

Family Story Project – Conversations with Families Raising Young Children In San Mateo County During COVID-19

Family voices are critical to dismantling systemic inequities in children’s healthy development, to inform policy makers, and to influence decisions around the types of investments families need to thrive. With the belief that those closest to the challenges also need to be closest to the solutions, First5 San Mateo County started the Family Story Project – an opportunity to engage in dialogue and conversations with working families who are raising young children in under-resourced communities.

In January 2020, First5 San Mateo County partnered with the Silicon Valley Community Foundation to launch these community conversations with families. The idea was for families to speak candidly, to share their perspectives and experiences. Then, COVID-19 hit.

The pandemic forced a new way of life upon all of us, and highlighted the extreme disparities in wealth, and access to resources working families face daily. It underlined the difference between the insured and the uninsured, the secure and the vulnerable.

Below are the experiences and perspectives from parents about the challenges and barriers faced during the pandemic, family and community strengths that helped them overcome obstacles and families’ hopes and dreams for their children.

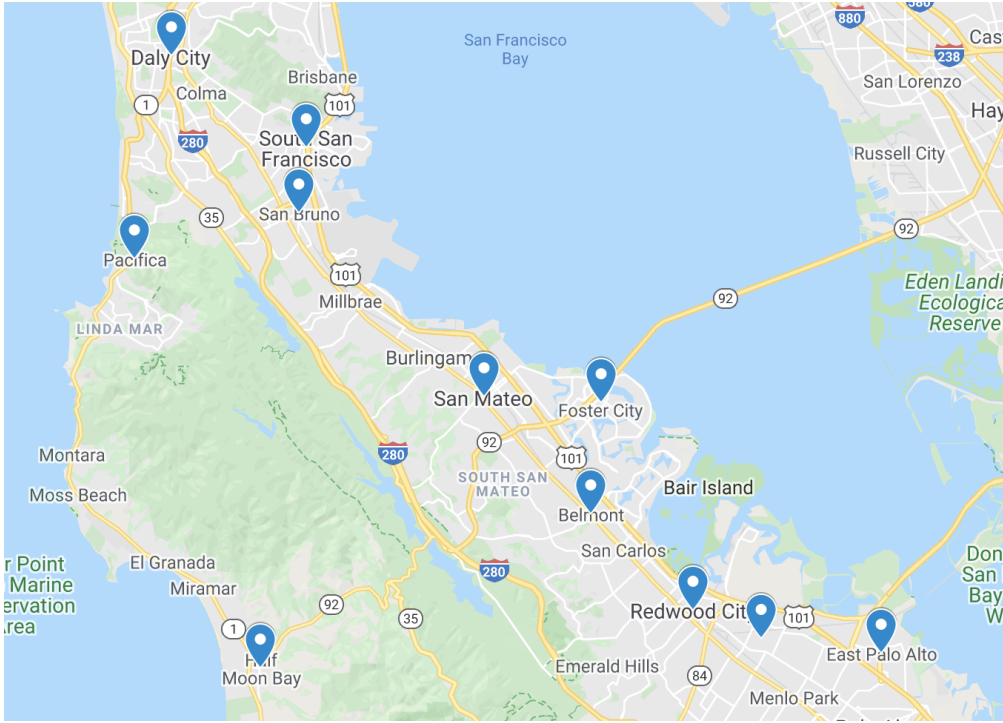
The report concludes with recommendations incorporating family’s perspectives and suggested strategies to support families.

STRUCTURE:

- Small group Zoom conversations with 6 parents/families moderated by Leticia Gonzalez in English and Spanish.
- In depth Zoom conversations with two parents at a time, moderated by Leticia Gonzalez and Elliot Margolis in English and Spanish.
- 1.5 hours conversations

GEOGRAPHIC & DEMOGRAPHIC SCOPE¹

The project included 10 community conversations conducted remotely in Zoom, in English and Spanish with 40 parents. Families were racially diverse and lived in: East Palo Alto, North Fair Oaks, Redwood City, Foster City, San Mateo, Daly City, Belmont, South San Francisco, Pacifica, San Bruno and Half Moon Bay. It included families raising children with special needs, single mothers, monolingual Spanish, undocumented, mixed status families (parents are undocumented, children were born in the USA), and at least three families recently experienced homelessness.



