



STRENGTHENING OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG FAMILIES OF COLOR

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2019-2020 YOUNG PARENT INITIATIVE

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Executive Summary

The goal of the current project is to better understand the experiences of young parents of color as they navigate systems of care during their transition into parenthood and adulthood. Through virtual focus groups and data collection sessions, young parents of color and stakeholders from relevant partner organizations highlighted young parents' strengths, goals, challenges, and opportunities. In addition to discussing themes in these areas, this report summarizes several barriers that disrupt the provision of effective support to young parents of color.

As described in greater detail in the full report, themes related to young parents' strengths include resilience, grit, patience, family values, self-awareness, awareness of systemic issues, ambition, and creativity.

Common goals discussed by young parents related to promoting stability, keeping the family together, and creating opportunities for children. Young parents of color frequently identified entrepreneurship and education as pathways for achieving their goals.

This project also revealed several barriers that can interrupt the ability of young parents of color to access and benefit from community services and supports. These barriers include:

- Inaccessibility due to lack of time, transportation, or childcare
- Restrictive eligibility requirements and obligations for participation
- Negative interpersonal interactions with program staff, which may relate to:
 - Judgement and discrimination
 - Relatability or a lack of empathy
- A lack of organization and structure
- Inefficiency in the referral process
- Communication barriers

Based on the contributions of young parents and organizational representatives, several recommendations are provided to address these barriers, enhance the community of support for young parents of color, and promote their economic mobility. Recommendations include:

- Increasing access to affordable childcare
- Providing transportation or reducing the need for cross-city travel
- Enhancing collaboration across organizations and streamlining the referral process
- Reducing or clarifying eligibility requirements
- Offering trainings for program staff to reduce judgement and promote positive interactions with young parents of color
- Providing diverse training opportunities that promote employment or entrepreneurship
- Hiring young parents of color as program staff when possible
- Facilitating opportunities for young parents of color to support and learn from each other
- Connecting young parents to accountability partners

While these strategies are described in greater detail in the full report, it is important to recognize that continued collaboration and creativity will be necessary to achieve the overarching goal of creating and strengthening economic opportunity pathways for young parents of color. It is also important that actions continue to be guided by the perspectives and experiences of key stakeholders, including young parents of color.

Introduction

Young parents (under the age of 25) frequently have to balance the demands of parenting with the pursuit of their own personal and professional goals. Furthermore, low-income, young parents of color may face barriers accessing support related to parenting, education, employment, and addressing basic needs, which can interfere with their social mobility and potentially have consequences for the future social mobility of their children. In an effort to interrupt systems of generational marginalization, Leading on Opportunity communicated with young parents of color and stakeholders from community organizations in the Charlotte metropolitan area to gather a more comprehensive understanding of young parents' strengths, goals, and challenges, as well as the barriers that may interfere with their ability to access effective support. This project also sought to understand the factors that promote young parents' positive experiences with community organizations, which could be replicated or expanded upon to enhance support throughout the Charlotte community.

Made possible by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Winer Family Foundation, this effort's overarching goal was to identify ways to build or strengthen economic opportunity pathways for young parents of color in the Charlotte community, which could promote positive socioeconomic outcomes and improve the futures of young parents of color and their children. Importantly, this project was designed to identify solutions that are informed by the strengths, challenges, and preferences of young parents of color as well as the experience and expertise of organizations currently working with this population in the Charlotte community. The purpose of this report is to summarize this effort's preliminary findings and implications for strengthening the community support system for young parents of color.

Method

This report focuses on data collected from 9 virtual focus group sessions conducted via Zoom. Four sessions were conducted with young parents of color: parents under the age of 25 who have a child under the age of four and belong to a non-white racial group. Five sessions engaged representatives from local partner organizations who support young parents of color. Data from these focus groups provide initial insight into the strengths, resources, challenges, and goals of young parents of color and the people who provide support services to them.

