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BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY: A MULTIGENERATIONAL APPROACH

Concepts to consider in serving families across the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area with highlights from the June 8 Community Symposium

Members of families and households experiencing poverty face immediate needs, and long-term barriers to success. Daily obstacles might include access to food, paying utilities or finding safe and affordable housing – impacting the health, happiness and productivity of everyone in the family. Children fall behind at school and lose educational momentum, which affects their ability to acquire and maintain employment. As adults living in poverty struggle to make ends meet, they often have less time and fewer resources to advance their education or secure living wage jobs. These barriers exist simultaneously and in relation to one another, which makes them even more challenging to address. Without intervention, the path to opportunity is neither open nor accessible for families experiencing or at risk of poverty. Programs around the country have responded with a two-generation approach that serves parents and children together. In doing so, the programs recognize poverty affects the entire household, and seek to put the entire family on a path to stability and economic security.

Anne Mosle, Executive Director at Ascend and Vice President at the Aspen Institute explained the benefits of serving adults and children together, and highlighted examples of successful implementation of the two-generation approach at the Community Symposium hosted by United Way of the Midlands in partnership with Buffett Early Childhood Institute, First National Bank, Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, University of Nebraska Omaha, and University of Nebraska Medical Center. The symposium is the second summer event in a three-year series designed to deepen collective understanding about poverty in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area. More than 350 individuals across the nonprofit, government and business sectors attended the June 8 symposium, and explored application of the two-generation approach in their work and across the country.

At the Jeremiah Program in Minneapolis, for instance, Nekey and her son Giovanni were moving frequently between family members' homes. She had left an abusive relationship, and was looking for stability and a path to opportunity for them both. The two generation approach offered by the Jeremiah Program provided Nekey and Giovanni with education, housing, life skills and social resources so they could build upon each other's' strength, and make progress together. Giovanni reached the 98th percentile in reading and math. Nekey graduated from the University of Minnesota, and is now pursuing a master's degree with aspirations to work as a counselor with children and youth.

The Jeremiah Program is an example of a program using a two-generation approach to advance education while providing a variety of other supports. But the two-generation approach can also be used to improve health, financial and other outcomes – one reason it is gaining momentum as a promising practice across the country.

BREAKING THE CYCLE

"Poverty in our community is concentrated and generational," said Shawna Forsberg, United Way of the Midlands president and CEO. "Strengthening the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area means addressing the needs of families today, and creating a clear path to opportunity for generations to come."

A two-generation approach helps families replace a cycle of instability with a cycle of opportunity by providing supports for children and their parents to make progress together.¹ It recognizes that the experiences of adults and their children are often interconnected.

For instance, children will often compare their own standard of living to that of their parents when assessing economic progressⁱⁱ by asking, “Am I better off than my parents?” This measure is often cited as an indicator of opportunity, and proof of the American Dream.ⁱⁱⁱ A two-generation approach recognizes shared and connected experiences among family members: parents influence the trajectory of their children’s lives, and children’s development can be a catalyst for parents.

“Every parent wants to shine in their child’s eyes,” Mosle said. “Families are at their healthiest moment when everyone is aligned.”

Serving parents and children separately often ignores the multiplying power of shared experiences. According to Ascend, “Fragmented approaches that address the needs of children and their parents separately often leave either the child or the parent behind and dim the family’s chance at success.”^{iv} A job skill program for adults, for instance, might not account for how unemployment and poverty affect the developmental milestones of children.

Activities or collaborative efforts that support adults and children together can lead to mutually-reinforcing motivation within families, breaking the cycle of poverty as family members build off the success of one another. This accelerates momentum, and creates what Mosle calls an intergenerational cycle of opportunity.

A two-generation approach calls for organizations to think holistically about serving adults and children together, and also about the types of services needed to break the cycle of poverty.

