACCELERATE solutions for the issues families face, ensuring uptake of policies, programs, and narrative change; generate and leverage insights.



EDUCATE to strengthen the capacity of families to engage in the advocacy process, as well as other organizations' ability to understand families' issues.

READ MORE





AMPLIFYING FAMILIES' VOICES

FSOs that use their platform to amplify family voices deeply engage families before, during, and after their systems and policy change work. This may include:

- **Listening to family priorities** and stated needs and assets. They may do this by co-building advocacy agendas, conducting surveys and focus groups, and hearing directly from families through the direct services they provide, for example, through helplines.
- **Building families' capacity to advocate for themselves.** FSOs also bring families together with decisionmakers so they can tell their own stories, for example, by providing testimony at events.
- **Elevating families stories** through media, providing platforms for families to provide testimony, and bringing families in direct contact with systems change leaders, for example in national conferences.
- **Helping families reach out, engage, and educate** their own networks of other families.
- **Keeping parents in the loop** long after parent engagement to understand how they continue to be impacted, to gather feedback, and to share progress with them.





CENTERING PARENT VOICES IN SYSTEMS AND POLICY CHANGE

LIFT, a nonprofit that seeks to break the cycle of poverty for families, has always centered its programmatic work on the parents and families it serves, their needs, and the goal of empowering them to achieve their financial goals. When LIFT decided to pursue policy and systems change in addition to their service work, they turned to the people who would be most impacted by their advocacy—their parent members.

To draft their inaugural policy agenda, LIFT conducted a listening tour with members across their sites. The tour involved first an educational component to familiarize members with the policymaking process. Then, based on their new knowledge and lived experiences, members were asked to prioritize issues and solutions they cared about and wanted LIFT to focus on in their advocacy.

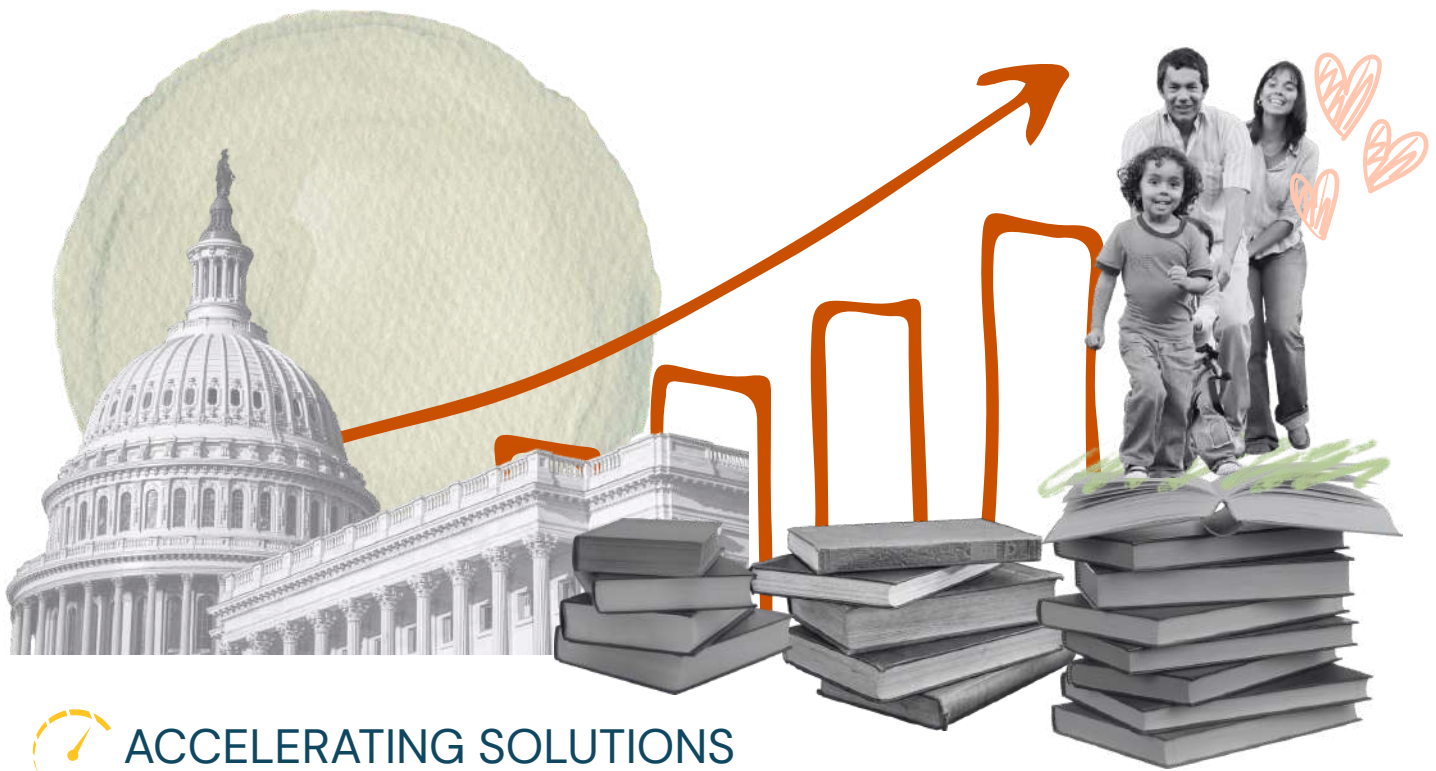
Once their agenda was set and LIFT better understood their members' priorities, they tested pursuing these priorities in a concrete setting. In DC, they asked members what they wanted LIFT to focus

on, and members cited a proposed District Child Tax Credit bill that would provide families with children under the age of 6 with a tax credit that would translate into additional cash every year. LIFT began advocating for this proposed policy, working with its members, training them, and connecting them with decisionmakers to share their experiences. At every step, members were centered in the work.