Two young parent sessions included only three participants, which allowed for an in-depth conversation that allowed participants to respond to follow-up questions and respond to one another's ideas. Another parent session was conducted in Spanish and followed a similar model with 7 Spanish-speaking young parents. The fourth young parent session included 54 young parents and a quantitative survey-type application called Mentimeter was used. While the 54-person session rarely allowed for participants to expand on their answers, it provided a basic understanding of how commonly young parents experience themes related to strengths, challenges, goals, and barriers. Many of the themes raised in the large-group parent session were explained in greater detail (i.e., with stories or examples) in the small-group sessions.

Four sessions were conducted with 3-5 representatives from partner organizations and involved an in-depth conversation about the challenges and potential solutions related to providing effective support for young parents of color and promoting their economic mobility. Two of those sessions included leaders from organizations focused on promoting economic opportunity through employment and training. Finally, a fifth conversation was held with several local service providers as well as representatives from multiple funding organizations. Notably, there are plans to continue these conversations to further shape the results presented in this report.

A team of four researchers attended focus groups, asked follow-up questions, took notes, and re-watched recordings of the sessions to pull out major themes. These themes were discussed in research team meetings as well as in meetings with the facilitator and other observers. While the research team deliberated and discussed themes extensively to maximize the consistency between the findings presented here and participants' statements and experiences, time and funding did not allow for all components of rigorous qualitative analysis (e.g., transcription, processes for ensuring inter-rater reliability, etc.) to be incorporated in this work. Nonetheless, this report summarizes several important themes raised by young parents of color and local service providers, which can lay the foundation for responsive community action.

Results

The results from the data collection processes described above are organized into three sections. First, we provide information about young parents of color and outline themes related to their strengths, goals, and challenges. Next, we discuss several barriers that limit young parents' ability to access and benefit from existing supports, programs, and services in Charlotte. Finally, we outline several strategies for addressing those barriers, enhancing the community support system, and promoting economic opportunities for young parents of color.

The Experiences of Young Parents of Color

Key strengths shown by young parents of color

During focus groups, participants described several strengths that have helped young parents navigate challenges and work towards their goals. Parents in both small and large focus groups described themes of grit and resilience, patience, awareness, and love for their families.

Grit/Resilience was described as the ability to persevere in the face of hardship and frustration as summarized by the examples to the right.

The theme of resilience also relates to **the strength of patience** that frequently came up in the large parent focus group. One story from a young mother exemplifies this theme.

"I wasn't able to complete the program (I was participating in) because I was pregnant and they thought I was a liability. It was supposed to get me ready, and then once I have my child I could get this job I wanted. I've always been independent and I want to be independent with my child. I've never depended on anyone and I want to show my child that I can be independent and not rely on others. I have to sit back and calm down."

"Having a strong mindset."

"Knowing that I can get through any storm, regardless of what is going on."

"The young population has a lot of hope and a lot of energy."

This example demonstrates how patience is a necessary component of resilience, as this mother had to *"calm down"* and maintain optimism despite her inability to continue the program. This quote also points to the mother's perseverance despite potentially limited support in the past.

Awareness can be divided into two sub-themes: **self-awareness** and **awareness of systemic barriers**. **Self-awareness** was shown by parents' capacity to recognize what they need and deserve (physically and mentally) and what their children deserve. Self-awareness and maturity were also shown by participants' recognition that *"everyone is not going to understand."*

Parents also showed **awareness of systemic barriers**. As one example, multiple mothers described how organizations and landlords told them to put their children's fathers on child

support to receive services or receive a lease. The quote to the right shows one mother’s awareness that this was an unfair (likely discriminatory) practice that could have harmful implications for her child’s father and her family.

“My child’s father is in his life and not slacking in any way. Why do I need to put him on child support and then they take him to jail if he doesn’t pay?”

The mother quoted above resisted the pressure to comply with that requirement. Nonetheless, this example (which was reiterated by other mothers) demonstrates how discriminatory practices can cause instability and insecurity for families of color, adding barriers to social mobility.

“(What I want my child to say is) I love you and I have the best Dad in the world because you’re always there.”