Adults and children experiencing poverty face a myriad of complex barriers that affect their immediate security and can prevent them from reaching their full potential. At the Jeremiah Program, Nekey and Giovanni benefited from career and education programs, housing supports, life skills training and an empowering community network. These elements were all connected, recognizing that poverty affects every aspect of daily life. To this end, research from Ascend suggests education, economic assets, social capital, and health and well-being are the core components to creating an intergenerational cycle of opportunity. Integrating and connecting these elements move the whole family toward economic security:

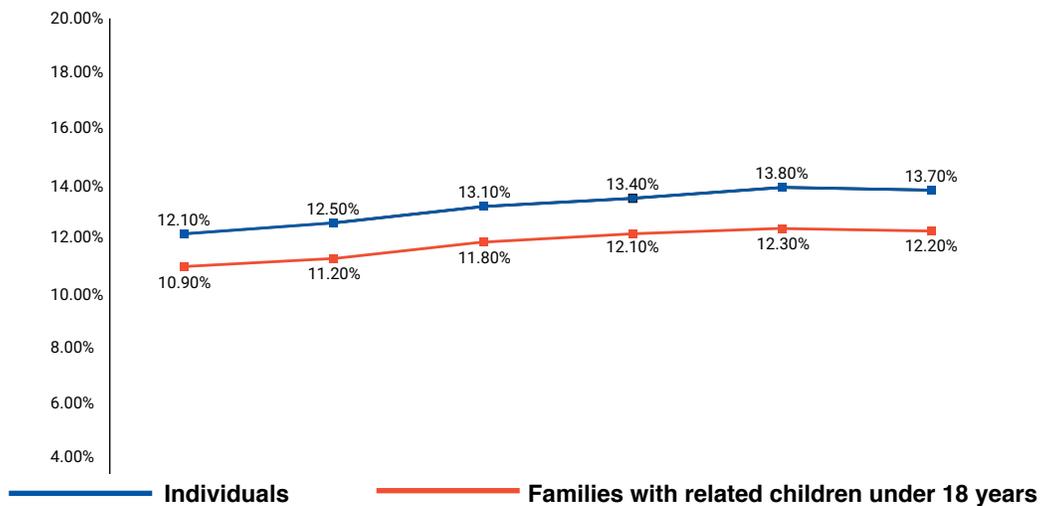
- Education – Investments in high-quality early education yield a 7 to 10 percent per year return on investment based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced social costs. At the same time, parents who complete a college degree double their incomes. A parent’s level of educational attainment is also a strong predictor of a child’s success.
- Economic Assets – Increased family income during early childhood can have a profound and lasting impact. A \$3,000 difference in parents’ income when their child is young is associated with a 17 percent increase in the child’s future earnings.
- Social Capital – As informal and formal networks expand, so do resources and support. People develop meaningful connections and skills that contribute to families well-being.
- Health and Well-Being – Physical and mental health have a major impact on a family’s ability to thrive. Childhood trauma, for instance, has lasting health and social consequences.

The “[Two Generation Playbook](#),” further outlines how the two-generation approach strengthens family outcomes by expanding opportunities available to parents and children together.

TRYING ON A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH

United Way of the Midlands focuses the efforts of organizations and thousands of individuals across the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area to impact poverty. In our community, the percentage of families with income below the poverty level is higher now than in 2010, aligning with national research that suggests needs among families are unique and growing.

Percentage with income in the past 12 months below the poverty level



13.7% of families with children under 18 years old in our metro area live below the poverty level – a higher percentage than individuals living alone.^v

There is more to economic security than living above poverty thresholds. Families who may not technically live below the poverty level still struggle to have their basic needs met. For instance, the federal poverty threshold for a family of four with two children under 18 is a gross annual income of \$24,339 per year.^{vi} According to The Economic Policy Institute, a two parent-two child household in Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area would actually need an annual total income of \$64,780 to attain a modest yet adequate standard of living.^{vii} Living wage calculators from MIT^{viii} and Voices for Children^{ix} place this amount closer to \$52,000. Cumulatively, this data reveals that even working families earning more than twice the poverty level still struggle to make ends meet as competing priorities consume limited resources.^x

A two-generation approach requires a new mindset for responding to the challenges of family by designing programs and policies that serve children and their parents simultaneously.^{xi}

During the symposium, Mosle facilitated an exercise for attendees to explore the value of the two-generation approach in their own work as nonprofit professionals, business leaders and volunteers. Participants recognized the value of serving children and their parents together – particularly noting how the two-generational approach creates a positive focus on the future, increases generational communication and builds a stronger sense of family and community.