As a result, the DC Child Tax Credit was included in the city's 2025 budget, but much more was achieved through LIFT's work. Members who contributed to the campaign built self-efficacy and confidence in policy spaces, many of them continuing on to work for change in other issue areas. While the Child Tax Credit is now under threat due to the federal climate, members continue to advocate with LIFT, now for the re-establishment of the Child Tax Credit and for the inclusion of optional coaching in the bill and others like it.

READ MORE





ACCELERATING SOLUTIONS

FSOs that accelerate solutions implement policies and legislation and prioritize learning from that implementation. They use their insights to shift narratives, increase visibility, and bring people together to share experiences, all in service of greater and more sustainable uptake of family-centric policies, legislation, and programs. This may include:

- **Implementing innovative pilot programs.** When new policies are being considered, or are just beginning to be rolled out, FSOs may act as implementing partners or administrators for the pilot of the program. They may co-design the pilot in partnership with families to ensure it meets their needs. They may also partner with other organizations in the ecosystem to roll out the program. Some FSOs may pilot innovative ways of using existing policy and infrastructure to deliver a new program or benefit.
- **Generating evidence and gathering insights** about how policies, legislation, and programs are impacting families. When FSOs conduct a pilot program, they gather valuable insights into how the program should be designed and improvements needed along the way. They also gather information (often through research studies) about a range of outcomes families experience.
- **Leveraging evidence and insights to advocate** for sustainable and long-term uptake of the policies and programs in the places where they implemented the pilot. They also use their learnings to promote uptake in other geographies or at scale and engage with implementers of other pilots to advocate for this uptake.



INTEGRATING LEARNING INTO A GUARANTEED INCOME PILOT IN BALTIMORE

From 2022–2024, the City of Baltimore (The Mayor’s Office of Children and Family Success), [CASH Campaign of Maryland](#), Mayors for a Guaranteed Income, and other partners implemented a city-wide guaranteed income pilot in Baltimore. They are now using the learnings to improve benefits support policies and programs in Baltimore and beyond. CASH Campaign of Maryland, a nonprofit that promotes economic advancement for low-to-moderate income individuals and families, the City of Baltimore, and partners envisioned an opportunity to create a more resilient economy and financial stability for families in Baltimore City. They also hoped that by implementing a pilot program, they would gather insights to contribute to a revolution in guaranteed income across the nation. They are taking the learnings from the pilot and applying them to other cash-related programs to make the case that people need more flexibility.

The pilot targeted young parents between the ages of 18–24, who had full or partial care-taking responsibilities for children, an income at or below 300% of the federal poverty level, and were Baltimore City residents. The pilot provided 200 young parents, including both fathers and mothers, \$1,000 a month for two years. The pilot generated insights about the best ways to meet families’ needs, and CASH Campaign of Maryland and partners are leveraging those insights to build the case for benefits support policies and programs. CASH Campaign of Maryland

successfully implemented the pilot due to their close connection with the community, and their deep systems and policy expertise is helping them share what they’re learning to influence policy and practice at the local, state, and national level. The pilot included a randomized control trial to track outcomes on participants’ lives. Of the 200 parents in the pilot, 70 were part of a storytelling cohort that shared their experiences publicly and with the media. The pilot was designed to use emerging evidence, including participants’ stories, for advocacy and policymaker education.

CASH Campaign of Maryland and partners saw the potential of collecting enough data from the wave of guaranteed income pilots around the country to create the conditions for the federal government to support a policy on guaranteed income. This pilot, along with other pilots around the country, has moved the needle on making guaranteed income a possibility. It has shifted narratives with government, philanthropy, and the general public about what people need, changed the public and decisionmakers’ mindsets around what is possible, and normalized guaranteed income in public discourse.

READ MORE





CONVENING FAMILIES AND OTHER ACTORS

We had the idea that we are better together. It was always about bringing a larger set of people together. Sometimes when we're all seeing similar kinds or problems, systems change conversations come up. Cross-sharing, learning, connections. It was baked into the way we worked.

– Interview with FSO leader

Many FSOs convene a wide range of partners, including parents, from diverse places in the ecosystem to work on shared goals. This may include:

- **Leading or participating in coalitions, advisory committees, and collaboratives.** Many FSOs convene people and organizations in formal coalitions or other platforms.
- **Cultivating relationships with larger policy organizations and networks** and tapping into their resources. Policy organizations and networks may have more economic and social capital to push forward systems and policy change than individual FSOs do. In these relationships, FSOs bring family narratives and storytelling about how policies, legislation, and programs are impacting families. Some FSOs report feeling valued and respected in these relationships.
- **Bringing a diverse group of partners to the systems and policy change space.** FSOs see the value of bringing a whole range of different organizations, from traditional policy groups to service groups, and decisionmakers and families, across a range of different sectors. They do so because families' needs are 'multi-sectoral'.
- **Bringing families and systems change leaders into direct contact.** Systems change leaders, which include policymakers and other key decisionmakers, often lack direct contact with the families impacted by policies. FSOs are able to build these bridges in ways other organizations may not be able to do.
- **Bringing families/parents together in their own spaces.** Some FSOs emphasize the value of having family-/parent-only spaces for them to talk about their experiences, hear from each other, build relationships, and strengthen their communities.