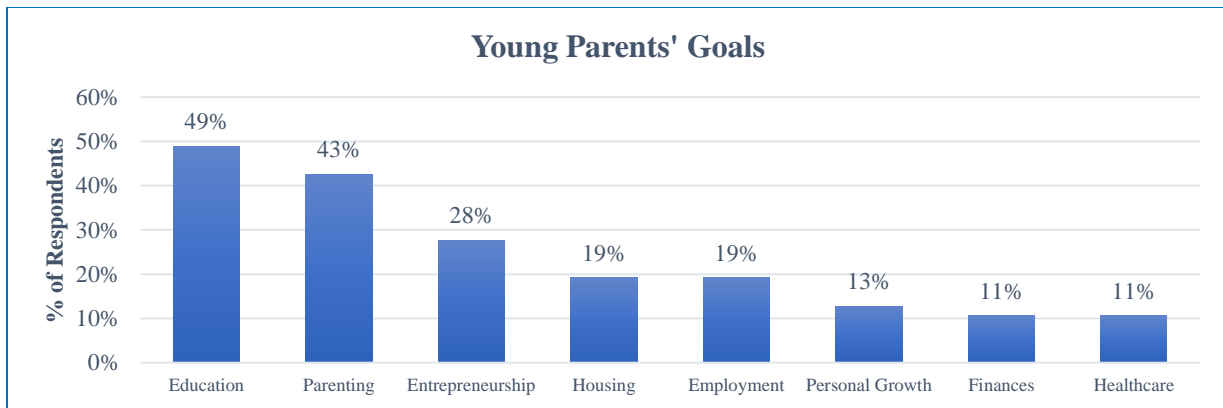
Participants frequently described **strong family values** and strength derived from their love for their families. This was shown by their goals of being happy and together and a desire for their children to have the opportunity to follow their dreams.

Related to family values, parents also wanted to pass their resilience down to their children so that they could be emotionally strong and overcome challenges. Examples of young parents’ commitment to family are shown in the following section discussing family-centered goals.

Other strengths, such as **creativity, ambition, communication, and compassion** were common throughout the discussions and will be evident in the subsequent sections of this report.

Common goals mentioned by young parents of color

Responses from the 54-person session are summarized in the figure below. Four key themes emerged from the smaller sessions regarding goals: 1) stability for self, child, and family; 2) opportunities for children; 3) entrepreneurship pathways; and 4) educational pathways.



Goals of stability, togetherness, and happiness

The desire for a stable life for themselves and their loved ones was pervasive among participants when asked about their goals. Young parents frequently highlighted independence with a strong emphasis on family togetherness.

“To live life to the fullest and be as happy and successful as we can be.”
“To buy our house and be healthy and united as one.”

In the second quote to the right, a young parent acknowledged the importance of home ownership and family togetherness. Many others simply indicated that they wanted a *“stable household”* and *“self-sufficiency.”* Some young parents focused on how togetherness relates to a

prosperous, independent environment. The quote to the right illustrates the goals of stability, independence, and “*success.*”

“Just be emotionally and financially stable. Be able to not rely on another company to pay us. We want to be successful.”

Another young parent offered the following list of related goals: “*generational wealth, bonding experiences, family traditions, family business,*” to highlight the importance of family relationships in addition to building a solid financial foundation to support future generations.

Creating opportunities for their children

Similarly, many young parents shared that they want their children to be healthy and free to grow and pursue their interests, especially pertaining to education.

“My goal for my child is for him to finish school, support him every step of the way and always tell him he can be anything in this world. Don’t ever let nobody tell him he can’t be something he wants to be.”

“(I want my child to) graduate high school, going to college, pursuing a career and being a respectable morally correct young woman and be genuinely happy.”

“I want her to graduate and never give up, but other than that, I want her to do whatever she wants to do.”

Participants consistently mentioned that they want their children to be equipped with competencies and traits that will enable them to be successful. Young parents identified coping skills, manners, and self-sufficiency as goals for their children.

“For him to have the tools to be able to be able to navigate through life and solve problems and conflicts on his own.”

“(I) Want her to explore and discover herself, have self-love, pursue her interests and maybe become bilingual.”

