



Policy and Systems-Level Approaches to Improve Services for Expectant and Parenting Youth and Their Families

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.



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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.

Focus of this Brief

This brief highlights activities of three PAF grantees to meet the needs of EPY through policy and systems-level change. The activities of these grantees and their partners were designed to better align or change the rules, requirements, policies, and legislation affecting EPY. These included requirements made by state and local government bodies, school districts, healthcare providers, human services agencies, courts, and community-based service providers.

PAF grantees and their partners decided to pursue policy or systems-level change because they recognized that some barriers or challenges faced by EPY cannot be addressed by direct service at the individual level alone. This decision was supported by previous research of PAF. Studies highlight the need to coordinate across services, increase public awareness, and navigate state and local laws and cultural contexts.¹

Researchers working in other areas of public health and family well-being have highlighted the value of strategies aimed at policy, systems, and environmental level changes in addition to direct service delivery. Such changes can include reducing redundancies, increasing connectedness among programs and providers, and ensuring that the needs of those being served are incorporated into decision-making.^{2,3} Others have suggested that without system-level change, programs are not able to substantially increase positive outcomes for individuals.^{4,5}

The brief summarizes three grantees' characteristics, grant structures, and primary approaches to policy and systems-level change as part of PAF. It discusses policy barriers the grantees aimed to address and their accomplishments. The brief's final sections highlight factors that facilitated successes and challenges that grantees and communities faced in implementing and maintaining their approaches.

Key Findings:

- EPY faced common challenges rooted in policies and systems. These included gaps in program coverage, policies tailored toward parents who were legal adults, and overlapping policies across agencies that created confusing rules or redundant requirements.
- To identify and address policy and system-level challenges, some PAF grantees established state-level or cross-agency coalitions.
- Cross-agency strategies at the state level helped to facilitate wider awareness among agency leadership and increase the likelihood that they would prioritize policy issues affecting EPY. These strategies also supported policy implementation within agencies.
- Having a dedicated leader focused on policy and systems-level exploration and change was essential to achieving and sustaining policy improvement and alignment for EPY.
- Direct youth involvement in policy identification and change helped to increase awareness of EPY needs and how policy decisions affected their lives.

Three Grantees' Primary Approaches to Policy and Systems-Level Change

The study team interviewed PAF grantees in Massachusetts, New Mexico, and Washington state and a purposive selection of local sub-awardees. The team selected these grantees because their PAF grant applications and progress reports emphasized state and local policy and systems-level approaches to serving young parents. Additionally, they represent three different approaches to implementing policy and systems-level change to benefit EPY. Their local implementation partners provided direct services, but grantees conducted most policy and systems-level change activities themselves. The following briefly describes each grantee organization and its approach to PAF programming.

Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH)

- MDPH provided PAF programming in five cities and towns, through sub-awards to local direct service providers and their

partners. These service providers used an interdisciplinary team approach to incorporate providers and resources from a range of sectors (e.g., healthcare providers and education supports) into PAF services. A single regional service provider with long-standing connections and resources within each community served three of the five locations.

- MDPH served EPY ages 14-24, with an emphasis on EPY ages 21-24, who were often not eligible for other programs serving youth. Some Massachusetts locations served young mothers exclusively.
- MDPH's main policy-centered strategy was to co-host a state-level cross-agency convening to identify policies affecting EPY within participating agencies. The aim of this group was to align policies to: eliminate gaps in program eligibility; reduce redundancy, contradictions, or eligibility gaps between agencies' programs; and remove barriers to service access.

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It was very clear that none of us were talking to each other, and that we were all doing the best we could with whatever funding restrictions we had, and that we were just kind of playing in our own lane. And it was very clear that the end result was that young parents were kind of left to figure out where to go next..
--Massachusetts Grantee

New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED)

- NMPED provided services to EPY enrolled in 29 high schools (across 18 counties) using the school-based GRADS program for education, peer support, and case management.^a NMPED facilitated training and statewide convenings to support coordinated service delivery for EPY and cross-provider peer learning.
- NMPED's primary sub-awardee was the statewide GRADS agency, which oversaw the individual GRADS sites directly. Other partners included a statewide agency focused on school-based healthcare and an agency that provided food and nutrition support. Under the most recent PAF grant, the project brought on a fatherhood mentor to support young fathers.
- NMPED primarily served youth ages 15-19, which provided a clear window into policy challenges facing parents who were minors.
- NMPED used PAF funding to begin convening an annual EPY statewide town hall, co-run by EPY and attended by senior state agency officials. They raised awareness and urgency levels for state agency officials and legislators and identified critical issues for supporting EPY within and across agencies. NMPED also convened a Statewide Advisory Committee of service providers, agency officials, and EPY that focused on specific topics, such as healthcare, childcare, education, and employment.