CONVENING ACROSS SECTORS TO SOLVE THE BENEFITS CLIFF IN TN

The nonprofit [Martha O'Bryan Center](#) is dedicated to improving lives and solving for the root causes of generational poverty.

Based in Cayce Homes, the largest housing project in Nashville, the Martha O'Bryan Center is a model of community listening and serves more than 12,000 individuals annually across an innovative and comprehensive support system including its Family Success Network, an Early Learning Center, two K-8 public charter schools, out-of-school care, post-secondary access and coaching, family services, adult education, employment training, and place-based community connection. Additionally, it leads statewide and nationally to address barriers to economic mobility like the benefits cliff. Through strategic partnerships and community engagement, the Martha O'Bryan Center remains committed to fostering hope, resilience, and opportunity for all.

In 2021, the state of Tennessee initiated the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Opportunity Act and announced it would fund seven pilots to demonstrate a new vision for the Tennessee Safety Net that could be scaled statewide and become a model for the nation. The Martha O'Bryan Center created the Tennessee Alliance for Economic Mobility, a public-private collaborative made up of more than 30 partners including community-based organizations, faith-based institutions, government agencies, and community and technical colleges in 16 Middle Tennessee counties. Under the leadership of the Martha O'Bryan Center, which serves as the backbone organization and fiscal manager, the alliance secured a \$25 million grant through the Tennessee Department of Human Services to launch the pilot in 2022 as a program called Our ChanceTN, which will continue through 2026.

At the outset, the Martha O'Bryan Center organized partnerships with a diverse group of trusted community-based organizations. The Tennessee Alliance for Economic Mobility held community planning sessions across Middle Tennessee to understand community needs and how to organize regionally and incorporated strategies from different communities and national research on solutions to help families move forward. Throughout the process, the work has been informed by local partners who bring their unique perspectives and regional knowledge to the approach. The pilot includes a community advisory committee of individuals from each geographic region that serves as a guiding team. It also includes peer ambassadors—Our ChangeTN participants who advocate for the caregiver perspective and help with recruitment and building social capital in the regions. The Martha O'Bryan Center's approach also includes strengthening the capacity of partners to work collaboratively and in areas beyond direct services, to help the community succeed in continuing the work when the pilot ends.

Three years in, with one year to go, the pilot is showing increased stability and economic advancement for families. Participants value coaching, and are building community and relationships with coaches and other caregivers. The Martha O'Bryan Center is building relationships and support among decision makers, and strengthening partner organizations' capacity for systems change.

READ MORE





EDUCATING FAMILIES AND OTHER ACTORS

FSOs that educate often strengthen the capacity of other organizations to understand families' and communities' issues. They do so using data they have generated from pilots or research and insights they have heard directly from families to educate systems change leaders and other organizations about families' experiences. They also educate families about how they may be affected by policies, and they engage in public awareness campaigns and public education to garner support for issues.

- **Educating families about a range of issues.** This includes educating them about their rights to various benefits and how to access them. It may also include helping families understand the importance of an issue so they get involved in systems and policy change work directly.
- **Increasing public awareness and support** for key issues, often by leveraging media.
- **Educating systems change leaders,** including organizations, advocacy groups, and officials. This may include educating them about the needs and strengths of parents and the demand for a specific service. FSOs play a big role in educating systems change leaders about the equitability and accessibility of policies, especially when those leaders are invested in a specific policy but lack the insight into how it affects different families inequitably.

Our role is to really focus on equity and accessibility of the policies. Paid Family Leave applies for everyone, regardless of how large their employer is. One of our key roles on the Task Force was to bring stories from our clients and say, “Of course we share this goal, but here are the inequities that exist,” and to express concern that if that’s your goal, you’re gonna bake in some inequities.

– Interview with FSO leader



EDUCATING FAMILIES ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING COUNTED

In early 2023, [ACCESS](#), a community-building non-profit serving the Arab American community, through its national institution, the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC), was advocating for recognition of Middle Eastern or North African (MENA) as a separate racial category from white in federal data. The data collection change by the federal government is an especially important change for the Census, as that data is used to understand population challenges and successes. Federal data on MENA populations would mean the ability to quantify disparities more accurately and better advocate for MENA communities' needs.

Part of the advocacy work involved generating enough public comments in favor of the change, which meant activating people to participate and engage in the amendment process. To accomplish this, NNAAC, with its knowledge of MENA communities across the US, was able to reframe the data

collection issue in a way that made sense to its constituents and demonstrate the tangible changes it would bring. For example, in Michigan, ACCESS had been hearing from the Arab American population that their vote didn't feel like it counted in elections. ACCESS created talking points that showed how recognizing MENA as its own category could help provide better data for redistricting decisions in the future and potentially help strengthen MENA populations' vote.

