



New Mexico Public Education Department: Policy and Systems-Level Approaches to Supporting Expectant and Parenting Youth

Overview of the Pregnancy Assistance Fund

Finding ways to address the diverse needs of expectant and parenting youth and their families (EPY) to improve their health, education, and well-being is a long-standing priority of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The HHS Office of Population Affairs (OPA) funded the Pregnancy Assistance Fund (PAF) grant program from 2010 to 2020. The PAF program supported states and tribes to provide a wide range of services in settings such as high schools, community service centers, and/or institutions of higher education.

PAF services focused on five areas: (1) personal health (e.g., case management, prenatal care, health insurance enrollment support, behavioral health, violence prevention); (2) child health (e.g., home visiting, nutrition, access to healthcare, well-child visits); (3) education and employment (e.g., tutoring, academic support, assistance with college applications, employment and job-readiness training); (4) concrete supports (e.g., food, housing, transportation, baby supplies including diapers, cribs, car seats, etc.); and (5) parenting supports (e.g., parenting and healthy relationship education, child development education, child care). PAF grantees determined which areas to focus on to improve outcomes for EPY in the areas of health, parenting, education, and economic stability.

Focus of the Case Study

This case study highlights how New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) used its PAF grant to identify and change state, local, and systems-level policies and practices that create additional barriers for EPY as they graduate from high school and build healthy families. Policy or systems-level changes can impact EPY above and beyond the effects of individualized services. Previous studies of PAF support the use of policy and system level approaches. They highlight the need to coordinate across services, increase public awareness, and navigate state and local laws and cultural contexts.¹ This case study expands on a brief outlining policy and system-level approaches used by three state-wide PAF grantees, including New Mexico PED.

Highlights of the Case Study:

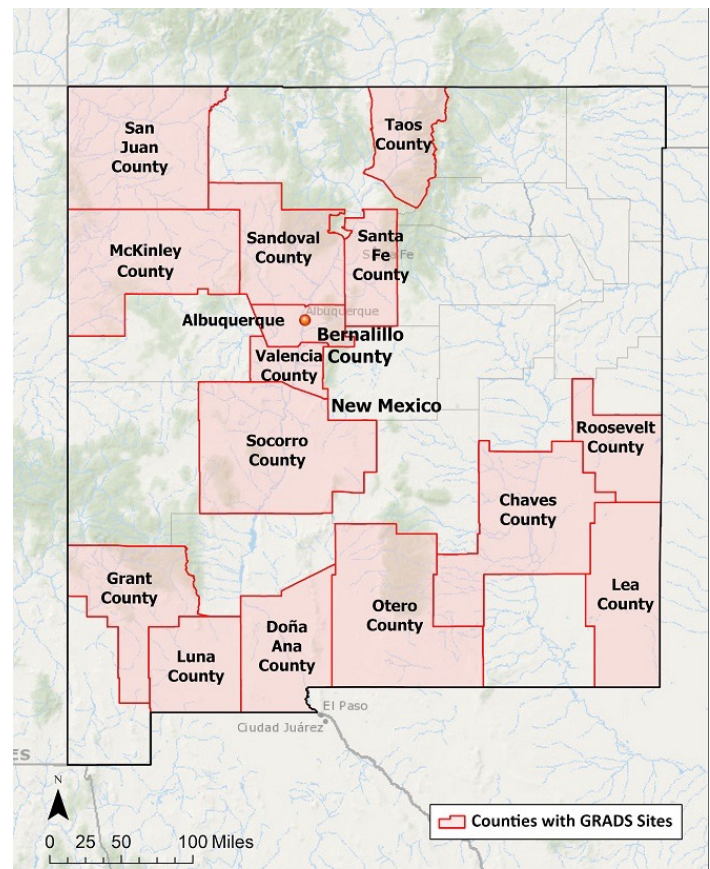
- New Mexico's PAF project created a Statewide Advisory Committee (SAC) and the Annual Town Hall to support young parents. The SAC and Town Hall were critical to raising agency leaders' awareness of EPY experiences and initiating policy changes. State government leaders who attended town halls were more willing to discuss policy changes or proactively incorporate EPY needs into existing agency policies.
- Youth voices and experiences were integral to the effort to improve policies and remove barriers for EPY. EPY were actively engaged in identifying challenges, connecting them to policies, and bringing together people with the power to make state and local-level decisions. Raising their awareness ultimately led to policy changes informed by EPY experiences.
- By facilitating changes in state-level policies and approaches to serving EPY (e.g., changes to Medicaid billing to allow students to get prenatal care at school-based clinics), the PAF project increased its impact beyond individual-level services and support alone.
- While policy change can be a time-consuming and incremental effort, it can ultimately support entire populations of EPY well beyond the time of the original changes.

