

# Chapin Hall Policy Brief



## System Transformation to Support Child & Family Well-Being: The Central Role of Economic & Concrete Supports

This brief summarizes the historical policy context and provides an overview of policy, programmatic, analytic, and engagement strategies for leveraging economic supports to promote child and family well-being and prevent maltreatment.

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession, and recognition of the role of systemic racism in driving disparate outcomes for families of color have accelerated momentum toward reshaping the social safety net. While numerous policies and initiatives designed to promote improvements have emerged in the area of child welfare, promoting the well-being of children and families requires that we address challenges far upstream of child protective services. Just as we recognize that the role of emergency rooms is not to prevent but to triage and treat acute, severe problems, responsibility for the prevention of child maltreatment lies beyond the child welfare system alone.

A public health approach to improving both safety and well-being of children demands that the entire human service system provide coordinated prevention, supports, detection, and services to ensure that families have what they need and children are safe and healthy. System transformation to improve child and family well-being—a broad term encompassing quality of life, functioning, and strengths as well as the avoidance of negative outcomes—must involve coordination among all human service agencies.

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(Children's Bureau, 2021)

Within the child welfare system, authentic transformation requires disentangling the issues of poverty and maltreatment, particularly neglect, and re-conceptualizing how the human service system responds to families with insufficient resources to make ends meet. Being poor does not make someone a poor parent, though poverty can create conditions under which maltreatment is more likely to occur. Similarly, addressing economic risk and poverty is necessary, but not sufficient to end child maltreatment or the need for child protective services. While our current data reporting systems challenge our ability to parse poverty from child neglect, more than 60% of maltreatment determinations are for neglect without abuse (Children's Bureau, 2021). Families and communities would be well served by a coordinated human services response focused on addressing the range of family needs, building protective capacities, and linking families with supportive resources and structures. The failure to adequately and comprehensively address the economic needs of families means that, for many, economic need and disparity are at the heart of child welfare system involvement.

This prompts us to consider a variety of policy, program, analytic (data), and engagement (people) steps to understand and address the relationship between economic risk and well-being outcomes.

This brief focuses on the opportunity and the imperative facing the child welfare system as it undergoes an historic shift toward acknowledging the role of economic supports in stabilizing families and preventing maltreatment. Subsequent briefs will provide deeper examination of the role of other systems (human services, mental health, public health, housing, employment security, health care financing) as well as the specific actions that can be taken in policy, data analytics, programming, and engagement to inform the development of a coordinated system of supports for families.

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## Background

### **Economic Hardship and Child Maltreatment**

Families below the poverty line are three times more likely to be substantiated for child maltreatment (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2014). Economic disparities and historical systemic disadvantages have fueled disproportionate child welfare system involvement among families of color; Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) families are disproportionately more likely to be poor due to longstanding systemic conditions (Semega et al., 2020). Evidence about the root causes of child maltreatment has been well documented, including poverty-related risk factors such as unemployment, single parenthood, housing instability, earlier child-bearing, and lack of child care (Escaravage, 2014; Marcal, 2017).

The income status of families is a significant predictor of involvement with the child welfare system (McLaughlin, 2017; Pelton, 2015; Conrad-Hiebner & Byram, 2020; Brooks-Gunn et al., 2013), and county-level poverty rates are associated with foster care placement rates among children of all races (Wulczyn et al., 2013).

Further, the majority of reported child maltreatment is neglect, and the majority of substantiated cases (60.8%) have been reported for neglect only (Children’s Bureau, 2021). While families experiencing poverty and economic insecurity do have higher rates of child abuse and neglect (Boyer & Halbrook, 2011; Courtney et al., 2005), current data reporting makes it difficult to parse problems related solely to poverty from neglect signifying maltreatment.

## Historical Policy Context

The establishment of mandatory reporting laws has created a system of surveillance rather than support.