As a result of their work and community engagement, ACCESS and NNAAC members' constituents accounted for 60% of comments concerning the Census amendment on the Federal Register. In addition, they had over 600 people turnout to the Michigan Independent Redistricting Commission to ensure their vote was not diluted in the redistricting process.



CONDITIONS FOR CHANGE

There are several characteristics of FSOs—and wider conditions within the broader systems and policy change ecosystem—that enable FSOs to **amplify, accelerate, convene, and educate**, and ultimately to contribute to family-centric changes.

TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

All of the FSOs we interviewed, and the systems change leaders who partner with them, emphasized the importance of long-term, non-extractive relationships with families. These relationships involve deep listening, centering families and honoring their expertise, and engaging them as full partners in the work.

FSOs are grounded in the communities they engage with, often because of their direct proximity to them. Many FSOs are geographically based directly within the communities they serve. For example, the headquarters of one FSO we interviewed is next to the oldest and largest public housing community in their city. Others have ongoing conversations with those families through their direct service work, which then allows them to also engage them in organizing and mobilizing towards systemic change.

FSOs have deep trust from the communities they engage with. One FSO shared that building trust and being reliable was a major factor in forming and sustaining relationships with communities. Another FSO explained that they were able to elevate members' voices and experiences and support them to be at the policy table because they have built a deep trust with the community.

Finally, FSOs center families and honor their expertise, engaging them as partners and in a non-extractive way. One FSO involved families as equal partners in a research process, compensating them to interview hundreds of home-based child care providers from their own networks, which shifted the state's idea of what supporting child care looks like. Another FSO involved student parents in organizing a conference from start to finish, speaking on the mainstage, and helping design the conference itself.

These close relationships allow FSOs to understand families' experiences more directly and engage them in design and implementation of policies and programs. It also helps FSOs to engage families in advocacy work, encourage them to share their stories, and bring them into partnership and coalition with officials.



INTENTIONALITY IN CENTERING FAMILIES TO BUILD TRUST

In 2022, voters in New Mexico approved a constitutional amendment that guarantees a right to early childhood education and provides yearly funds for child care and early education programs. AP-OD, also known as [Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors](#), a national organization that supports parents as leaders and their child's most important teacher—and the families they work with were some of the main community advocates working as part of a coalition to push the constitutional amendment, which was a 10-year process and a huge win for families in New Mexico.

As part of the community-led research early in this process, parents of AP-OD engaged with a local implementing partner, Partnership for Community Action, to do a needs assessment of where families used child care and considerations in their child care decisions. Parents conducted research with the University of New Mexico and were involved as equal research partners while being compensated to conduct the research and interview parents and providers. AP-OD, Partnership for Community Action, and University of New Mexico invested in the leadership of parents as experts and honored their expertise and know-how, encouraging and preparing them to lead the process, which ultimately influenced the state's idea of what supporting child care looks like so it reflects the voices and needs of parents.

Similarly, [Springboard to Opportunities](#), a nonprofit organization that works alongside residents of federally subsidized housing in Jackson, MS, made it a priority

to build relationships and trust with families before engaging in systems and policy change work in 2017. While they've always recognized that providing a direct service was never going to be enough to create lasting, sustainable change, they intentionally prioritized building trusting relationships and working alongside residents to design and create programs like afterschool academies and community support programs that were aligned with residents' expressed needs in the first four to five years of their organization. That way, when they did begin more explicitly engaging in systems and policy change work, they were able to elevate families' stories and lift up their priorities. This laid the groundwork for a successful guaranteed income pilot, which they designed in close partnership with mothers. It also meant they were able to get close feedback from mothers to improve the program throughout its implementation and moving forward.



SPEAKING FAMILIES' LANGUAGES

We understand that the power of FSOs, local ones, is to understand place, to understand dynamics.

– Interview with systems change leader

Because of their proximity and relationships with families, FSOs understand families' experiences and how policies and systems impact their lives. This allows them not only to understand families' immediate needs, but also allows them to understand the nuance of how policy affects them. All of the FSOs we interviewed have direct insights and, while many of them do conduct research and gather and share stories, one FSO leader shared that they don't have to rely on secondhand reports or data as much as other types of organizations. Several of the FSOs were able to innovate and test

interventions directly and see if they were worth sharing or expanding. Generating insights in-house is a big value proposition for FSOs.

FSOs can also get communities to care about issues because they are able to communicate how the issue will impact them and make it relevant. One FSO leader explained that FSOs are a key lever for policymakers' because they're able to 'make policy sticky' and get people to care about it, since they have a better understanding of how families think. All of the FSOs we spoke to shared that they are able to speak the language of families and focus on what they actually are concerned with.

FSOs also understand the impacts of a policy on the community and how to frame families' needs and concerns with decisionmakers. Many of the FSOs and systems change leaders we spoke to explained that FSOs are able to bring up issues that may not have occurred to traditional advocacy organizations, and they are also well positioned to generate solutions and bring families to the decisionmaking table.