Overall, participants wanted their children to have opportunities for self-actualization.

Entrepreneurship as an economic opportunity pathway

When asked about personal goals, young parents some shared ideas that aligned with economic pathways of entrepreneurship and education.

Specifically, goals related to entrepreneurship were mentioned by 28% of participants in the 54-person focus group and several parents in the small parent focus groups.

Some planned to attend college first, while others described goals of opening a tattoo business or starting their own clothing lines. Young parents were also interested in developing a better understanding of how to start a small business and how to acquire business loans.

As these examples suggest, entrepreneurship was described as a means for transcending their current situations and may be a pathway that promotes economic stability and self-actualization, while also providing a sense of liberation.

“Graduate A&T and open a car dealership”

“Owning my own financial services business; creating generational wealth and breaking generational curses; and being a better woman.”

“Being able to gain the confidence to finally jump into the real estate world. Encouraging my wife to start her businesses and supporting her.”

“I would like to have workshops about starting businesses. I do not know where to start, but I would like to learn more.”

Educational pathways for economic opportunity

Additionally, young parents expressed that **they aspire to continue their educations**. Several participants were pursuing a college degree and others wanted to complete their General Education Diploma (GED). Young parents for whom English is a second language shared that they want to enhance their English skills to have greater access to employment. Others hoped to pursue culinary school in hopes of a career in the food industry.

Moreover, multiple young parents intend to enter the medical field or obtain advanced degrees:

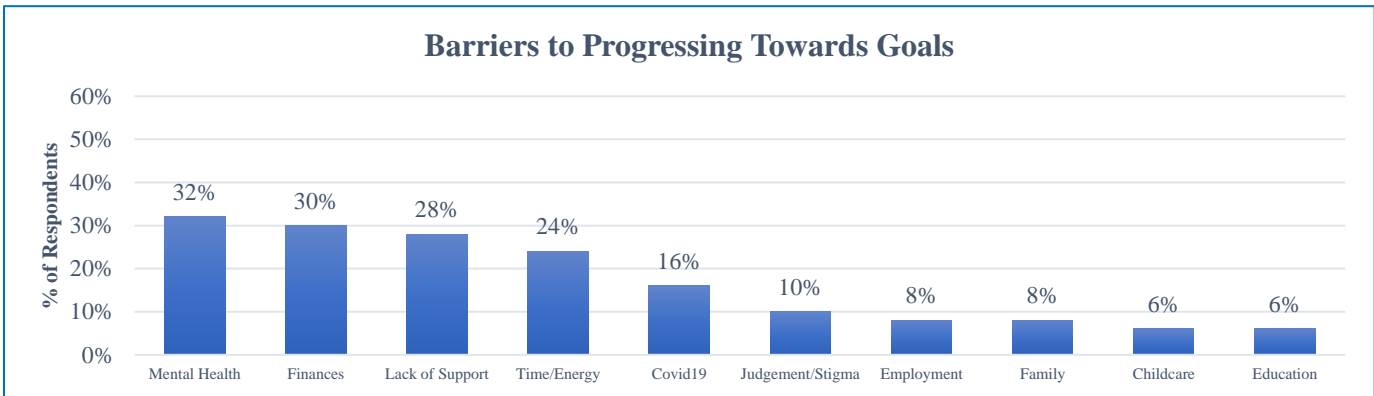
“(I) got knocked off the path but that’s ok. I want to go to medical school to be a doctor or a psychologist related to health. I go to Johnson C Smith and I wanted to triple major, but I couldn’t do that with a baby.”

“I want to be a pediatric nurse. At one point I wanted to be hematologist but (the doctor) said he went to school for 12 years to do it. I want to care for people, and I love little people.”

In summary, young parents of color expressed general life goals of stability, togetherness, independence, and health, which would help them feel successful and fulfilled. These goals are intentional decisions derived from their strengths and experiences. Furthermore, participants highlighted entrepreneurship and educational pathways for achieving those goals.

Common challenges affecting young parents of color

Young parents of color can face an array of challenges as they navigate young parenthood and the systems at work in their communities. Common challenges described in the 54-person focus group are shown in the table below.