Unstable housing, food insecurity, and economic shortfalls are problems that can endanger children and jeopardize the stability of families, but the child welfare system is neither resourced nor designed to address the consequences of poverty. Early child welfare system leaders recognized the need to provide financial supports to mothers (such as Mother’s Pensions) in order to maintain the integrity of families and enable poor parents to maintain care and custody of their children (Thomas et al., in press). However, several key decisions resulted in separating fiscal supports from child protection. Namely, the Social Security Act of 1935 nested Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) within the Social Security Administration, while situating social services for families within the federal Children’s Bureau. This bifurcated the key supports and oversight that would be needed to ensure that

children are protected without separating families. It also shifted the focus away from economic supports as a strategy for keeping families together, initiating a trajectory that has had profound social, political, and cultural consequences for generations of children, and particularly children and families of color.

Mandated reporting laws (requiring key individuals interacting with children to report suspected abuse or neglect) were enacted in 1974 as part of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and required states to implement child abuse and neglect reporting procedures. The laws, which vary across states and jurisdictions, do not include standard guidelines or expectations for the training of mandated reporters.

The establishment of mandatory reporting laws has created a system of surveillance rather than a system of service delivery, in part because nearly every state imposes penalties, such as fines or imprisonment, on mandated reporters who fail to report. In addition, many professionals are concerned about liability if they do not report. Mandated reporters represent a potential source of support in identifying problems and seeking solutions, and many believe that a child protection hotline call will result in service delivery. However, their calls often initiate a sequence of intrusive and expensive actions (for example, child protection investigations) rather than link families with needed supports. Liberal and imprecise approaches to mandated reporting paired with systemic bias disadvantages families of color, who are overrepresented in both poverty and child abuse reporting. This has resulted in vastly disparate experiences as well as inadequate, punitive, and inefficient mechanisms for serving families.

Professionals from the education, medical, mental health, and social service systems account for the majority of all reports that are made to child

protective services (Children’s Bureau, 2021), yet these professionals are working in systems that have the ability to provide primary preventive community-based services. Many of the reports they make do not result in an indicated victimization or the delivery of services. This mandated “system of surveillance” has unintentionally shifted the accountability for the well-being of children from the primary prevention sector to a tertiary system that was designed to respond to egregious acts of child maltreatment.

By realigning incentives to preserve families and creating opportunities to deliver interventions aimed at preventing further system involvement, the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA, 2017) offers unprecedented opportunities to expand the availability of preventive evidence-based interventions to intact families. However, it continues the policy trajectory of addressing maltreatment by treating parents’ service needs (substance abuse, mental health, and parenting deficits) without explicitly taking on poverty as a source of family stress and instability. It falls short of embracing the potential of economic and concrete supports that may serve a key role in prevention and does not prescribe the type of inter-agency collaboration that would be necessary to move prevention upstream of child welfare. FFPSA’s narrow focus on prevention via behavioral health and in-home services overlooks the centrality of economic risk.

These and myriad other policy decisions have resulted in a child welfare system that is neither resourced nor designed to provide families with the array of supports they need to stay safely together, and that remains separate from the other agencies that could offer support to decrease risk and prevent maltreatment. It is reactive to economic distress but not designed, equipped, nor resourced to directly address the root causes of maltreatment.

## Economic and Concrete Supports

Financial supports reduce child abuse and neglect by enabling families to better access resources and address their own basic needs.

Building the capacity and pathways for families to receive needed supports requires an understanding of the mechanism by which economic risk drives child maltreatment reporting. The relationship may be direct or indirect: models such as the Family Stress Model suggest an indirect relationship in which unmet economic needs destabilize families and create parental and child stress that disrupts parenting and child development, which can lead to abuse or neglect (Conger et al., 1994). In this way, economic challenges due to unemployment, single parenthood, earlier childbearing, and lack of child care can build stressors within a family that puts it at a higher risk of child maltreatment. Along these lines, supports such as access to appropriate, affordable, and available child care enable working parents to not only maintain their jobs to support their families, but also improve parenting ability by decreasing the stressors of single parenting and promoting balancing professional and parenting responsibilities.