City	Hispanic or Latino	Asian	White	Black
Daly City	24%	57%	21%	
South San Francisco	33.9%	40%	34%	
San Bruno	26.8%	30.8%	32.8%	
Pacifica	18.7%	25.6%	69.9%	
San Mateo	24%	33.3%	54.1%	
Foster City	8.4%	51.4%	36.9%	
Belmont	12.1%	31.5%	67.2%	
Half Moon Bay	28%	5%	80%	
Redwood City	30.1%	18.7%	63.8%	
North Fair Oaks	N/A	N/A	N/A	
East Palo Alto	66.1%		38%	14.2%

¹ Demographic data pulled from the 2017 Demographic and Housing Estimates found on the <https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>. Numbers listed are the largest racial and ethnic groups by percentage in each city identified.

Undocumented Families

Undocumented families felt isolated and were not eligible to apply for governmental resources to support their families during the COVID-19 crisis. They struggled to meet their basic needs for food and are housing insecure. These families spoke of fear of their immigration status coming under scrutiny while providing information to nonprofit organizations requesting a lot of eligibility documentation. Some felt intimidated by the requirements and preferred not to apply.

- *Single mom of four, ages: 4, 8, 10 and 12: I had to stop working because I didn't have a place to take the children. School closing meant I had to quit my job; I couldn't earn money. My mother also works and couldn't help me. During the first months of the pandemic, we were living on the streets until June, July when we finally got a place to live. My children had trouble with school before COVID, hyperactivity and challenges concentrating. Now with the pandemic it is a lot worse and they have developed addiction to screens and YouTube. I found a school in San Francisco (we live in Daly City) that tested my five-year-old and allow me to send him to a small class because he is so behind. He can't talk at 4 and is hyperactive. I looked for help in different places, but we are undocumented, and most places asked for social security for a lot of things. StarVista is the only place that helped us a lot through my son's school (my 4-year-old).*
- *If you have a child that was born here, you qualify for food stamps and medical. I applied and it was a big help.*
- *All my children are Mexican so I could not apply for any of that. A program called Migrante helped me to find resources for my 4-year-old (diapers, books and games and support to play with him) I found them in the school district in SSF, also the Diaper Club.*

Families Experiencing Financial Insecurity– Low wage jobs paired with high cost of housing

Families are forced into shared housing situations to share the high cost of living. Larger households experienced higher levels of stress and risk of contracting the virus. These households could not socially distance, adults had to continue to work to generate some income, coming and going to various jobs, and risking the elders and those with pre-existing health conditions.

- *I had no work. I went from 40 Hours to nothing a week for a single mom. I was not sure if I was going to lose my housing with being behind in all the bills and expenses. Without Head Start opening I could not have gone back to work. That saved my life.*
- *Some of the support was difficult to navigate too. If you received unemployment your food stamps got cut. So as a family we had to decide which was more important, unemployment cash or food stamps or rental assistance and possibly lose something else. WIC was great, stayed online and it continued. They did a great job and replied quickly.*
- *If you found a new job, you had to cross your fingers your child would not get a runny nose, or he would have to stay home for 2 weeks and you couldn't work so you would lose your new job.*
- *I lost my job because of the shelter in place (furlough), I lost not only my job but my benefits, health insurance and dental insurance, which was very stressful in the middle of a pandemic. I*

applied to get EDD until it got discontinued. I tried to apply for Medical but because I was getting EDD I was not eligible, and I was told I needed private insurance on my own. That was overwhelming, I was a student before COVID and my semester fees were due, I had rent money I had to come up with, car payments and credit card debt. What saved us was that my partner was able to get us in his insurance. I waited until EDD got cut and then went back to apply for Medi-Cal. I was also able to put my son on EBT.