State and Community Context

In recent years, teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined in New Mexico, as they have throughout the country. However, in 2019 New Mexico ranked eighth in the U.S. for teen births; 1,659 teens gave birth, and fifteen percent of these births were repeat births.^{2,3} Young parents face many barriers to graduating from high school, meeting basic needs, and growing a healthy family. Nationally, about half of young women who give birth as teens receive a high school diploma by age 30.⁴

The Graduation, Reality, And Dual-Role Skills (GRADS) program has been the central means of providing support to EPY in New Mexico high schools since 1989. GRADS provides a four-credit course addressing ten core competencies. Peer support and case management is provided by the GRADS teacher or a separate case manager. Most schools offering GRADS have on-site childcare centers and school-based health centers. Some offer additional fatherhood programs and other services. As of fall 2020, GRADS served EPY in 26 schools and one community-based organization in 21 counties across New Mexico, and one non-school setting (see adjacent map). GRADS has seen positive educational outcomes for teen parents. In the 2017-2018 school year, 82 percent of mothers in their senior year who participated in GRADS graduated from high school, with some schools seeing 100 percent graduation rates among their participants across multiple years.^{5,6}

Counties with NM GRADS Sites



New Mexico's PAF Grant

PED supported the GRADS program with three multi-year PAF grants over nine of the previous ten years. As part of its PAF grant, PED had three sub-awardees:

- The NM GRADS organization, which administered the GRADS program in schools across the state.
- The New Mexico Alliance for School-Based Health Care (NMASBHC), which provided technical assistance and additional health services for EPY across the GRADS program through its network of providers.
- In the most recent grant period (2018-2020), Fathers New Mexico provided support and technical assistance to local fatherhood coordinators for mentoring and father-specific curricula.

The New Mexico PAF project's approach to driving policy change hinged on two complementary collaborative structures – the **Statewide Advisory Committee (SAC)** and an **Annual Town Hall** meeting to support young parents. This approach aimed to remove barriers to education, health, and development for EPY by (1) coordinating across and within state-level agencies, and (2) engaging department decision-makers and lawmakers in establishing and aligning policies. EPY and their perspectives were essential to the policy and systems-level strategies. The project actively and visibly involved youth at every stage of planning and stakeholder engagement.

Collaborations Central to New Mexico's Policy Approach

The SAC set the agenda for effecting policy change, crossing topic areas and agency domains. The PAF project director worked with other EPY stakeholders to form the SAC in 2014 with the goals of:

- sharing information about services available for EPY between providers and other stakeholders
- supporting EPY state-wide through state-level policy action and outreach within members' spheres of influence and collaboration between stakeholders

SAC Composition. As of spring 2020, the SAC included a range of staff from state-level departments (e.g., education, workforce, behavioral health, health, early childhood, housing, and juvenile justice), GRADS program leaders and teachers, EPY, and other state and local stakeholders.

The project recruited members from this mix of sectors and systems purposefully. They first identified primary systems that provide services to young parents and recruited all key systems to ensure representation in the SAC. Where possible, they aimed to recruit high-level staff in the position to make or influence decisions, such as deputy secretaries of state departments and offices.