SUPPORTING MOTHERS TO ENGAGE ON CHILDCARE POLICY + FUNDING

Jeremiah Program is a national organization with a mission to disrupt the cycle of poverty for single mothers and their children, two generations at a time. In 2024, they partnered with a coalition of community organizations, led by United Way for Greater Austin, to ensure that families' voices were represented in important conversations about childcare, afterschool programs, and workforce development. As part of this effort, Jeremiah Program supported

the mothers they work with in understanding the local ballot process and educated them on how community decisions are made around childcare funding. Jeremiah Program moms attended county commissioner meetings, observed the process of how items move onto the ballot, and learned how to share their perspectives with policymakers.

Throughout the process, Jeremiah Program provided updates to help their Jeremiah Program moms stay informed and created opportunities for them to engage with local officials in nonpartisan ways. Jeremiah Program moms shared their personal stories about childcare challenges, connected with their networks to discuss the importance of civic participation, and built confidence in their role as community leaders. This work strengthened both individual leadership and the collective narrative around childcare, ensuring that the lived experiences of single mothers were centered in shaping more equitable systems for families.

ORIENTATION TOWARDS SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Success depends on having some core policy expertise at an organization that is eager to engage people with direct lived experience. Service-advocacy hybrid FSOs understand the policy process, we know how to do policy mapping, etc. It is critical to have that expertise in this space.

– Interview with FSO leader

FSOs that are deeply committed to systems and policy change work have strong leadership and expertise in how to catalyze systemic change. Several FSOs spoke about how an incoming leader with experience and commitment to systemic change created space for staff to focus on that work, in addition to services. It also helped to shift the strategy of the organization to integrate both service and systems and policy change efforts.

This deep commitment to systems and policy change allows FSOs not only to understand how the systems and policy change space works, but also allows them to frame issues in ways that speak to decisionmakers. Combining that with their embeddedness in communities and states allows them to bring a rich understanding of local politics—like zoning laws, labor markets, and key decisionmakers—that is often missing from the policy table.



STRATEGICALLY PRIORITIZING SYSTEMS + POLICY CHANGE

The [United Planning Organization](#)—a community action agency that serves DC residents with low incomes—has a long history of doing systems and policy change since its founding in the 1960s. Especially in the early days, the organization had a sense of activism and focused on shifting systems to address poverty, in partnership with the District. Over time, the national community action network and UPO shifted more towards a focus on direct services, with advocacy happening on more of an ad hoc basis.

In recent years, the organization's new CEO embraced a vision of bringing back an intentional systems change focus, under the recognition that poverty is systemic and can't be eliminated one person at a time. In 2022, she brought on a new Director of Legislative Advocacy, to ensure this longstanding, deeply embedded community organization had more influence on the District's policy, especially by uplifting voices of their large base of directly impacted families and individuals. Recent priorities have included protecting the Emergency Rental Assistance Program amidst rising evictions, expanding food access, and addressing the benefits cliff.

Similarly, [Prepare + Prosper](#), a nonprofit organization that offers tax preparation and financial services to low- and moderate-income families in the Twin Cities, MN, has been engaged in systems advocacy and policy change work since its founding in 1971. However, it has only recently begun to approach this work with greater intention. In 2021, the organization hired a new Executive Director, who is the first woman of color in this role. She brings extensive lived experience and an educational background in the field of social justice. Recognizing the potential to mobilize the organization's base of over 12,000 customers and 400 volunteers, she has led efforts to change the organization's approach for the betterment of the community.

Although they are the largest tax preparation organization connected to local communities, they have primarily been reactive to policy changes rather than actively shaping them. In recent years, the Executive Director and the staff have been working to transform the organization's culture. This shift aims not only to provide essential direct services to families but also to empower those families to influence policies and systems based on their priorities.

Key objectives include engaging the Latino community and other cultural groups in tax justice and financial empowerment, as well as raising awareness among non-filers about their eligibility for the Child Tax Credit, which is the largest state credit in the country.



DIVERSE PARTNERSHIPS

FSOs leverage cross-movement collaborations with a wide range of partners to strengthen their work. The FSOs we talked to recognize the niche and contribution of many different kinds of organizations—policy organizations, direct service organizations, and hybrid organizations like themselves. FSOs that convene partners often work across sectors and movements, since families are ‘multi-sectoral’ and uplifting and supporting them requires bringing together a range of partners, from childcare and education, to economic justice and work, to housing and food security.

FSOs are often very effective conveners because they may be seen as less partisan than traditional advocacy

organizations and because they have developed trusting relationships and deep understanding of families’ experiences.

FSOs are also uniquely able to bring families into partnership with other ecosystem actors. FSO convenings are spaces where the families they serve can come into contact with people they may not usually have access to including policymakers, elected officials, or policy advocates.

Systems change leaders also emphasized that engaging with FSOs and the families they support amplifies impact. FSOs are able to build a bridge between families and policymakers and bring them together because they speak the language of both groups.



A core tenet of our policy advocacy department is neutrality. We work with both sides, and we don't attack people. That mantra has held, but grown stronger. Since 2021, we have leaned into this more. There's a trustworthiness that comes with being neutral in these types of situations.

– Interview with FSO leader



BUILDING BRIDGES AND TRUST THROUGH NEUTRALITY

In 2021, [Hispanic Unity of Florida](#) and partner organizations advocated for a community ID program to be established in Broward County by the county commission, which passed unanimously. Hispanic Unity of Florida is a non-political, non-partisan community organization that supports immigrants on their path to achieving the American dream. They were invited to be part of the coalition because of their deep knowledge and 40-year experience in the community. Their policy department was seen as a neutral actor, which helped them build trust with the county commission. Along with other community partners, they formed a core advocacy group and Hispanic Unity of Florida advised the group on the advocacy strategy and planning for engagement with the county commission.