- *It was very hard for me because I was pregnant and all the uncertainty was a heavy load, then my 3-year-old was in speech therapy and all that was a mess, and he could not do it the same way on a screen. I also lost my job, so finances were tight and stressful. Luckily, I got a call from Peninsula Day Care (I had been calling since my older daughter was 2 years old! It had been at least a year) and they gave me a spot, that helped me to find work.*
- *My family moved in with my parents for them to help me pay my bills and to help me with my son. They both work in the restaurant industry and both lost their jobs at the same time and struggle to make the mortgage payments. It was scary, then they started to work a few days a week. It is hard to explain what is happening to my son, that we do not have any money and I cannot buy him ice cream or anything else we would buy him before. He had a birthday, and I was very happy my siblings helped and came to see us with food and a pinata, so he had a birthday. Everyone chipped in.*
- *Taxi drivers had no work from one day to the next. Zero income. We managed with my part time and navigating the EDD craziness. In this area you cannot not work. EDD alone is not enough for the monthly expenses and if you work, it must be so little that it still doesn't help. If you increase your hours too much you lose your EDD. We are stuck. This are the struggles we are facing now, figuring out how to make it work while we cannot work as we used to. They do not consider the high cost of rent and that you must work to cover it. There were no jobs during covid. We want to work; I am not complaining about that. You cannot make it on one salary that is less than 40 hours a week.*
- *The hotel industry shut down all employees got furlough and had no income from one day to the next. Also lost our health insurance and benefits.*
- *There were other organizations helping with diapers and food. I found one on Facebook called Hearts of Solidarity for mothers to share resources locally. That was great. They organize food drives and toy drives and things like that for free. No cash assistance but stuff you need for free. I learned about it because I was homeless for a while and stayed in the San Mateo Homeless shelter and from there, I learned about Loving you Back to Life which now is Hearts of Solidarity.*
- *We live in a two bedroom and our daughter is 7. We are struggling financially and wonder if we should rent her room. She needs her privacy though, we don't want to rent it, but we may have to rent it.*
- *I was waiting for a below market rate apartment for 5 years. They called me and because I had lost my job, I had to turn it down a couple of times. I lost my job because I lost my car first. I couldn't get to work, I worked at Nordstrom and my work moved me to Hillsdale and I live in Daly City and I just couldn't get there.*
- *We live with my sister and we have 6 small children at home. It is very chaotic; we have a lot of boys with a lot of energy and no place to go.*
- *My husband lost his job for a party rental place, he found a job in Sacramento and travels back and forth every day. He is also looking for work in East Palo Alto where we live.*

- *The pandemic didn't get us all the same, we are more exposed, we must be on the streets every day and others can just work from home and life continued as usual. We have to leave our children; we can't work and take care of them at the same time like it is for other families.*
- *Small biz owners had to stop all work and put all business plans on hold, only being able to work a few hours and having to spend a lot of time looking after the children.*
- *Some of the support was difficult to navigate too. If you received unemployment your food stamps got cut. So as a family we had to decide which was more important unemployment cash or food stamps or rental assistance and possibly lose something else. WIC was great, stayed online and it continued. They did a great job and replied quickly.*

Language Barriers

Monolingual Spanish speaking families struggle to find reliable and trustworthy sources of information, and as a result relied on word of mouth from friends, family and neighbors, information that was not always reliable. These families reported struggling to connect to opportunities, resources and services that may be available to them.

- *If you are looking for a job, don't have school, don't know English or how to use a computer, you just don't qualify. It has been a challenge finding work. Having all the children at home was very hard. Thank God I took all those parenting classes that helped me to lose my fear of asking for help and gave me different tools. Thank God I had decided for my child to stay in Head Start for one more year. When they open, I found a couple of houses to clean. That was a blessing, I cannot afford a babysitter and I have a place I trust to leave him, safe and happy.*
- *If you speak Spanish, you feel sometimes embarrassed to go ask for help for fear of being judged and treated without respect. Just because you do not speak English some people think you don't know anything, and you are not worthy, and they can just be disrespectful and judge you.*
- *I understand English but never feel comfortable speaking it and prefer to ask for help in Spanish. I recently was at the school asking for help with a computer for remote learning. The woman in front of me spoke only Spanish and wasn't understanding what the person helping her was saying to a co-worker in English. He was making fun of her, saying he was just going to change the computer and she would leave happily. I was upset at how disrespectful that was. He is there to help, why does he think is ok to make fun of this mom just because she doesn't speak English?*
- *If you get a Latin person, you may get the same service, if not, you may not. You may have to wait until after the white person gets service, even if they arrived after you.*

Parenting Challenges

- *Parents being diagnosed with COVID had to send their kids away with family members and were not able to see them from one day to the next. This caused separation anxiety for the little ones that is long lasting. I just buried a very close friend who died from COVID. I am not going anywhere. I need to protect my daughter. She has asthma, and it is very scary. I am thankful for distance learning. I would not be comfortable sending her in person.*