The word cloud to the right also highlights the frequency at which various challenges were mentioned by young parents in the 54-person focus group. The following sub-sections will provide greater detail regarding several of these barriers as described by participants in the smaller focus groups.



Mental Health and Trauma

Young parents described mental health and past traumatic experiences as barriers to receiving effective support. Notably, they described trauma in their personal lives as well as their past interactions with support organizations.

Throughout the focus groups, participants also stated that being a young parent can feel isolating and bring complex, overwhelming emotions, both during and after pregnancy.

Representatives from partner organizations noted how young parents' traumatic experiences can be challenging on a personal level and may interfere with the provision of effective services. For instance, multiple organizational representatives noted that young parent participants frequently come from challenging background themselves. Furthermore, it may be necessary to help young parents address past trauma so that they can participate in and benefit from other forms of support. One community partner shared how experiences of trauma can affect the Latino community:

“(Latino families) are hidden and afraid of being caught and being taken away. They have not gone through the system of receiving services here. They have been completely isolated and in hiding and loneliness and not being able to share.”

As another example, a parent described her hesitation to participate in services that took place in large groups because of her past traumatic experiences.

“I do not like public functions. I prefer private functions. If I feel safe, I may go. If it looks like something is thrown together, I will not go.”

Changing Life Roles and Limited Support

The transition into parenthood has presented difficulties for several young parent participants as well. Focus groups revealed that balancing roles as a child, sibling, parent, and provider can be draining in terms of time and energy. Participants shared that they take care of multiple children (at times brothers and sisters as well as their own children) which can make them feel like they cannot invest in themselves. The quote to the right demonstrates how their access to supportive peer relationships had changed as well.

“Having to understand that everyone is not going to understand – friends expect me to be there, but I can't be there because I have a child. As a Mom you have to think about your child first – you have to put you on the back-burner.”

“Figuring out how to grow up and raise your child at the same time”

Additionally, many young parents reported feeling a need to grow up quickly, which is captured in the quote to the left.

Lack of Stability

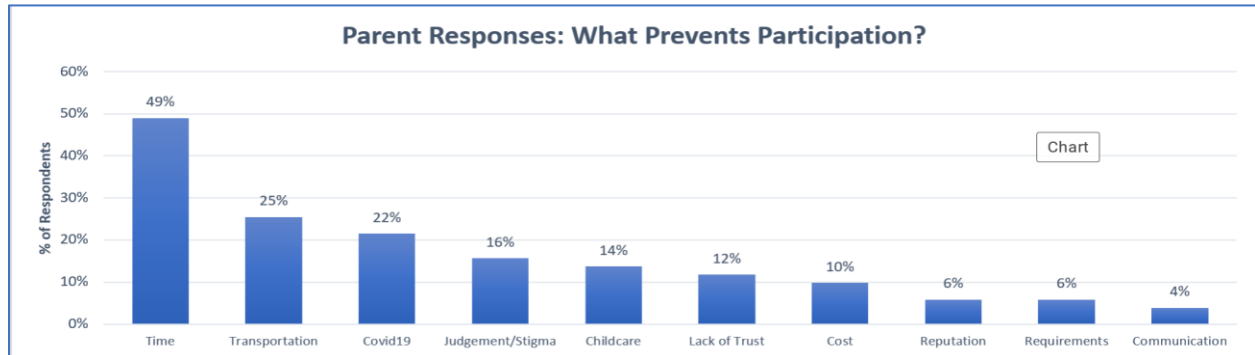
Lack of stability relates to challenges accessing childcare, transportation, and employment. The excerpts below display the cycle of instability relating to childcare, employment, and transportation:

“Every week I have to find a family member that is willing to watch my son or someone from care.com to watch him for \$125, which is a lot. The childcare subsidy at Johnson C Smith is not available right now because of COVID.”