Washington Department of Health (WADOH)

- WADOH used home visiting-based case management in five counties, with some additional school-based support through GRADS programming and a program for incarcerated fathers. Through sub-awards, local partners delivered the PAF services. The grantee also partnered with statewide organizations, including a fatherhood support coalition, a domestic violence response organization, an organization of Black ministers, and a regional Indian health board.
- WADOH's diverse and statewide programming served EPY ages 16 – 24.
- WADOH used a longstanding framework for setting policy agendas to gain support through the state legislature and Governor's office. WADOH gathered feedback from local service providers, established policy goals and priorities, and advocated for them through the department's policy team. The policy team produced an agenda and recommendations for policymakers, carefully timed to the State's legislative calendar. WADOH also supported a new state and regional partner convening focused on young fathers.

^a GRADS (Graduation, Reality, and Dual-Role Skills) provides in-school programs that address the needs of teenage families, including keeping teen parents in school, promoting maternal and child health, preparation for economic independence, and preventing unintended repeat pregnancies.

Profiles of Three Grantees Serving Expectant and Parenting Youth and Their Families through Policy and Systems-level Approaches

 MASSACHUSETTS	 NEW MEXICO	 WASHINGTON
Grantee (state agency)	Grantee (state agency)	Grantee (state agency)
 Department of Public Health	 Public Education Department	 Department of Health
PAF Grant Periods (fiscal year)	PAF Grant Periods (fiscal year)	PAF Grant Periods (fiscal year)
 2010-2020	 2010-2020	 2010-2020
Number of EPY Served (annual average for 2018–2020)	Number of EPY Served (annual average for 2018–2020)	Number of EPY Served (annual average for 2018–2020)
 188	 320	 356
Service Areas	Service Areas	Service Areas
 Five Massachusetts cities and towns with high teen birth rates	 26 school-based GRADS sites in 18 New Mexico counties	 Five Washington counties
Key Partners	Key Partners	Key Partners
 Local service providers (in turn partnering with local healthcare, education, and employment service providers); the state’s department in charge of benefits provision	 The statewide GRADS agency (which oversees GRADS sites); statewide technical assistance and service providers for school-based healthcare, fatherhood support, and nutrition	 Local service providers, state education department, statewide technical assistance providers for fatherhood support and domestic violence, organization of Black ministers, a regional Tribal health board
Primary Service Approaches	Primary Service Approaches	Primary Service Approaches
 Case management (interdisciplinary team approach, including basic needs, parenting, physical and mental health)	 School-based approach, through GRADS program (education, case management, peer support)	 Home visiting–based, with additional school-based programming through GRADS
Primary Approach to Policy and Systems	Primary Approach to Policy and Systems	Primary Approach to Policy and Systems
 State-level cross-agency convening to identify and align policies and programs to remove barriers for EPY	 State-level town hall to identify and elevate policies relating to EPY for decision-makers. Regular state-level working group dovetailed with annual town hall	 Agency-level agenda-setting approach centered on state-level executive and legislative decision-makers
Age Group Focus	Age Group Focus	Age Group Focus
 Parents ages 14-24, focusing on filling service gaps for parents ages 21-24.	 Parents ages 15-19 (primarily in high school)	 Parents ages 16-24 (with some sites providing teen parent services through GRADS)

Sources: Grant applications, progress reports, performance measures reported to HHS/OPA, and information provided in interviews.