An Example of Policy Success

The SAC Healthcare Working Group worked with the state Medicaid Office and Department of Health to change billing codes, ultimately allowing Medicaid-funded school-based health centers to provide prenatal care to students.

within the larger committee focused on specific topics such as health and education. These were areas of need identified by SAC members. Working groups set topic-specific annual and ongoing goals and priorities, determined plans for specific members to achieve these goals, and conferred with the full SAC. Over time, the SAC began apportioning specific time for the working groups to meet during each SAC meeting. Successful actions ranged from raising awareness among state policy decision-makers of EPY's barriers to childcare and transportation, to getting EPY priority in state-level housing subsidy programs written formally into program policy. Following discussions with EPY and other stakeholders, the project formed a group of child welfare-involved EPY. They helped to create a clearer picture of challenges (e.g., redundant case management requirements or administrative barriers to receiving services) and needs (e.g., absence of family financial, emotional, parenting, or childcare support) specific to child-welfare involved EPY.

EPY involvement. EPY voices were integral to the SAC from its inception. The committee included a Young Parent Action Council (YPAC). Some also participated in topic-specific working groups. The SAC called on the YPAC to provide input in planning and executing key activities, including the Annual Town Hall.

The Statewide Advisory Committee

Sectors/departments represented

- Education
- Workforce
- Health
- Early childhood
- Housing
- Food and nutrition
- Juvenile justice
- Child support
- Behavioral health
- Medicaid
- TANF
- Young fathers

Stakeholder types represented

- State-level deputy secretaries
- Other state-level department staff
- GRADS organization leadership
- GRADS teachers
- PAF sub-awardees
- State and local services providers
- Young parents

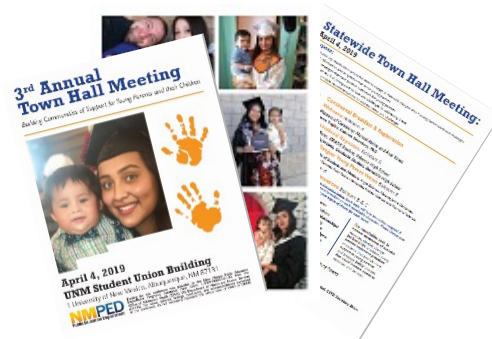
SAC Actions. The group identified services and resources available to young parents within the systems represented, with the aim of "maximizing opportunities to increase access." The SAC's successful efforts and visibility led to further engagements. For example, the New Mexico Early Childhood Department that formed in 2019 worked with the SAC to gather stakeholder and EPY input on the needs of young parents. They also requested feedback from the SAC members in forming the new department's strategic plan. **Working groups**

An Example of Policy Success

A state-level youth workforce coordinator on the SAC worked with her professional network to create a program providing on-site employment and career development services to students in southern New Mexico GRADS sites.

“There’s a lot of barriers for minor parents that were not created maliciously. It’s just an oversight... People don’t think of teen parents. So, they naturally set up rules and regs for 18 and up. And that creates barriers for expectant parenting teens that we’ve had to bring to people’s attention.”—Sub-awardee/SAC Member

In Spring 2017, the project held the first statewide **Annual Town Hall** to elevate and explore the experiences and needs of EPY. The town hall was a working conference, bringing together state-level decision-makers such as cabinet secretaries and deputy secretaries, in addition to service providers, advocates, and young parents. The content topics, speakers, and exhibitors for the town hall were closely tied to the SAC topic-specific working groups, which were themselves focused on addressing SAC-identified areas of need. Together with town hall organizers and other interested stakeholders, SAC working group members encouraged department secretaries within their areas of influence to participate in the town hall.



3rd Annual Town Hall Meeting program (2019)

Roundtable Discussions with Agency Leaders and EPY

State-level officials with decision-making power discussed key topics affecting EPY in roundtable discussions at the Annual Town Hall. Each agency leader was paired with young parents to facilitate a dialogue about the topic or policy area, discuss EPY experiences in accessing those systems, and brainstorm and probe ideas about how to improve access.

for service delivery. EPY and service providers shared success stories, lessons learned, and outcomes. They presented projects such as “Poems for Two Voices” written by EPY participants from the Mother Tongue writing project and their mentors.^a Cabinet secretaries spoke on agency leader panels, where they described services and resources available for young parents within their agencies and shared their thoughts on ways to increase service access.