Many of the frameworks that have emerged to organize areas of essential support to families include economic or “concrete” supports as an essential protective factor. The Strengthening Families framework defines “concrete support in times of need” as “the basic necessities everyone deserves in order to grow and thrive (e.g., healthy,

food, a safe and protective environment), as well as specialized health, mental health, social, legal, educational, or employment,” (Harper Browne, 2014, p. 48). Similarly, in *Essentials for Childhood*, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) propose a set of strategies aimed at preventing abuse and neglect that is grounded in economic supports and includes strategies that aim to reduce familial stress (Centers for Disease Control, 2020).

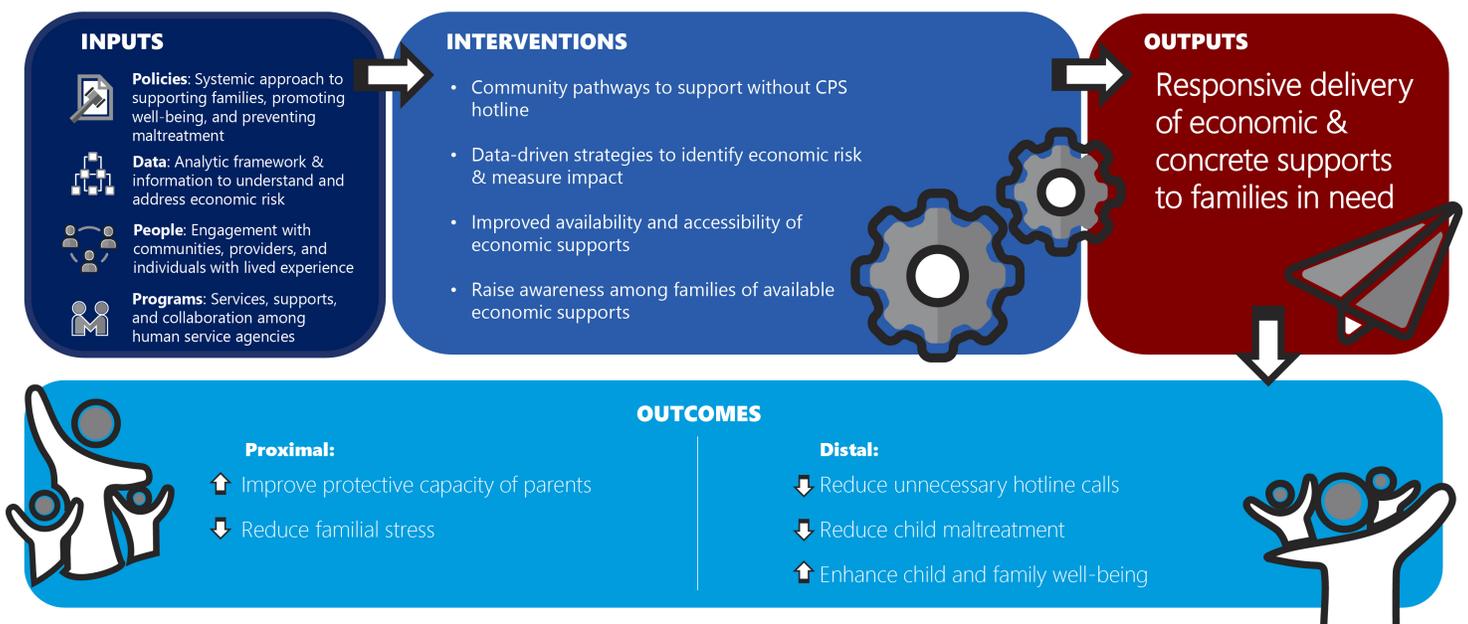
As described, mandated reporters are well-positioned to identify the need for concrete supports, but need alternatives to a child welfare hotline call that initiates an inefficient, circuitous, and unnecessarily intrusive process (for example, child welfare investigation) that may not result in service delivery.

Effective planning for the delivery of supports to families will require attention to the mediators of the relationship between economic risk and child maltreatment. Financial supports may reduce parental stress, and alternative pathways and inter-agency collaboration may provide mandated reporters with the ability to link families to resources. Figure 1 displays a theory of change for the relationship between economic and concrete supports and the prevention of maltreatment, which is just one component of improved child and family well-being.<sup>1</sup> One could envision additional models keyed to other child and family outcomes to guide the development of an array of coordinated strategies to address economic risk.