A SUPPORTIVE CONTEXT

In addition to being truly valued in the systems and policy change ecosystem, FSOs identified other conditions that need to be in place in order for them to fully be able to engage in the work.

FSOs face a number of funding challenges, including limited funding for systems and policy change work, a tendency for organizations to cut policy and systems change work first when having limited funds for direct service and policy and systems change work, restricted funding that inhibits a whole family/2-Gen approach, funders preferring to fund through intermediaries rather than giving directly to FSOs, and lack of long-term funding after the initial program ends.

FSOs also need time to be able to do the work, and families need the time (and resources) to be able to engage. One systems change leader recognized that the resources required and the rhythm and cadence of doing systems and policy

change work is often misaligned with that of service work. There is sometimes a tension between addressing immediate needs through direct service and the long-term engagement and mindset to see systemic change, especially when the demand for services is so high.

Finally, **the socio-political environment an FSO is in also affects their ability to catalyze systems and policy change.** Several FSOs shared how COVID-19 created both openings and constraints for initiating change, while others talked about how a favorable policy environment facilitated change. Several FSOs also highlighted how having the support of an official or prominent politician could facilitate systemic changes that support families.

ACTIONS + QUESTIONS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE LEADERS

Many funders and other systems change leaders have long been supporting the engagement of service-advocacy hybrid FSOs in systems and policy change work. However, despite the numerous contributions FSOs make, their significant knowledge of how policies (and the policymaking process) truly impact families, and their deep trusting relationships with those most impacted by the issues, FSOs often feel tokenized and undervalued. **This disconnect means that there is a long way to go in ensuring the systems and policy change ecosystem is welcoming to FSOs and the families they work with.**

What we need is humility. There's a real belief in policy circles that we are possessive of expertise that we in fact are not possessive of. And so you see a lot of immediate dismissal of an FSO as not being a relevant player in the game. And how do you give us that humility?

– Interview with systems change leader

The systems change leaders we interviewed foregrounded institutional and individual humility as the key way to better support FSOs. Therefore, we've developed a set of actions and reflective questions to support systems change leaders to engage in introspection, interrogate their practices, and identify concrete steps they can take.



1

REFLECT

on your/your organization's assumptions, values, and beliefs about FSO engagement in systems and policy change

- a. What assumptions do you hold about expertise and who drives effective systems change?** What beliefs do you have about policy 'expertise' versus the lived experience and frontline knowledge that FSOs and the families they serve bring to systems and policy change work?
- b. How do your organization's institutional values and theories of change compare to those of FSOs?** What assumptions underlie how your organization understands systems change goals and pathways, and how might these differ from FSO perspectives on change?
- c. What is your understanding of FSOs' role and contributions in the systems change ecosystem?** Beyond what you typically recognize, what deeper or less visible contributions do service-advocacy hybrid FSOs make to systems and policy change work?

2

EXAMINE

and improve policies and practices in your organization and the ecosystem(s) you are connected with

- a. How do your beliefs and organizational values manifest in your current practices with FSOs?** Examine your funding approaches, partnership structures, and engagement methods—where do you see gaps between your stated values and actual practices in supporting FSO systems and policy change work?
- b. What barriers do FSOs face when working with your organization, and which are within your control to address?** Consider obstacles like lack of understanding of rules around lobbying and advocacy, resource access challenges and the need for long-term, unrestricted funding, and lack of staff bandwidth or experience to take on systems and policy change. If unsure, what pathways does your organization have to getting this information?
- c. What changes in policies, practices, and feedback systems in your organization would better support FSO engagement in the systems and policy change ecosystem, if implemented?** Look at organizations in your networks that effectively support FSOs—what can you adopt? What feedback mechanisms could you implement to gather ongoing FSO input on your practices?



CONNECT

service-advocacy hybrid FSOs with other systems change leaders

- a. **How can you leverage your network and power to create meaningful connections between FSOs and other systems change leaders?** What other systems change leaders are you connected to, and how can you facilitate opportunities for them to hear directly from and work directly with FSOs and the families they serve?
- b. **What supports and systemic changes are needed to enable authentic FSO and family participation in systems change spaces?** Consider practical needs (funding, transportation, childcare, capacity building), as well as institutional policy and practice changes required to make these spaces truly inclusive and accessible.
- c. **How can you deepen relationships with FSOs to better understand and support their work?** Examine your current relationships with FSOs—how are you learning about their needs and challenges? What steps can you take to build non-tokenistic partnerships and help others in your network to do the same?



ADVOCATE

to other systems change leaders to share power and foster meaningful partnerships

- a. **How can you use your influence and access to catalyze mindset shifts among other systems change leaders?** What spaces and leaders do you have access to who you think should better share power with FSOs and families, and what strategies can you use to influence their actions?
- b. **What concrete actions can you take in the next 3 months to model power-sharing and motivate others to follow suit?** Identify specific steps you can take to better share power with FSOs and families, while simultaneously encouraging other systems change leaders to adopt similar practices.
- c. **How can your organization strategically leverage its resources to foster meaningful FSO partnerships across your network?** Consider how you can use your funds, influence, and connections to encourage and facilitate authentic relationships between FSOs and other systems change leaders, moving beyond one-off connections to sustained partnerships.