All three grantees' statewide policy and systems-level approaches aimed to address similar types of needs and challenges. Each included convening as a key component of their approach. At the same time, the approaches they took varied across several dimensions:

- **Governmental focus.** The grantees varied in the degree to which their approaches were intra-agency or cross-agency and whether they focused on the legislative branch of state government. Massachusetts and New Mexico engaged different state-level agencies through cross-agency convenings. In contrast, Washington focused efforts on policy change through the legislative session and the governor's office.
- **Degree to which EPY were involved in the approach.** EPY involvement fell on a continuum of indirect involvement (youth experiences and priorities filtering up through direct service providers) to direct (youth actively involved in activities). For all three grantees, local service provider partners were a conduit for sharing youth experiences and incorporating these experiences into discussions about policy and systems change. Washington and Massachusetts relied primarily on implementation partners to provide examples of EPY experiences, needs, and challenges. By contrast, New Mexico involved EPY directly in convenings, planning, and agenda setting. Whether EPY were more directly integrated into activities, as in New Mexico, or more indirectly involved, as in Washington and Massachusetts, all three grantees understood and embraced the importance of EPY involvement.
- **Tenure of each approach.** The length of time that statewide approaches to policy change and alignment had been in place varied by grantee and played an important role in what they could accomplish. Massachusetts and New Mexico were constantly engaging and re-engaging agency leaders and working group participants in response to cross-agency agendas and directives. This required effort to build structure and momentum but allowed for flexibility and a more dynamic response. Washington relied on a long-standing process within the state health department to advance IPY-supporting programs, resource requests, and policies. This established approach was more stable and lower maintenance but less adaptable.

Barriers Addressed by Policy and Systems Change Efforts

The grantees and their partners identified numerous policy-specific barriers faced by EPY as they attempted to access services. Sometimes the issues stemmed from policy and program misalignment between or within departments. The PAF projects typically addressed multiple policy issues and system goals at a given time. Policy domains they worked to address spanned TANF and Medicaid benefits rules, school accommodations (mostly relating to absences), housing assistance rules, childcare rules and benefits, school-based healthcare, family reunification after temporary loss of custody, and others. Interviewees across the three states also mentioned efforts to interest state legislatures in funding programs supporting young parents, particularly because PAF funding was ending in Fiscal Year 2020.

Policy barriers to the health and well-being of EPY and their families participating in PAF fell broadly in three categories: 1) Access to services for parents, 2) Meeting needs and goals, and 3) Excessive requirements for service participants or overlapping policies.

EPY faced barriers to accessing services due to program eligibility requirements or definitions

Eligibility requirements between and within public benefits and support programs made it difficult for EPY to access some services. Across all three grantees and their partners, interviewees reported that the constellation of policies that EPY faced were complex to navigate or did not offer sufficient support for EPY. They described policies and programs with "holes"—for example, a mismatch in ages served by programs, or programs for young parents or parents living in poverty that were limited to first-time parents. MDPH described the need for state agencies to define young parents in a uniform way (e.g., an age range) to make clearer how policies applied and to limit gaps in support. Grantees highlighted the need to close gaps in eligibility, coordinate across departments, and help youth navigate the existing eligibility requirements.

Agencies set program eligibility rules with the assumption that parents are adults

Policy- and decision-makers often designed programs and policies without considering that parents may be under age 18. This led to unintended barriers to minors accessing services. For example, EPY who are minors are often ineligible for TANF because program rules provide benefits to adults, and only to minors through their own parents. These program and benefits challenges ranged broadly, from TANF to healthcare.

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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. And sometimes there are legal barriers that we are still working on that are still challenges because of the law related to minors. But we have made progress I feel just out of awareness-building. –Statewide Partner

EPY faced barriers to meeting needs and goals because of inflexible school and employment-related policies designed for minors who were not parents

Grantees and their implementation partners reported that policies designed for participants who were not parents were barriers to meeting EPY needs, such as completing high school and accessing other education or employment. Often these were policies related to high school attendance or school bus rules. For example, existing policies on attendance did not allow for enough absences to cover birth, recovery, and care for a newborn or new mother, temporary remote or home visit school options, or options to make up lost time. Additionally, though some schools had childcare on site or nearby, often state or local rules precluded EPY from bringing their own children on school buses. These were significant barriers to high school completion for EPY.