“I still haven't gotten my diploma because when I was (a teenager) I got kicked out and moved to uncle's house then aunt's house. My family didn't have any money. I couldn't get any vouchers because I didn't have transportation to get my daughter to daycare. I was homeless for two years. We've just been trying to get back on our feet. (I) went back and forth between jobs – didn't have a job for more than 3 months at a time – mostly because of the lack of consistent childcare.”

Inaccessibility due to lack of time, transportation, or childcare

The figure below demonstrates the percentage of responses in the large, 54-person parent focus group that related to the various barriers that prevent participation in social programs. As shown in the figure, parents frequently described time, transportation, judgement/stigma, childcare, and lack of trust as barriers to accessing services or participating in social programs.



Time

Participants in the smaller parent focus groups explained that the hours organizations were open could be difficult for them due to the responsibilities of being a young parent and maintaining employment. Others described how they frequently felt that they were given the “runaround” when they approached organizations who were unable to meet their needs for whatever reason. They described taking time out of their schedules to complete a long enrollment process, just to be told they did not qualify and referred to another organization, where that process might be repeated. Parents described that it was time-consuming and exhausting, just to find support or services related to simple needs, such as clothing, crisis assistance, or childcare.

Transportation

Additionally, parents described lack of transportation as a common barrier. An organizational participant gave the example of applying for a child to participate in public preschool through Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. To apply, families are required to travel to the Smith Center in south Charlotte, which may be a 30-minute commute or more for some families who have their own transportation and over an hour each way for families using public transit. For low-income young parents, investing that time may be impossible or may cause additional consequences (e.g., reduced income), even for those who have their own transportation.

Childcare

Childcare was not only described as a barrier for parents, but a barrier for organizations attempting to work with parents. Several parents noted that they look to see whether a program offers childcare when considering whether or not to participate. A member of a partner organization explained that when parents do not have childcare, they must bring their child with them to receive services, which can negatively impact their ability to focus, engage in positive interactions, and receive quality one-on-one support. This example, which was provided in the context of case management, shows how lack of childcare not only interferes with young parents’ ability to access services, but may also decrease the quality of support received

Parents also described the difficulty finding affordable options that provide high-quality care and education for their children. One parent described this experience as follows:

“I do not want to leave my child in a place that is not welcoming. Some people are there for money and others are there for the kids.”

Lack of childcare was also described as a significant barrier to employment, which is especially critical because many housing and childcare programs require employment for parents to participate. Parents described struggling to get childcare assistance without employment, but also struggling to find stable employment without consistent childcare.

“I didn’t have a job for more than 3 months at a time mostly because of a lack of consistent childcare.”

Restrictive requirements and obligations for participation

Parents described feeling that although programs were designed to provide resources, those resources were frequently unavailable to them because they did not meet specific eligibility requirements. For example, one mother described being turned away from a mother-infant health program because pregnant mothers had to sign up in the first month of pregnancy, and she was already two months pregnant. A service provider gave another example of parents being ineligible for support because they made \$300 more than the federal poverty level the prior year, barely above the cutoff to participate. Additionally, several participants in the 54-person session noted that it would be helpful for programs to remove restrictions related to age.

Parents who had concerns regarding immigration status are uniquely affected by program requirements. One representative from a partner organization described that parents may not apply for programs for fear that receiving support may violate the recent “public charge” ruling, which states that undocumented immigrants applying for documentation (i.e., a green card) can be denied if they have used public services due to concern that they will be dependent on the government in the future. Thus, parents fear that their ability to obtain legal status for themselves or for their children will be jeopardized in the future if they participate in social programs. This representative also noted that many programs do not serve non-U.S. citizens.

Additionally, to reiterate the interrelated nature of the challenges affecting young parents of color, some parents described that they didn’t qualify for childcare subsidy because they were not employed for 30+ hours per week, but they could not obtain employment or participate in employment programs because they did not have childcare.

These examples demonstrate how requirements can make it difficult for young parents in need to access services. Many parents described a desire for help meeting these requirements, rather than simply being turned away, and others described how the concern that they would not qualify deterred them from approaching organizations in the first place. The quote to the right demonstrates a young mother’s frustration with her experiences being turned away from support services.