Each town hall closed with sector and issue-focused roundtables, where both agency leaders and EPY participated. Roundtables were an opportunity for agency leaders to speak directly with EPY who were affected by their decisions, and for the group to articulate specific needs and goals in a variety of topic areas. Notes from these roundtable discussions and the town hall fed into the SAC’s planning and goals for the next year. One grantee noted, *“Part of the reason that we do that*

As of fall 2020, PED had convened the Annual Town Hall for four years (with an interruption in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic). The event had gained substantial momentum, attracting several hundred attendees every year. In 2019, 120 EPY and 120 stakeholders, including decision-makers, attended the Annual Town Hall. Many state-level cabinet secretaries and deputy directors had actively participated in one or more town halls.

Attendees participated in workshops and talks where they discussed practical information about EPY and early childhood needs and experiences, available resources, and best practices

An Example of Policy Success

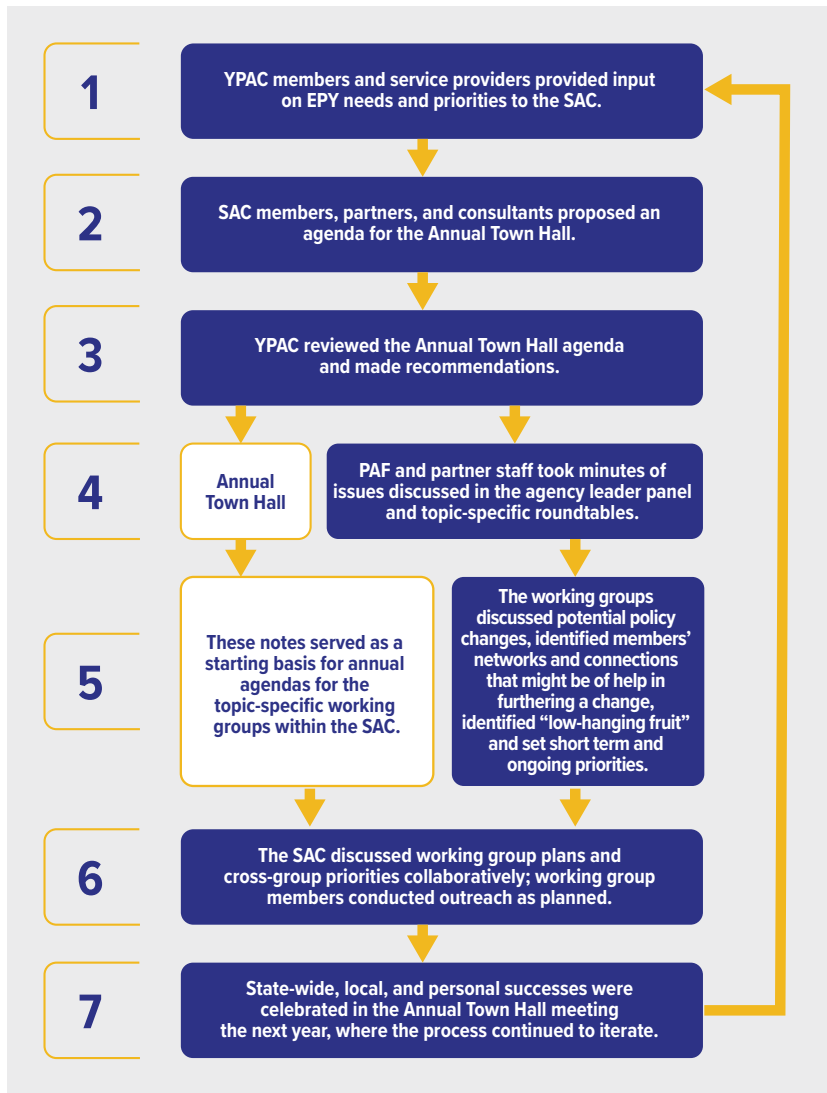
The first step in changing a policy or implementation process was making decision-makers aware of the problem and possible solutions. Through the Annual Town Hall, an HHS cabinet secretary learned that EPY who are minors could not earn Medicaid rewards points in their own right for prenatal visits—dampening the incentive and potential benefit for EPY. This awareness led the secretary to open discussions internally to find a solution.