APPENDIX A. METHODS

This research is the culmination of a two-year research project that sought to understand the experiences of family-serving organizations (direct-service organizations that work with families) that also engage in systems and policy change. The primary research shared in this report built on an exploratory research phase, in which we reviewed literature and conducted interviews to understand what was already known about FSOs and their experience in policy and systems change work. A key finding of the exploratory research is that, despite many FSOs' intentions and efforts to contribute to systems and policy change, many FSOs may be tokenized and may not be considered as legitimate and full partners in the advocacy space. This proves a key challenge to engaging in the systems and policy change ecosystem.

With the guidance of a research advisory committee, consisting of 5 representatives from FSOs, **the purpose of this research is to contribute to shifting mindsets and narratives of funders (and other supporters, like intermediaries) and system change leaders (e.g., federal, state, local government; advocacy groups) around FSOs' expertise and role in policy and systems change work**, in order to create the conditions that enable FSOs to be bigger players in the systems change ecosystem. The research contributes to that aim by surfacing stories of success and factors that enable and constrain FSOs to be successful in policy and systems change work, as well as make recommendations for how funders and systems change leaders can better support FSOs engagement in the ecosystem.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The research was guided by 5 questions:

1. What are the motivations of FSOs for engaging in systems and policy change work? What do funders and systems change actors see as the benefits of engaging FSOs in systems and policy change work?
2. What are examples of successes of FSOs contributing to systems and policy change that better reflects the lived realities of families? What problem were they trying to address?
3. What capabilities were most important for FSOs in achieving those successes? How did having an FSO specifically involved contribute to that success? What unique challenges did they face in influencing policy and systems change?
4. Who did FSOs collaborate with and how to achieve those successes? How did they engage with/how were they supported by funders and systems leaders? What's the nature of that collaboration—in terms of how equitable the decision-making power, how funding decisions were determined, and how information was shared. What processes shifted power to FSOs and centered their expertise in these achievements? If power didn't shift, what were the roadblocks or barriers?

5. How were families engaged in these FSO advocacy and systems change efforts/successes? How much do families feel that these efforts better respond to their lived realities? Do they feel their expertise was valued?

DATA COLLECTION + ANALYSIS

The research involved two waves of data collection. In the first wave, we conducted interviews with leaders in 15 FSOs around the country and 5 systems change leaders who are already prioritizing inclusion of FSOs in their systems and policy change work (including funders, think tanks, conveners, and advocacy organizations).

In the interviews with FSOs, we asked them to identify 3 stories of systems and/or policy change that their organization contributed to. We then asked them to select which story they felt best demonstrated the value of FSOs in contributing to systems and policy change that better reflects the lived realities of families, and tell us that story in depth, including what they were trying to address, what change they saw, how they contributed to it, who they partnered with, and how they centered families.

With systems change leaders, we asked a set of questions about how and why they prioritize centering FSOs and the families they work with in their systems and policy change work, successes they have observed and conditions that facilitated those, and what needs to change in the systems and policy change space to better include FSOs and share power.

In the second wave of data collection, we invited three organizations to participate in in-depth snapshots that dove deeper into their selected stories of change. During this wave, for each of the three organizations, we interviewed 1–2 more staff, 1–2 partners, and 1–2 parents/families. These interviews gathered more information on the approaches organizations took to (a) amplifying parents' voices, (b) accelerating innovative solutions, and (c) convening a diverse range of people. They also surfaced lessons learned for moving forward.

For both waves, participants were identified through convenience sampling. We prioritized having a diversity of FSOs represented in terms of geography, sector, size, experience and length of time engaging in systems and policy change. For the snapshots, we prioritized diversity again, inviting three organizations that show a range of assets and approaches taken in their systems and policy change work. See [Appendix B](#) for a list of participating organizations.

The individual snapshots were analyzed and written up individually, and can be found here: LIFT, Martha O'Bryan Center, and CASH Campaign of Maryland. We analyzed the interviews with 15 FSOs and 5 systems change leaders for themes related to (a) the changes FSOs contributed to, (b) the approaches they took that contributed to those changes, and (c) the conditions that need to be in place that enable FSOs to contribute to systems and policy change. Finally, we developed a set of reflective questions (instead of recommendations) to spark critical reflection among funders and other systems change leaders so that they can better share power with FSOs and the families they work with in the systems and policy change ecosystem.

CONSIDERATIONS + FURTHER RESEARCH

The priority of our research was to take a strengths-based, appreciative look at the myriad ways FSOs and the families they work with are making tremendous impacts in the systems and policy change space. We acknowledge our own orientation to support and uplift this work, and our belief in the importance of FSOs in shifting power in the systems and policy change space. Additionally, we prioritized engaging organizations who are already doing this work and seeing its benefits, many for several decades and with strong leadership and expertise. The research intentionally does not examine at any length the barriers or challenges FSOs face, but significant research on this already exists (see our [exploratory report](#)). It also does not try to be representative of the experience of all FSOs, but rather to highlight some of the successes some FSOs are already having to generate support for this work.