“(If there is) some type of requirement that I don’t meet, that makes me shy away from it at first glance.”

It is important to note that ambiguous or inconsistent requirements can be problematic as well. As one example, a representative from a local organization described how uncertainty can decrease the likelihood that Latino immigrant parents will access certain services or programs:

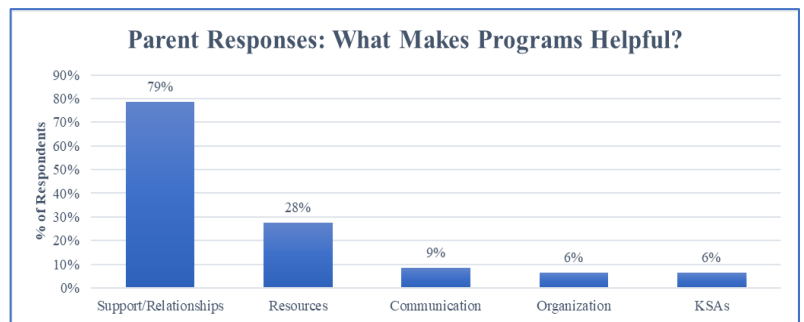
“There is a lot of hearsay information. Legal misinformation is something that we struggle with a lot. So, for example if the child qualifies for free/reduced but that could possibly in the future affect their ability to get legal paperwork, then they will not apply for it.”

Additional concerns related to obligations for participation that force young parents of color to make decisions that may not be positive for their health and wellbeing. One young mother described how she was required to start taking birth control to participate in a program supporting young, single mothers. Although this mother was happy with the services she had received and seemed content following this requirement, it is important to consider the ramifications of requiring young mothers to make a “choice” that may be detrimental to their health. Another example described previously, was the requirement for young mothers to put their children’s fathers on child support.

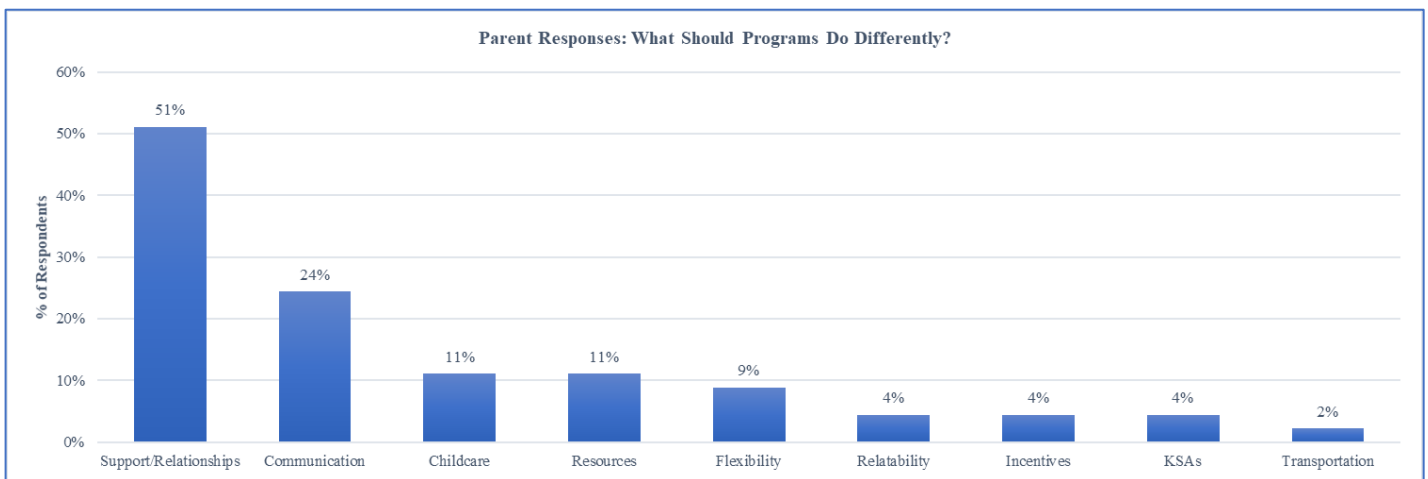
Young parents described these requirements as personal decisions that should not be considered when applying for or receiving aid. Furthermore, these requirements appear to impede the freedom of young women of color to make their own choices.