- *We live very close to my daughter's school. We could not take her out anywhere because she would see the school and would start to cry about not being able to go. The school reopened and we sent her in person. Now we are gaining work hours and things seem to be getting better somehow.*
- *My kids hate school now and homework. Is all disconnected from friends and fun of playing.*
- *It took my 3-year-old took six months to stay in school (crying 15 minutes every day) and now she is afraid of leaving the house because of the Virus. I am not sure how we are going to handle it when we have to go back.*
- *Multitasking and balancing school and work was very challenging (mother of a 5-year-old and a 2-year-old in Head Start)*
- *I see my son (3-year-old) being more aggressive and having lots of tantrums. Being stuck at home with limited physical activity and lots of screen time is not good. As soon as he started to go to school, he changed and is happier. He needs other children, and he needs interaction and play.*
- *My Kids were mostly at home for 4 months – isolated and with lack of physical activity. I am not sure how he will do transitioning to Kinder. I had signed him up for the Big Lift Summer, but it was canceled for Kindergarteners, that was very disappointing.*
- *Even for me, I'm not stressed as before now that she goes in person. I know she's in a good place right now and she's having fun while I am in my work. So that's helpful.*
- *It was stressful knowing they were in school one week and at home the next. I had to continue working.*
- *Managing 4 children at home (a child just entering middle school, a child just entering Kindergarten, a preschooler in Head Start and a baby). I have lost myself for a little bit because I am so stressed out. They have not done well with remote learning. It has been very intense and difficult on me.*
- *I was working part time as an accountant and the businesses I worked for closed because of shelter in place so the hours went down for me. I am looking after three children under the age of 5. Shelter in place was very difficult as I could not work looking after the kids. I do not have the patience nor know how to help them with school. I am not a teacher. That is not what I chose to do. My plans for my business were put on hold and my plans for us as a family to be stronger and better off also were put on hold.*
- *Children are falling behind; my child was doing well and was advancing, and I am afraid that is not going to continue. He cannot advance the same at home.*
- *Keeping the children engaged and learning is very challenging when you have to work to pay the bills. For children with a lot of energy that is a big problem, and I am afraid my daughter will fall behind.*
- *We didn't have two computers at home to use. I would have to choose between me attending my college classes and my son seeing his teacher/classmates. That is why I decided to send him in person as soon as the option was available.*
- *My own desire to get my kids into an excellent program was there, and I was sad that I didn't have the money to be able to do that. And if I can be a part of the movement to provide early childhood education for every child, no matter their circumstance and their ability to pay, or whether they're rich, it doesn't matter.*

High Levels of Stress

Some parents exhibited signs of depression and could not even reach out for help. The situation felt too overwhelming, and the bad news were abundant. Parents mentioned therapy to cope and were thankful to have it available. For some it took 9 months to get a therapist, even with “good” insurance and in the middle specific crisis with teenagers. Some would have liked therapy and had no access, and some were too overwhelmed to reach out for help.

- *Depression/Anxiety and Feelings of being overwhelmed were expressed by all the parents that participated in the conversations.*
- *Feelings of being lost and of not being able to accomplish much -overpowering sense of hopelessness.*
- *Being away from family members was really hard emotionally for the adults and the children.*
- *Remote learning helped my daughter, twice a week she would get excited to see her friends and teacher and to show her toys etc.*
- *At least we have a backyard, and she gets to run outside and ride her scooter. I am the caretaker for my mother, and I had to make sure we were not seeing anyone or leaving the house.*
- *Having no activities or sports (swimming, martial arts, and sports) was challenging for children who looked forward to friends and physical activity. Parents had to manage all that energy at home.*
- *Families with older children were under a lot of stress and most teenagers went through depression and experienced challenges with remote learning.*

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

Resiliency

Families coped emotionally and otherwise with support from relatives, friends and family and neighbors. Some found new talents (baking, sewing, flower arrangements, learning to cook different foods from around the world for fun, trips to the ocean, hikes, and walks.