^a Mother Tongue is an alternative college prep English Language Arts class for expectant and parenting mothers in high school, started by a Santa Fe GRADS teacher. It includes one-to-one mentorship and incorporates literature, research, essay-writing, and public speaking with the intention of building strong writing skills to make authentic, well-crafted narratives and persuasive arguments. (<http://www.mothertongueproject.org/>)

is so that we have our leaders recognizing the needs of parents and actually speaking about it. It's an opportunity for them to meet young parents from all over the state."

New Mexico's Process for EPY Policy Identification, Prioritization, and Change

The PAF project influenced and shepherded policy changes to better support EPY in a number of ways. These included formal and ad-hoc discussions with state-level decision-makers and communication at SAC meetings, the Annual Town Hall, or other events. However, the project also defined a regular process for identifying needs and corresponding policies, prioritizing goals, and facilitating policy changes. While this process varied and iterated, it most often consisted of the following sequence:



With this infrastructure providing dedicated space for mutual understanding and new ideas to grow, the SAC and other PAF partners were able to make or advance concrete changes to policies on the state and local level. PED and partners also noted as a major accomplishment the significant increase in awareness and priority given to the needs of young parents by leadership within state agencies. Department officials who attended town halls or working groups were subsequently willing to discuss changes to policies. In some cases, they proactively incorporated EPY needs into existing agency policies (including an increase in financial support for EPY leaving the foster care system). The SAC working groups also made targeted contacts and preparations leading up to the state legislative session and reported out to the group on progress after the session.

Facilitators of Success

The central role of EPY helped ensure practical goals and increased visibility

PED actively included EPY at every stage of planning and implementation for its efforts to improve state-level policies. This helped ensure that their needs were central to the approach and were more difficult for high-level stakeholders to overlook. EPY served on the SAC, were invited as speakers to share experiences at SAC general meetings, provided input through the YPAC, and served on topic-specific working groups within the

SAC. EPY also spoke at various PED events with legislators or school districts. These events helped raise awareness of the GRADS program's impacts and highlight the need for continued funding or engagement from school districts.

EPY were integral to every aspect of the Annual Town Hall. Their roles and responsibilities increased each year, and by 2019 EPY were registering participants, serving as town hall guides, monitoring or co-chairing workshops and talks, and facilitating roundtables (EPY received stipends for their work). The organizers actively supported and encouraged young parents to bring their babies to the town hall, to further increase their visibility.

EPY Involvement was Essential

- EPY are the experts in their own experiences. Given that they are the ultimate stakeholders of the efforts, their direct input, early and often, was the only way to accurately identify problems and ensure that solutions were effective. Grantees and partners said that many policy and system-level problems emerged because policies were designed and implemented without EPY in mind; their direct involvement may be the best remedy.
- As the ultimate stakeholders, EPY must be highly visible so that decision-makers cannot overlook them. Direct communication through the town hall activities, visibility of expectant and parenting youth, and direct accounts from youth at public or targeted events were critical. They ensured that decision makers genuinely understood EPY's experiences, challenges, and needs. Decision makers were then able to connect EPY needs to positive changes in policy or implementation.

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I think the first step is really increasing awareness that young parents exist and have these challenges in these different systems.

–Grantee

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“There’s nothing like a Commerce Secretary speaking and there are babies in the background going “bleehhh!!”

– EPY leadership consultant

Actively engaging agency leaders amplified policy impacts and system-level engagement

Engaging state and local leaders was essential to spur policy changes and garner support for the GRADS program, which relied extensively on state and federal grant funding and school district support. PED encouraged engagement through direct invitations to individual agency leaders that included the opportunity for them to speak publicly. This gave them a platform to publicize the programs and support available for EPY within their agencies, while also learning more about how their agencies' departments, programs, and policy decisions impacted EPY. Some agency leaders returned to their departments with increased awareness, information, and concrete examples provided by EPY themselves and implemented policy changes. For example, in response to hearing EPY speak personally about their exit from foster care and their needs and challenges, one department decision maker designed an additional subsidy to support EPY exiting the foster care system as young adults.