Our research highlighted several future directions for appreciative research on FSOs doing systems and policy change work:

- **Further understanding the pathways and mechanisms by which FSOs contribute to systems and policy change.** Our research begins to scratch the surface of four 'approaches' these organizations take, as well as builds out a model for how that may represent shifting power to families, but future research that better uncovers the nature of this work would help funders and systems change leaders understand how best to support FSOs.
- **Further understanding parents' and families' experiences with engaging in the systems and policy change ecosystem.** This includes better understanding their contributions and impact, as well as what supports they need to be included.
- **Understanding the broader dynamics at play in the systems and policy change ecosystem that tokenize and/or exclude FSOs and the families they work with.** This includes looking at the mindsets, policies, and practices (implicit and explicit) of funders and other systems change leaders that may be exclusionary and ensuring that the ecosystem is welcoming and supportive of FSOs and their families.

APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANTS

FSO PARTICIPANTS

Name	Issue Areas	Population(s) Served	Direct Service Scale	Systems & Policy Change Scale
Prepare and Prosper Suyapa Miranda	Financial well-being, including tax prep and financial services	Low- to moderate-income people	Local: Twin Cities, MN	State: Minnesota
Martha O'Bryan Center Marsha Edwards & Kent Miller	Poverty elimination, including education, employment and two-gen supports	Children, youth, and adults in poverty	Local: Nashville, TN	Local: Nashville, TN State: Tennessee Federal
ACCESS (Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services) Rima Meroueh	Health, economic, social, and cultural well-being	Arab Americans	State: Michigan	State: Michigan
Legal Aid at Work Sharon Terman & Katie Wutchiett	Workplace rights and employment law	Low-paid workers and marginalized communities	State: California	Local State: California
Family Scholar House Cathe Dykstra	Poverty elimination through education	Low-income students, student parents, and former foster youth	State: Kentucky, with affiliates in other states	State: Kentucky Federal
Springboard to Opportunities Sarah Stripp	Housing and socioeconomic well-being	Residents of federally subsidized housing	Local: Jackson, MS	State: Mississippi Federal
Jeremiah Program Gloria Gonzales-Dholakia	Education, housing, work and economic security	Low-income single mothers and their children	Local: Fargo-Moorhead, ND; St. Paul, MN; Minneapolis, MN; Rochester-SE, MN; Brooklyn, NY; Baltimore, MD; Las Vegas NV; Austin, TX	
LIFT Helah Robinson & Khadijah Williams	Well-being, financial strength, and social connections	Low-income parents	Local: Chicago, IL; New York, NY; Washington DC; Los Angeles, CA	Local State: Anchor cities and their states Federal

Name	Issue Areas	Population(s) Served	Direct Service Scale	Systems & Policy Change Scale
Educare Network Joelynn Avendano & Rio Romero-Jurado	Early care and education	Children ages 0 to 5 and their families; Historically disinvested urban, suburban, rural and tribal communities	Local: 25 schools/ comprehensive early learning and care programs providing services across ~16 states	Local State Federal
Abriendo Puertas/ Opening Doors Adrián A. Pedroza & Debbie Ignacio	Early childhood learning	Parents, caregivers, and their young children ages 0-5	Local: 500 cities across US	Local State Federal
Generation Hope Nicole Lynn Lewis	Post-secondary education for economic mobility and wealth generation	Student parents, teen parents	Local: Washington DC; New Orleans, LA; Dallas, TX	State: California, Maryland Federal
Cash Campaign of Maryland Robin McKinney & Sara Johnson	Economic advancement	Low- to moderate-income	Local: Baltimore, MD State: Maryland	Local: Baltimore, MD State: Maryland Federal
United Planning Organization Ed Lazere	Economic stability, incl. education, workforce training, housing, food, senior supports, financial supports, etc.	Low-income	Local: District of Columbia	Local: District of Columbia
A Better Balance Jared Make	Justice in the workplace	Especially women, caregivers, and people with health needs of their own	National	Local State Federal
Hispanic Unity of Florida Otayme Valenzuela	Education; economic development; citizenship, naturalization, and civic engagement	Immigrants	Local: South Florida (Broward County)	Local: South Florida (Broward County) State: Florida

SYSTEMS CHANGE LEADER PARTICIPANTS

Name	Description
Kresge Foundation, Human Services Program Raquel Hatter	The Human Services Program at The Kresge Foundation seeks to advance social and economic mobility with an applied racial equity lens driven by a two-generation, whole-family approach.
Funders for LGBTQ Issues Shaena Johnson	Funders for LGBTQ Issues is a network of more than 100 foundations, corporations, and funding institutions that collectively award more than \$1 billion annually, including approximately \$200 million specifically devoted to LGBTQ issues.
Economic Policy Institute Dave Kamper	The Economic Policy Institute (EPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank working for the last 30 years to counter rising inequality, low wages, and weak benefits for working people, slower economic growth, unacceptable employment conditions, and a widening racial wage gap.
Ascend at the Aspen Institute Marjorie Sims	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.
UnidosUS Eric Rodriguez & Mauricio Garcia	UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since their founding in 1968, they have contributed to a stronger America by elevating the voice of Latinos, and defending and advancing their community's concerns.