- *What motivates me and gives me happiness is having a job because I have seen lots of families who didn't have a job and it's hard. My sister doesn't have a job, but I do and because of that, I was able to share this Christmas with her. Imagine those who didn't have Christmas, that is sad.*
- *We must keep going. If I am fine, my family is going to be fine also. Seeing each child unique ideas and personality.*
- *I want to be involved with my child, I want to give her a happy childhood, I didn't have that I want to do better for her.*
- *Watching them grow is very special.*

- *Growing and learning with my kids gives me hope. They make me a better person and inspire me to do more and to be better.*
- *My happiness is to see my children smiling. It is exciting to know we haven't gotten sick and that we are alive. They are my strength and my happiness to keep going.*
- *Well, I am alive. I am doing better. I know God won't leave me. I am having this personal battle, but day to day I can wake up next to my children and my husband, and that is what makes me most happy, that I am alive with the people I love.*
- *Taking on 2 or 3 jobs and being exhausted all the time and not having any time to be with the children was hard. My husband now has had time and has gotten some rest he desperately needed and now knows he too, can look after the children when I need help with my business.*
- *Being forced to spend more time with my family has strengthened our bond. I like that saying, "Everything works out at the end, if it hasn't worked out, it isn't the end".*
- *I have gotten involved with my children's preschool, becoming a parent ambassador and participating in Father's café which is great.*
- *Having an opportunity to talk about the fears, the stress and all that has happened has been helpful to keep things in perspective.*
- *But the good thing that happened with the COVID, at least it's just like a family bonding. It's just like we're all together. Before, we were all busy working. Only on our day off we can do bonding most of the time with our kids. But now at least we can look at them every minute.*
- *No matter what happens, I know I have to keep going and figure out what I need to do to provide for my children.*

Helpful Community Supports

Parents had ideas about helpful programs and indicated a desired for greater access.

- *A learning center where we could bring the kids in the afternoon and get help with homework and support with their academics, that would be great.*
- *School districts to provide tutors and academic support for the children falling behind.*
- *Summer schools and afterschool programs that help with homework so when the kids get home they can rest and have dinner and go to bed earlier.*
- *Flexibility with the pick-up times for afterschool would be great. The Boys and Girls club requires the children to stay until 6 pm but they refuse to provide homework support. The kids must do their work after they get home tired from a full day.*
- *Programs that provide activities for children/families on weekends.*
- *Weekend opportunities for parents to connect with schools. We do not have flexibility at work and cannot miss work to do activities in school. That is a luxury I don't have.*
- *Access to library programs on weekends, outdoors for families and their children as well as internet. A lot of people cannot afford internet, or a printer and kids need access for homework and school. Parents need internet access for jobs, applications.*
- *Access to tutors would be great, we are not equipped to teach our children as they get older.*
- *Guidance for parents on how to help their children at home would be great. Some parents are scared to send kids to school. Options for remote learning in Kindergarten so that if the virus is still around in August, my child can stay home and still learn.*

- *Access to programs for children in speech therapy that can support parents. Activities for families to do with their children, games, or other ways to work with them. Speech therapy afterschool, in the same location.*
- *Affordable and quality preschools. I cannot afford a private preschool, but I want my child to have all the great kids in more wealthy families have. Education is very important; it should be for all kids.*
- *I would like the resources to ask for paperwork but not so many. Most have too many requirements and difficult/long applications to get support. You have to fill out so much paperwork and have to go back, over and over, spending time, energy and gas to get support. It is too much for small things. People fear that so much information is dangerous because it could be passed along to other institutions, to the government and immigration officers.*
- *I would like to see more services/front desk people and staff that can speak Spanish. I cannot express myself in English and that stops me from asking for help. I feel I get treated like I am dumb if I don't speak English. I also see front line staff treating Spanish speakers badly, without respect as people. They treat us worse than they would treat a white person that arrives to request a service. I have seen it and heard/understood their disrespectful comments in English in front of the person that only speaks Spanish.*
- *I would also like to see qualified translators. Sometimes you get a translator that says what they want to say and not what you are saying.*
- *More training to avoid discrimination and to treat all with respect is needed. To help us Latinos that only speak Spanish and for other cultures that do not speak English.*
- *Head Start did do a summer program for just the kids who were transitioning into kindergarten. So I did find that helpful, and that was through Head Start. I had signed up for a program, The Big Lift. And my son should have gone to The Big Lift program this summer, but they canceled it for kindergarteners. It was so disappointing.*

