Economic Mobility for Low-Income Populations: A Blueprint for the Future

Over the past decade, new understandings have emerged about issues that impact the design and implementation of services designed to improve economic mobility. Because these understandings are not program specific, they carry implications for several programs, including but not limited to Temporary Assistance of Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Energy Security, Child Support, Housing, and Workforce Development.

This brief article identifies these issues (economic mobility, measurable outcomes and program design, the social determinants of health, coaching as case management, muti-generational poverty, equity – access-participant voice, virtual work, community collaboration, and organizational change) and suggests that states should leverage this increased understanding to enhance the effectiveness of the afore mentioned programs. State and local program leaders are in the best position to identify current program strengths and challenges and build more contemporary program capacity and strategies. In this article, we identify these issues and suggest a strategic direction for their implementation.

Economic Mobility as the Core Aspiration

The use of the term economic mobility suggests a broader philosophical foundation than immediate employment expectations. Several decades of experience have revealed that forcing everyone into employment in exchange for benefits (which are often meager) may force some participants into roles for which they are not prepared and/or negatively impact program participation. The term economic mobility suggests a broader philosophical foundation should be used to drive program attention toward an increased focus on participant strengths and challenges and provide the right supportive services in the right order to achieve more sustainable family stability outcomes. Additionally, because of current policy opportunities and restrictions, program planners may need to find ways to increase opportunities (even voluntary) for program participants (e.g., child support) to access broader sets of supportive and family stability services.

Measurable Outcomes and Program Design

Increased attention is needed to better define clear definitions of desired success for participant economic mobility. More attention to this fundamental element will increase the potential to align such outcomes with resources, services, strategies, and partnerships. The use of logic models and nationally identified best practices, data dashboards, economic mobility assessments, supportive service asset mapping, and effective partnerships with workforce programming should be routine across all programs that intend to improve economic mobility outcomes.

Social Determinants of Health (SDoH)

The social determinants of health correlate with the quality and longevity of life. The domains and factors within the social determinants of health create a framework to increase understanding about individual and family strengths and challenges; provide an effective service array; and develop community strategies to prevent population "health" inequities before they become acute. This framework is also a logical

foundation to improve service coordination, integrate and/or consolidate programs and human service, physical health, and behavioral health agencies.

Coaching as Case Management

Traditional case management is a process to help individuals and families address one or more specific challenges (e.g., employment). Generally, traditional case management uses screening tools to determine participant eligibility, identify barriers, and impose organizationally-driven plans and timelines. These expectations can emphasize compliance, an agency/case manager driven action plan, and a case manager–participant relationship characterized by one way communication to the participant.

In contrast, coaching as case management is a philosophy and set of techniques used by the case manager to support participants in self-identifying and achieving their goals through individualized planning. Coaching increases participant involvement and ownership in the process by emphasizing participant strengths and goals rather than organizationally determined measures of success. Effective coaches understand the impact of toxic stress on executive brain function and use motivational interviewing and trauma informed practice to conduct comprehensive assessments for participants to self-identify strengths and short and long-term goals, create a participant driven action plan, and foster a case manager–participant relationship characterized by rapport, authenticity, and trust.

Multigenerational Poverty

Communities around the country are implementing multigenerational approaches that focus simultaneously on supporting parents and preventing their children, and sometimes their children's children, from repeating a cycle of poverty and poor health outcomes. Whole family approaches in low-income housing areas and in other contexts create efficiencies, multiplier effects, and can increase access to services. Assessing and providing services through a SDoH lens would be a powerful framework.

Equity, Access, and Participant Voice

Inclusion of participant voices and on-going authentic listening about the customer experience can reveal unintended negative impacts of program design, business flows, and the challenges that customers face that affect program participation and success. Important understanding can be developed across research methods, including survey and focus group activities. Participant voice should drive program improvements, address equity challenges, and increase program access. Stakeholder advisory committees, routine customer feedback, and program participant/leavers analyses can net valuable information and support organizational culture change.

Virtual Work

COVID-19 has revealed a myriad of service delivery opportunities and challenges for organizations, program participants, and case managers. These new understandings and capacities should be maintained to provide maximum service effectiveness for customers and improved work-life balance for staff. Lessons learned about technology and technology platforms, equipment, and internet connections; managing and supervising a virtual workforce; training and staff development; and personnel policy implications; should be codified to sustain current approaches and maintain readiness to implement virtual service delivery in an ever-changing environment.

Community Collaboration

Sustainable economic mobility for low–income populations requires that community leaders, stakeholders, and organizations work together to identify mutual goals and the implementation of more coordinated services and strategies. This is difficult but necessary work to increase the odds that low–income individuals and families (often served by the same agencies) will be able to access the full range of supportive services that will make a make a measurable and sustainable positive difference.

Organizational Change

Building more modernized and better-coordinated strategies within and/or across programs will cause significant change. Planning and implementing change require leadership, stakeholder involvement, a practical action plan, and on–going training. Implementation of new strategies and capacities is a process and requires a clear vision about a better future and patience for practical implementation that accounts for natural staff uncertainty.

Summary

Building more equitable, modernized, and effective systems to achieve economic mobility for low–income populations means that states and communities must work beyond current program silos, engage authentically with all stakeholders, and build new capacities and strategies within and despite existing policies across traditional program constructs. Effective partnerships between traditional, means–tested programs and the workforce system, behavioral health, and post–secondary education agencies are essential.

About Poverty Solutions at ICF

The Poverty Solutions practice at ICF engages with state, federal, and nonprofit partners to promote authentic economic mobility and family well–being. Our team includes technical assistance specialists, researchers, planners and facilitators, organizational change leaders, former program administrators, and technologists committed to a more equitable and outcome driven domestic safety net within and across programs that builds authentic wellness across the Social Determinants of Health.

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