EPY can become overwhelmed when seeking to understand and work within overlapping policies across agencies

Grantees and their partners reported that the complex web of policies, programs, and systems was itself a barrier. Policies from one agency or program might interact or overlap with policies from other agencies and programs in ways that were difficult to navigate and could discourage EPY from seeking benefits or services. For example, youth receiving multiple benefits or participating in multiple programs might be required to meet regularly with a case manager for each, with no option to reduce meetings and no mechanism for the case managers to communicate with one another without violating privacy laws. A Washington partner that supported youth affected by domestic violence reported that policies from different programs overlapped in a way that was confusing and difficult to navigate for both EPY and advocates or home visitors supporting them (e.g., interactions between TANF and child support in abusive situations, tenants' rights, and paid sick leave rules).

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Some of the findings [from focus groups with young parents] were that some young parents have four caseworkers across different programs in the state, which is not efficient. In some cases, the programs are offering different benefits, or different services.... Managing four caseworkers could be like a job. Some young parents can't do it. –Grantee

More generally, interviewees across all three states mentioned that young parents could be particularly vulnerable and overextended because of their responsibilities, such as completing high school while parenting and looking for a way to be economically self-sufficient.

Accomplishments in Policy Change and Alignment

Despite the challenges of working to improve or align policies and systems, grantees and their partners pointed to a range of concrete accomplishments that ranged across services and levels of government. As of Spring 2020, these accomplishments included: 1) identifying gaps and misalignments between agencies' policies and spurring policy changes, 2) spearheading or supporting changes to key rules affecting school attendance and transportation, 3) engaging high-level state officials in policy and systems-level work to increase the officials' awareness of EPY needs, and 4) using state-level convening to support local implementation partners and their communities in making local policy changes.

Grantees identified gaps and misalignment between agencies' policies and spurred make policy changes

Gaps in services. Through their efforts, grantees and their partners were able to identify and help fill gaps in services. For example, WADOH pointed to positive changes in state policies allowing local school districts to support childcare and bus access for the children of EPY. They noted, however, that *implementing* these changes happens on the district level and requires funding, which is "still a work in progress." They also reported that PAF had set up a fatherhood alliance in three cities. They pointed to a greater awareness of EPY needs and challenges at the state level. This included awareness of outcomes achieved by the GRADS program, which they hoped would increase state funding and support needed for expansion.

Misalignment. Grantees and partners were able to identify areas where policies were misaligned (often because they were not set with minor parents in mind) or mismatched or redundant between agencies. For example, the cross-agency collaboration led by MDPH helped the Massachusetts Department of Transitional Assistance recognize that policies around cash benefits and food assistance eligibility were hindering EPY employment. The Department removed the earnings cap for eligibility to these programs for the first six months employed. An MDPH implementation partner said that this change seemed to have both increased participation in the benefits program and increased educational attainment among the youth with which they worked. In New Mexico, one statewide partner reported facilitating a change in Medicaid charge codes that unbundled prenatal care from labor and delivery costs. That change allowed pregnant students to receive initial prenatal care from school-based health centers.

Grantees spearheaded legislative changes needed to help EPY graduate from high school

One of New Mexico's most far reaching and concrete accomplishments preceded the formation of its town hall and Statewide Advisory Committee. In 2013, NMPED supported the passing and implementation of a new state law requiring school districts to amend attendance policies to increase excused absences for young parents for prenatal care and treatment, birth, recovery, and pediatric doctor's appointments. This change removed a significant barrier to high school graduation for EPY.

Grantees engaged high-level state officials in policy and systems-level work, which increased the officials' awareness of EPY needs and led to concrete changes in policy and implementation

Interviewees reported significantly improving awareness and priority of young parents' needs within state agencies. This helped correct or prevent unintended consequences that resulted from agencies setting and implementing policies independently and without young parents in mind. Agency officials who attended town halls or Statewide Advisory Committee working groups were open to discussing policy changes. After attending a town hall, some of these officials proactively incorporated EPY needs into existing agency policies (e.g., greater financial support for EPY leaving the foster system). The NMPED grantee also noted that young parents became a priority population for the state housing grant which provided rental assistance to residents of the state. They attributed this prioritization to having successfully increased policy makers' awareness of young parents' housing challenges.