**Figure 1. Theory of Change**

# THEORY OF CHANGE

## ECONOMIC & CONCRETE SUPPORTS



<sup>1</sup> Theories of change consider the root causes of the problems we seek to address, the population affected by them, and the intended outcomes of intervention. These may include short-term, or proximal, outcomes, such as the reduction of parental stress, which are prerequisites for long-term, or distal, outcomes, such as the prevention of child maltreatment reports.

When economic interventions have been tested, even modest financial supports reduce child abuse and neglect by enabling families to better access resources and address their own basic needs (Duncan et al, 2014). Research has documented some beneficial effects of supports for housing, child care, and concrete needs. In the context of efforts to provide family support in lieu of child protection investigations (such as “alternative response” or “differential response”), concrete supports have been associated with reductions in subsequent reports for neglect, as well as reductions in foster care entries (Loman & Siegel, 2012). Other interventions delivered in the context of family preservation (such as secondary prevention) programs have also been associated with reductions in subsequent child maltreatment reports (Rostad et al., 2017). It is important to recognize and reconcile these findings with the observation that families who access economic supports have higher rates of child welfare system involvement (Goerge et al., 1993a), which may reflect the inadequacy of existing data for understanding the temporal sequencing and nuance of family needs or the inadequacy of existing supports to address complex challenges.

To address housing, some supportive housing programs (such as vouchers and case management) and housing subsidies have reduced removals to foster care and maltreatment reports, but results have been mixed and programs have been difficult to scale (Farrell et al., 2018; Gubits, 2015).

Research on new guaranteed income programs is underway; historically, economic interventions like child care subsidies have been demonstrated to reduce parental stress as well as foster care placements (Meloy et al, 2015; Yang et al., 2019). Medicaid expansion has also been correlated with decreases in the rate of child neglect (Brown et al., 2019). Conversely, policy changes that reduce families’ access to TANF have been associated with

increases in child abuse and neglect substantiated reports and foster care entries (Ginther & Johnson-Motoyama, 2017).

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## The Path Forward

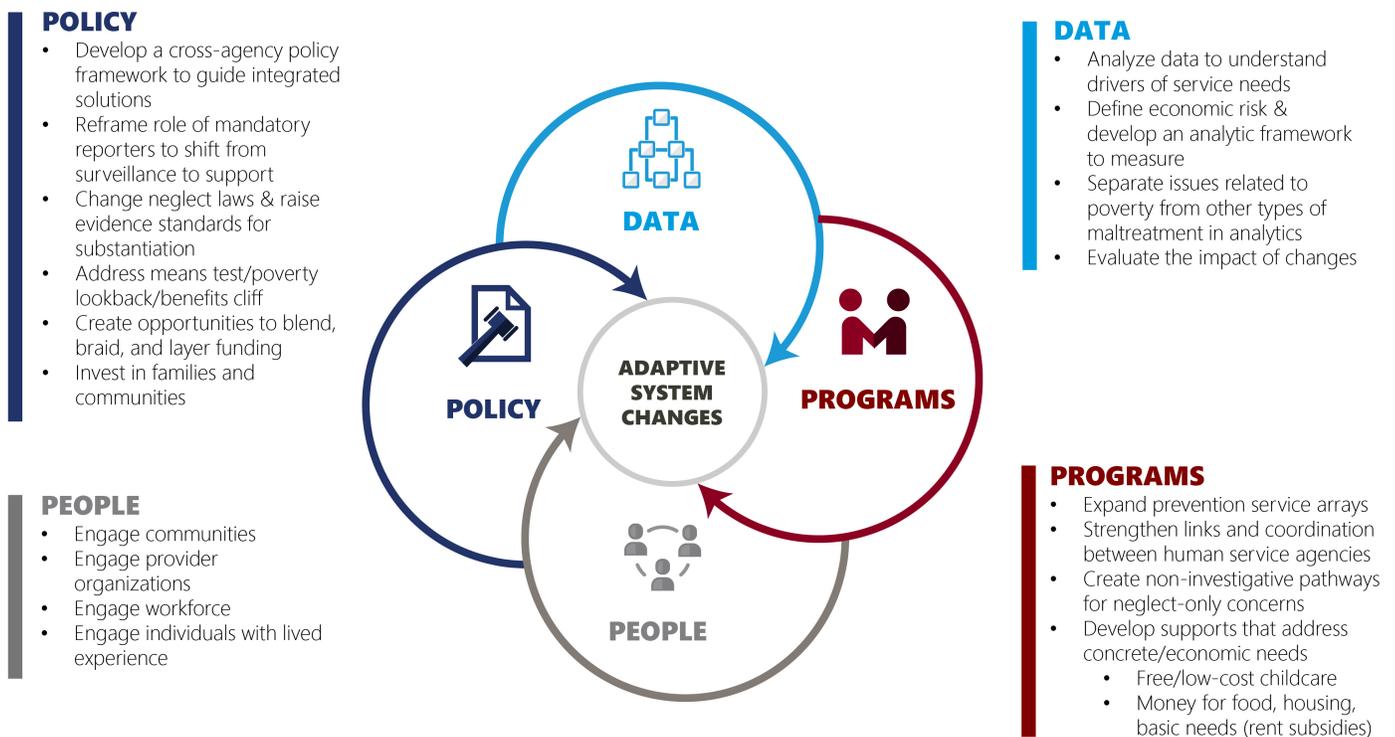
More is needed to achieve inter-agency coordination for a systemic approach to supporting families.