Examples of the two-generation approach in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area exist on a spectrum. Some programs might focus on children and incorporate adults, whereas others focus on adults and incorporate activities for children. Others might fully incorporate the whole family or maintain a narrow focus exclusively on children or adults. Many programs in our area consider both adults and youth in delivering services. Yet fewer programs measure outcomes for both parents and children and serve the whole family, which is shown to be most beneficial.

Participants named 17 organizations locally that are early adopters of the two-generation approach, with Educare and the Learning Community of Douglas and Sarpy Counties being some of the most clear examples of the approach in our region. These organizations work to build a legacy of opportunity by providing early childhood education and engaging parents in the process. Parents learn English or new skills to communicate with teachers, and children receive age-appropriate instruction. Family activities and weekly classes through the Learning Community, specifically focus on the parent role in supporting classroom success.

The Family Support Program operated by Family Housing Advisory Services in partnership with the Siemer Institute and United Way of the Midlands works with families at imminent risk of homelessness to maintain

stability. It is an example of a local two-generation approach focused on the core components of economic assets and education. Through intensive case management and financial counseling, adults improve their income and housing stability. Children remain in the same school, and are able to build momentum from one lesson to the next.

With two-generation approaches gaining traction, Mosle emphasized the importance of setting goals for children, parents and families. “What are the intended outcomes of two-generation programs?” and “What are the pathways to these outcomes?” have become questions of growing importance for the field.^{xii}

To this end, local examples of the two-generation approach are delivering results and showing signs of progress.

Independent evaluations show children participating in the Learning Community are exceeding school district standards in reading and math. For its part, the Family Support Program consistently produces outcomes well above the national average compared to 50 similar programs operating in other communities.

The positive outcomes produced with a two-generation approach also appeals to policy makers. Mosle highlighted growing bi-partisan momentum in support of two-generation efforts across the country. In December 2016, Nebraska’s Health and Human Services Committee released a report following a 15-month study by the Intergenerational Poverty Task Force. The report included several recommendations to decrease poverty, specifically calling for a two-generation approach to program design.^{xiii} The report also suggests increased interagency collaboration and communication, particularly among the Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Education and the Department of Labor to “provide services that are less fragmented, easier to access, and use resources more efficiently.”^{xiv}

Core components of the suggested Nebraska two-generation approach include employment, financial stability, early childhood education, health care, fair credit and financial literacy, housing, language access and child care.^{xv} During the symposium, Mosle also highlighted access to high-quality, affordable child care as part of a paradigm for child and parent work supports.

Mosle described how Ascend addresses these issues from a national level, and provided shared principles that could create a local foundation for Omaha to collectively advance this work.

- Measure and account for outcomes for both children and their parents
- Engage and amplify the voices of families
- Ensure equity
- Foster innovation and evidence together
- Align and link systems and funding streams

Aligning and coordinating services with other organizations is a crucial part of the two-generation strategy. That’s why Ascend focuses on networks and systems most able to influence families: public human services resources, community colleges, and funders.

Several local foundations currently support the two-generation approach with financial investments. For its part, United Way of the Midlands supports two generation programs through financial investments and collaborative partnership, such as the Family Support Program with Family Housing Advisory Services and the Siemer Institute. Furthermore, United Way of the Midlands community investments advance progress on collaborative 2025 community impact goals as part of an overall mission to address poverty in the Omaha-Council Bluffs metro area.

“Policy and philanthropy can be powerful forces in fueling innovation, but there is not one strategy, one organization, one strategy, or one foundation that can do this on its own,” Mosle said. “We need to have a fundamental commitment to radical collaboration.”

For more information about the symposium series, Ascend, or opportunities to partner with United Way of the Midlands visit www.UnitedWayMidlands.org/2genwhitepaper.

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