Factors That Helped Grantees Accomplish Policy Goals

The points below present the key factors that helped grantees and their partners accomplish or advance their policy goals and approaches.

Project leaders dedicated to policy and system-level change were essential to grantees' successes

Each of the grantee agencies had a staff member, supported by the PAF grant, who served as the primary advocate for policy-related work to meet the needs of EPY. This person also led efforts to strengthen or establish state-level policy alignment and advocacy activities.

In Massachusetts, the grant project director worked with a leader in another state agency to form and maintain the cross-agency collaboration. The project director worked with a sub-grantee to address high school attendance policy for EPY. Similarly, in New Mexico, the project director worked to establish, maintain, and help grow both the EPY town hall and the Statewide Advisory Committee. This position was the primary conduit for aligning and elevating policy priorities for EPY across state-level agencies. In Washington, the process for prioritizing policies was well-established within WADOH. Because of this, WADOH did not establish a new process to develop and advocate for policy change. The project director did, however, take on the role of gathering lessons from the experiences of state and local PAF sub-awardees to guide and advocate for policy and legislative priorities.

In at least some cases, PAF funding was essential (though not sufficient on its own) to supporting these staff roles focused on convening, coordinating, and setting policy goals and approaches. Some interviewees noted that, should these leadership positions no longer exist after PAF funding ended, there may be no mechanism to maintain statewide groups or to advocate for policy and systems-level changes for EPY.

Champions within other agencies supported grantees' successes

In Massachusetts, the MDPH project director started the cross-agency collaboration to support EPY by finding common goals with a senior leader at the state's Department of Transitional Assistance. These two champions worked together to better align benefits rules falling under the Department's purview for parents who were minors. The champion within the Department of Transitional Assistance helped to keep both their agency and others engaged in the policy alignment work.

In New Mexico, champions at all levels were evident within the topic-specific working groups that met as part of the Statewide Advisory Committee. For example, a leader of the health and healthcare working group took the initiative to work directly with Medicaid staff to change a billing practice that made it difficult for EPY to receive prenatal care in school-based clinics. While the goal to change this practice was likely set in the annual town hall or subsequent working group meetings, the individual advocate's relationships and actions are what ultimately made the change possible.

Having the grantees situated in state agencies helped projects to think at the state level

The grantees themselves were all state-level agencies (MDPH, NMPED, WADOH). Their roles in state government may have allowed them to see state-level policy change and alignment as both necessary and achievable. The cross-agency collaboration in Massachusetts began by identifying policies under each participating agency or office and assessing how they affected EPY. They examined individual policies as well as overlap or misalignment between policies across agencies. While a local provider may have been able to see that EPY were hitting roadblocks because of holes or contradictions in state agency policies, it took a state agency to make direct connections between its own agency and others operating at the same level of government.

Similarly, one of the ongoing tasks of New Mexico's Statewide Advisory Committee was to help agency decision-makers identify their own policies and programs that affected the well-being of EPY and how these policies interacted with those of other agencies. NMPED could affect its own agency's policies; it was also familiar with how policies were set and implemented within other state-level agencies and what was required to coordinate between agencies.

Grantees needed to build cross-agency awareness of EPYs' experiences to gain support for policy changes

MDPH and NMPED reported that to obtain support from decision-makers across key agencies, they needed to help them understand the impact of policy misalignment on EPY. For example, after the town halls convened by NMPED, decision-makers in other departments were more likely to approach NMPED about specific policy barriers discussed or to respond to requests for help than before they attended the town halls.

WADOH's approach to policy change and alignment relied on elevating the priority of services and support for EPY in statewide legislation, budgeting, and executive-level decision-making. WADOH also needed to convince its own department-level policy convening that EPY needs should be a priority for the departments' legislative agendas.

Grantee staff worked to increase awareness of and commitment to policy goals within and across agencies:

- Massachusetts: Repeated communication to encourage department decision-makers to participate in the cross-agency convening
- New Mexico: Encouraged decision-makers to participate in the town hall by inviting them to speak
- Washington: Shared data with Governor's office and state legislature to help them quantify needs of EPY and understand their experiences and outcomes

Challenges in Policy Change and Alignment

Most of the challenges that grantees or their partners reported hinged on one of three things: 1) the ongoing challenge of gaining and maintaining decision-makers' attention to EPY issues, 2) scarce resources for policy change and alignment, and 3) the range of cross-agency policies and programs affecting EPY.