A human service system that legitimately acknowledges and simultaneously addresses these inter-related issues will be more effective than a siloed child welfare system for preventing maltreatment and improving child and family well-being. The economic circumstances associated with the COVID-19 pandemic paired with increased societal pressure to address deep racial divisions in the U.S. have motivated policy makers to deploy economic and concrete supports broadly to families in need (Meade, 2021). Federal programs such as the Child Tax Credit and the Earned Income Tax Credit, as well as targeted pilots to deliver direct cash, guaranteed income, housing assistance, childcare subsidies, WIC, SNAP, and other economic supports, aim to provide families the resources they need for stability and success. At the same time, many child welfare system leaders and partners have called for an expanded focus on promoting child and family well-being through prevention, leveraging early intervention and home visiting as well as the targeted use of economic and concrete supports to families. In this section, we outline the elements of system transformation that will be needed to address economic risk factors contributing to adverse outcomes for children and families.

Figure 2 depicts the core strategies to increase the use of economic and concrete supports. They include:

- **Policy solutions** to increase the availability of supports and align incentives and opportunities to support family well-being;
- **Expanded programmatic capacity** to deliver supports collaboratively across human service agencies through new pathways accessible to families who need them;
- **Robust data analytic framework** to define and identify economic risk as distinct from child maltreatment, measure family well-being, and quantify the impact of economic supports; and
- **Meaningful stakeholder engagement** to ensure that system shifts reflect the priorities and needs of families.

**Figure 2. Strategies to Increase the Potential of Economic and Concrete Supports**



Work is needed to **identify and build policy levers that can support and encourage practices that stabilize rather than separate families**. These may include increases to the minimum wage, earned income tax credits, and child support payments—all of which are promising approaches that may provide families with economic relief to promote stability and prevent removals. These levers could also include policies that align human service systems and promote coordinated efforts to address poverty. While FFPSA provides some opportunities to extend prevention and well-being promotion beyond the child welfare system, more is needed to achieve inter-agency coordination necessary for a systemic approach to supporting families.

A child and family well-being system that builds protective capacities, mitigates maltreatment risk factors, and addresses racial disparities must attend to the economic and concrete support needs that jeopardize families' abilities to care for children. This will require **expanded programmatic capacity and new pathways** to receive supports. Calibrating partnerships and strategies to overcome challenges requires a comprehensive approach. This approach should include redirecting some families from hotlines/investigations to receive economic and concrete supports by better leveraging the availability of these supports across the existing public benefit platform. It should *also* include deploying economic and concrete supports as a component of the prevention service array as part of a coordinated response that addresses pervasive intergenerational effects of poverty on family stress and well-being.