HOPES AND DREAMS

- It's just fun to see their personalities, and watch them grow.
- My childhood, it was very rough when I was a child and I just want to see how my kids grow to be better than that.
- What I love about being a mom is just growing with my kids, being the main guidance for my kids to grow into respectful and adventurous human beings. They're the reason why I became a better person and why I continue to do things for the community.
- So many things. For them to continue studying, to become independent when they grow, to cheer life, to have a positive mind.
- I want them to know who they are. I want them to respect and love themselves. I want them to be treated with respect. I want them to have the ability to make a mistake and to have to face the consequences of it in a healthy manner, so that they can learn from their mistakes.
- At the end of the day, I just want them to feel healthy, to feel happy, to feel loved, but most importantly, I want them to love themselves and respect themselves because that's one thing that I didn't do

- I definitely want my children to be happy 10 years from now. And being happy doesn't necessarily mean having everything they want, it means being loved and knowing that both of their parents support them 100 percent in whatever it is that they want or choose to be, without having pressure, no limitations. Because love is unconditional. As a parent, you have to just be there.
- I want them to be safe and to grow healthy and study.
- We can listen to them. It feels good because sometimes we are so busy with our jobs or duties that we do not have time to listen to our children.
- I want her to be kind, I want her to be smart, confident, to have friends, to be smart and wise.
- I want to be present, to help her with her schoolwork, to make sure that she stays on top of it. I didn't have that. My parents didn't speak the language, so it was just me and my sister figuring things out. So, it will be different for her.

RECOMMENDATIONS

These conversations with families were candid and open ended intentionally. The idea was to hold space for families to talk about what they felt was important to share about the challenges they face and the potential solutions to those challenges. Families were grateful for the opportunity to provide their perspective and to share their experience navigating the day-to-day challenges of raising children on a low-income budget. On the one hand, they told stories about navigating daily stressors providing basic needs for their families – access to health care, quality childcare and preschool education for their children, food, and shelter. On the other hand, they told stories of entrepreneurial aspirations, resourcefulness and informal support systems from friends and family. For most, providing a better future and access to a better education for their children, was the engine that keeps them going.

Within this group of families, there were disparities accessing reliable sources of information, services, and resources as well as level of trust in governmental institutions and community organizations between first-generation English-speaking families, monolingual immigrant families and monolingual Spanish speaking families. The latter group expressed feeling isolated and experience higher levels of stress and financial instability impacting the adults and the children.

The families we talked to welcomed every opportunity they got to do better, to work harder, to learn and grow for themselves and their children. Their stories reflected their sense of community, expressing a desire to lift their families and their communities up. They contribute so much despite all the hurdles they must navigate. Imagine how much more they would be able to contribute if some of the barriers they face could be removed.

Below are recommendations that would start to level the playing field for working families raising children under the age of five in San Mateo County:

1. Increase level of investment to align support systems available to families:

- Invest in aligning systems providing safety net options for working families. Including: streamlining processes and applications and consolidating requirements and documentation. These systems often include multiple steps, long applications written in technical language hard to understand and excessively burdensome eligibility requirements and documentation families need to provide.
- Invest in community navigator staff housed in trusted community-based organizations embedded in low-income zip codes of the county. Families often rely on informal support systems provided by staff at community clinics, community centers, preschool centers, and school-based social workers to navigate access information and referrals to resources and services for families.
- Practice trust based grantmaking providing multi-year, full cost grants to support the general operation of small nonprofit organizations embedded in low-income zip codes of the county, who are providing family centered solutions to the most pressing challenges.
- Invest in organizations embedded in communities of color that are trusted partners for families and engage them in the design of the solutions to the challenge's families face.
- Evaluate grant making process and identify ways to streamline the implementation and reporting requirements.
- Invest in designing family centered ways to capture family voices on a ongoing to inform policy makers and decisions about the types of investments different communities need.
- Fund afterschool and summer programs with enrichment activities for young children.

2. Advocacy

- *Support organizations working with undocumented families and increase access to services and resources.*
- *Advocate for affordable and high-quality early care and learning experiences for all children.*
- *Build bridges between preschools/schools and community organizations supporting the needs of the adults. Healthy adults translate into healthy children.*
- *Advocate for public transportation improvements and subsidies for working families.*
- *Offer responsive, flexible, and non-traditional hours to meet the needs of working families.*
- *Increase public and private partnerships to advocate for ways to bridge access to resources and support gap undocumented families with children face.*