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“These are our sister agencies that we are inviting to participate. And, in a way, the whole goal is creating communities of support for these young parents. We have leaders there. We have local programs there, and they start to get used to what we’re doing, too. And so, for instance, one Cabinet Secretary called me on the phone. [He said] ‘Okay, what do you need?’ He’s used to coming to our events. And so, they get used to hearing about young parents.” –Grantee

To keep leaders in decision-making positions coming back to the Annual Town Hall and either attending or sending senior staff members to SAC meetings, PED engaged in ongoing, frequent contact. PED also presented events as an opportunity for officials, service providers, and EPY to celebrate successes in policy change and outcomes. This incentivized participation and helped disseminate successful approaches.

An Example of Policy Success

After attending the Annual Town Hall and discussing personal experiences with a young parent exiting foster care, one decision-maker independently created a new subsidy for EPY aging out of foster care, extending state support beyond the standard age limit.

The policy change process relied both on individual champions within and beyond the SAC and coordinated actions through the SAC and working groups

The SAC encouraged members to work at two levels:

- (1) Individually within their spheres of influence or authority to improve policies, share information, grow resources, increase awareness, and advocate for EPY; and
- (2) through topic-specific working groups, where they identified needs, annual goals, policy and service priorities for the topic; and made assignments for action. This was done each year following the Annual Town Hall meeting.

The PAF project director established, maintained, and helped grow the EPY Annual Town Hall and SAC. The director was also a primary conduit for conveying policy priorities for EPY to key stakeholders, including state-level decision-makers. Additionally, independent champions arose within agencies following interaction with the SAC or after attending the Annual Town Hall. Some implemented policy changes on their own within their departments (see example, this page), while others returned with an increased awareness and advocated for youth in policy decisions within their own agencies.

Facilitating School-Based Prenatal Care:

The leader of the SAC healthcare working group used ongoing personal communication and problem-solving to facilitate a policy change with the New Mexico Medicaid program. This change allowed Medicaid-funded school-based health centers to provide prenatal care to students. Steps leading to this change took three years and included:

- Identifying the change needed to solve an administrative problem (unbundling Medicaid charge codes for prenatal care and labor/delivery)
- Finding people in the position to make a change and making personal connections with them
- Identifying interim steps (including the Medicaid bill change and a prerequisite regulatory change) and advocating for those changes
- The Department of Health speaking with Medicaid and changing the encounter codes

Summary

Many policy changes require the sustained attention of multiple high-level stakeholders to bring to fruition. Some, such as New Mexico's change in Medicaid billing codes to allow school-based prenatal care, require a change in office-level policy or implementation and a regulatory change requiring legislative or other high-level approval. At the same time, state-level changes in policy have allowed the New Mexico PAF program to have a lasting influence beyond one-time advocacy for individual EPY. To drive these types of changes, the PAF project worked to build, refine, and maintain a combination of collaborative state-level structures focused on supporting EPY. Combined with individual-level programming through GRADS, these efforts have allowed New Mexico to better support the state's youngest parents to graduate from high school and build healthier children and families.

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- 6 Interviews with New Mexico Public Education Department staff, July 2020.

About the Study

HHS/OPA contracted Abt Associates to identify successful strategies and lessons learned from the Pregnancy Assistance Fund grant program (see <https://opa.hhs.gov/research-evaluation/pregnancy-assistance-fund-paf-program-evaluations/evaluation-key-strategies>). The study produced six topical briefs and corresponding in-depth case studies. The six topics were identified from a review of grantee documents and input from OPA staff. They reflect the range of approaches PAF grantees took to best serve EPY needs. The topics are (1) serving system-involved (justice or child welfare) youth; (2) serving youth in Tribal communities; (3) serving youth in rural communities; (4) cross-sector partnerships; (5) policy and systems-level strategies; and (6) strategies for improving educational outcomes. For each topic, the study selected grantees from the pool of 26 grantees funded in the most recent cohort (2018-2020) and in at least one other cohort.

The briefs and case studies draw from review of grantee documents, performance data, and semi-structured phone interviews with grantee and grantee partner staff. Note that due to COVID-19 restrictions, case studies could not include the originally planned site visits.

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