The problems associated with economic risk, including housing instability, food insecurity, and insufficient childcare may endanger children, yet our data systems are often insufficient to document the elements of economic risk at the individual or family level. While data linkage that leverages vast administrative data holdings has helped to understand the degree to which families receive support or assistance from multiple state agencies (Goerge & Wiegand, 2019), federal, state, and local child welfare systems face significant barriers to leveraging data, including insufficient infrastructure, confusing privacy rules, and siloed data systems. The consequence is that agencies cannot systematically identify or collaboratively address the needs of families. These complexities require a **data analytic framework** that can distinguish poverty from maltreatment, describe family need so that interventions can be responsive and targeted, and gauge the impact of economic and concrete supports. This could include (but is not limited to):

- **Systematic administration of family assessments** that include economic stability and concrete needs and incorporation of assessment data into Child Welfare Information Systems (CWIS);
- **Asset-based approach to measuring well-being** that goes beyond the avoidance of negative outcomes;
- **Integrated data systems** that can identify families' complex needs and multiple system involvement, in order to identify opportunities to align policies and programs across silos;
- Adding **child welfare-related outcomes** to studies of economic supports to both build evidence and incorporate the costs of child welfare system involvement into calculations of cost effectiveness or ROI;
- Consistent use of **standardized measures of economic hardship** within and across state SACWIS/CCWIS systems;
- **Classifications of neglect** that can parse poverty from maltreatment;
- Return-on-investment calculators to estimate **cost effectiveness** of identified services and supports;
- **Predictive models** to identify type and level of risk by group characteristics or geography that can be ethically used to subsequently target resources to meet those needs; and
- Real-time **dashboards** and other reporting mechanisms integrating traditional child welfare metrics (such as reports, substantiations, removals, etc.) with more holistic measures of well-being, risk, and resiliency.

Many of these will require timely, integrated data systems across programmatic areas and sectors; analytics that incorporate local context and illuminate disparities; and output that is responsive to the needs of policymakers, practitioners, and families across programmatic areas and sectors. These improvements can enable the development of targeted approaches, which have been

associated with higher levels of child poverty reduction, conditional on the direction of targeting and the characteristics of the benefit system (Van Lancker & Van Mechelen, 2015). Despite controversy and concern over whether predictive models may increase child welfare system involvement, some analytic approaches have shown promise for identifying the children and families most likely to benefit from intervention (Centre for Social Data Analytics, 2020).

System transformation also must be informed by the perspectives of youth and families with lived experience, which requires **deep and meaningful engagement of families and communities** in discussions about what supports are needed and how to overcome the barriers to accessing them.

Historically, efforts to reformulate child welfare policy or develop programs have either not included youth and family voice or included the voices of few individuals who may not be representative of the larger population affected by child welfare system involvement. Today there is a renewed focus on overcoming the gaps between what individuals and families say they need and what the system delivers. The COVID-19 pandemic is in part responsible for this new sense of urgency. Inequities among rates of infection, access to treatment, and mortality illuminated disparities, but the public also saw the power of government to allocate resources more quickly and nimbly than ever before to provide timely and needed supports (Winston, 2021).

Creating and sustaining transformation requires more than efforts by institutions, which by nature resist complexity and individualization; large systems lack the agility and resources to customize approaches to address needs and build on the strengths of every family. Further, reactive systems often allocate the bulk of resources to existing funding patterns, deep-end services, and crisis management. In contrast, informal community

approaches to child welfare are grounded in long-term relationships, adaptive use of existing community strengths, and holistic approaches to prevention. To create and sustain system transformation, families and communities need to play meaningful roles in developing solutions.

Some prevention-related, family-friendly solutions have aimed to build individual agency, reduce isolation, and connect families. These solutions include the creation of Neighborhood Action Councils, as well as Parent-Child Visitation Centers, in Los Angeles as part of the Prevention Initiative Demonstration Project (McCroskey et al., 2012); 14 site-based “people power” efforts within The California Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities initiative (Farrow et al., 2020); and an even more recent effort to open Family Enrichment Centers as part of New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services efforts (Youth Studies, Inc., 2020). System partners also can ensure that communities can access the best research and practices, share learning across communities, and help create a shared understanding of state policy levers to accelerate and scale change relevant to community-identified issues.