Key decision-makers' lack of attention or commitment could stall or block efforts

Lack of resources and attention from some key stakeholders was a significant challenge for grantees. Some grantees reported that key state agencies were unwilling or unable to participate in a convening. Thus, the grantee worked individually with regional representatives or specific offices within the agencies to target a recommended policy change, or they had to work within other agencies. Gaining and maintaining the attention of high-level stakeholders within an agency or organization (e.g., department leadership) required ongoing effort for the two grantees convening cross-agency groups. One grantee noted that constant communication through e-mail and phone calls was essential for maintaining engagement as was following up when group members missed a meeting.

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I think folks originally were very excited about being able to align services, and really understand what were gaps and do something about it. But I think that because we were in the research, and really on the early stages of everything that we were trying to collect in order to move strategically, to address the needs, and to be able to address everything, it just took longer, and folks kind of dropped off. And then the meetings went from being every other month to quarterly to then every four months. –Grantee

To the degree that grantees were able to maintain the attention of key stakeholders, they did so by highlighting their successes and the level of need in communities. For example, NMPED illustrated higher graduation rates for GRADS participants compared to their peers and pointed to past policy accomplishments that may have contributed. All grantees aimed to capture and maintain key stakeholders' attention by making the need personal and concrete—for example, by sharing data or EPY personal stories. In the case of NMPED's town hall, EPY presented stories, opinions, and priorities.

Resources for policy changes and alignment are rare and limited

In both Massachusetts and New Mexico, the PAF staff members instituted and maintained cross-agency collaboratives. Grantee and partner staff pointed to the ongoing challenge of limited resources for managing policy alignment and change. They noted that the resources grantees used for dedicated staff were only available during the PAF grant period. Furthermore, lack of internal resources meant that collaborative work begun during the PAF grant period may not have resources or momentum to continue after the grant ended. For example, it was uncertain whether NMPED would be able to continue convening the cross-agency collaborative or the EPY town hall after the PAF grant ended, or whether other staff members within NMPED or another agency would be able to take on this leadership in addition to their other duties.

The constellation of policies and programs affecting young parents who were minors was particularly challenging to unravel and often involved rules from multiple agencies or programs

The volume and diversity of policies and program rules that were unintentionally inter-related or inter-dependent made it difficult to identify or address misalignment. Benefits to minors from programs such as Medicaid and TANF are often linked to their parents, making it difficult to serve minors who themselves are parents and may need benefits for their children. While filling holes in eligibility or improving policies did not always require legislative involvement, it often did require the involvement of multiple agencies and offices within those agencies unaccustomed to changing rules of this magnitude.

Conclusion

The examples of these three PAF grantees and their partners highlighted the importance of implementing state-level policy and systems changes to better align policies with the needs of EPY and their families. The grantees' policy and systems-level approaches allowed them to better address those needs at scale, by making specific changes to policies that benefited more EPY than at the direct service level alone. Furthermore, though ongoing funding would be necessary to maintain capacity to examine and improve policies within and across agencies, most of the changes made with these approaches during the grant period could have long-lasting effects even after funding has ended.

From the experience of these grantees, the PAF program supported policy and systems-level change and alignment in two ways: It connected staff in state-level agencies with local direct service providers and youth, and it provided the resources and motivation for grantee staff to lead or support priorities for EPY across and within state agencies. The range of approaches these grantees used to implement this work varied. These statewide approaches depended on the resources and leadership styles of the grantee project directors and on existing state and departmental structures and relationships.

Working across state agencies or with state legislatures brings challenges. It requires identifying how each agency or program contributes to creating barriers for EPY, gaining and maintaining the attention and priority of key advocates, and sustaining and growing efforts to keep state-level awareness of EPY needs and challenges high. Through purposeful approaches, each of these three PAF grants was able to identify barriers that EPY face daily, prioritize policy and systems change goals to support EPY, collaborate with other stakeholders, and achieve lasting changes.

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