Community solutions should drive us toward an ecosystem or braided approach that weaves together not only concrete and economic supports like child tax credits, direct cash transfers, and earned income tax credits, but also a continuum of well-being supports that are funded by systems that connect families, build social capital, and restore communities. Community-driven engagement approaches challenge our ability to measure process and outcomes; restoring communities through improved agency, social capital, and connections may yield intangible outcomes that are difficult to capture with traditional measurement approaches.

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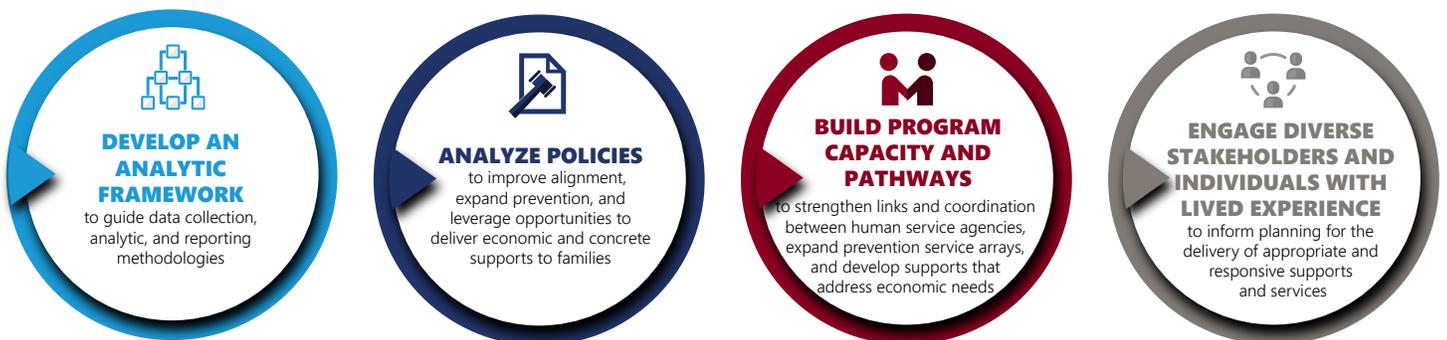
## Summary and Conclusion

It is more efficient and cost effective to provide families with the supports they need to have stable and supportive homes for their children than to raise them in a system that has fallen short of achieving positive outcomes. To achieve system transformation and effectively leverage economic and concrete supports will require a set of activities related to data and measurement, programs and pathways, power sharing with communities and families to drive decision making and resource allocation, and the policy actions necessary to realize a re-imagined child and family well-being system.

While this brief highlights strategies in four areas—data, policy, programs, and people—for addressing maltreatment risk and well-being with economic and concrete supports, there are adaptive challenges to consider. Misperceptions and values about poor families and the historical separation of child protective services from the mechanisms of financial support have resulted in vast and pervasive disagreements about the optimal role of direct financial support to families.

Dr. Henry Kempe’s 1962 article on the “battered child syndrome” brought national attention to the physical cruelty to children by their caregivers, but his focus was not on maltreatment that occurred because families lacked housing, lacked food security, or were unable to control their children’s behavior (Daro, 2013). These are all concerns that should be addressed by other systems—those best equipped to support well-being. These include local health departments, schools, local mental health departments, and sister human services agencies like housing and benefits. Shared accountability is critical for a well-being system to work and it cannot be accomplished without major reforms to mandated reporting laws and the reporting process.

The child welfare system cannot accomplish this shift alone. Whether child welfare system involvement represents the culmination of family stressors and unmet needs or the inadequacy of existing pathways to obtain support to preempt risk, addressing system shortcomings will require a multidimensional approach. Subsequent policy briefs will explore each of these areas to develop specific strategies to:



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Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit [www.chapinhall.org](http://www.chapinhall.org) or @Chapin\_Hall.

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