Barriers related to interpersonal interactions with program staff

One of the major issues raised in both the small and large young parent focus groups was the importance of relationships. The figure to the right summarizes participants responses to the question “What makes programs helpful?” and demonstrates how often parents mentioned the importance of positive, supportive relationships.



The figure below shows parents answers to the question “What should programs do differently.” Together, these two figures show the importance of supportive relationships and how parents frequently noted that organizations could do better at facilitating positive interactions.



When dissecting comments related to negative relationships, we found that concerns frequently related to judgement, discrimination and stigma, or a lack of relatability and empathy.

Judgement, Discrimination, and Criticism

Participants repeatedly voiced their frustration with experiences of being judged when they approached organizations to ask for help. Young parents of color described their frustration with these experiences and how they deterred them from participating in social programs.

*“If people are judgmental, it is really hard to work with them. It is hard for me to ask for help and when I do it, if I am made to feel bad, it makes me shy away from asking for help or being involved in programs. Yes, you are there to help, but it does not give you the right to make me feel bad. **You shouldn’t make someone feel bad for being in the situation that they are in when it isn’t their fault.**”*

*“If people make me feel bad for asking for help, then I don’t want it. **I don’t want to be told that it could have been different.** Sometimes you get criticism in a time where you need help. **Opinions can be good, but negative ones in a time of need are not.**”*

“They just kick you down when you already feel down and it doesn’t make you feel good. That’s what pushes some people away from wanting to even seek help. When you are on your last leg and trying, you feel like okay I’m done, I don’t want to look for help anymore.”

Importantly, young parents of color described experiencing judgement, discrimination, and criticism related to various aspects of their identities, including their race, age, single-parent status, language, and immigration status. The quotations below highlight these experiences and the assumptions made related to different aspects of their identities.

“People think because I’m young my child was an accident—but she was planned.”

“People don’t believe I can be a parent because I’m so young”

“People think less of you and most don’t see that you are trying to succeed in life with your child”

“It is frustrating going into something and then they say something about the child’s dad.”

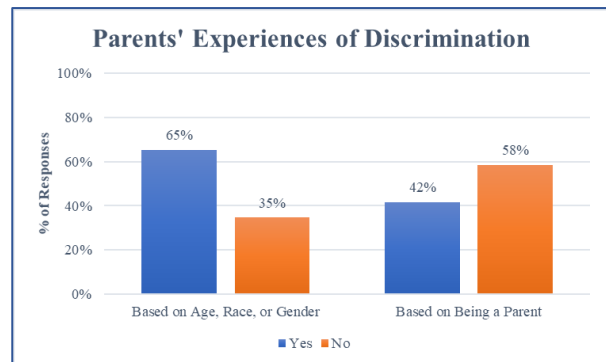
“Yes, (I was treated differently) because I was a single parent. When you are just a parent it’s fine, but not when you are single.”

“Renewing Medicaid in Social Services has been difficult for me because I do not speak English very well and they take you as ignorant in those places. Latinos themselves (also) treat you badly because they have a higher rank than you.”

“If I go through any programs, I expect to be treated differently.”

“It’s hard for a Brown person in general to survive a world run by White people. The protests are in response to things that make Black people feel they aren’t welcome to live or thrive here. I know it when I come across certain programs that treat me differently because I’m a Black man”

The figure to the right was created using data from parents’ responses to two yes-or-no questions in the 54-person session and shows that a high percentage of young parents have experienced differential treatment related to some aspect of their identity, suggesting the examples provided above are not isolated cases. It is noteworthy that most if not all parent participants reported that their negative experience(s) did not occur at the organization who connected them to this project.



Lack of Empathy and Relatability

Both parents and partner organizations communicated a strong need for program staff to relate to and empathize with young parents throughout the process of receiving services. Parents described feeling isolated in their situation, magnifying the importance of feeling understood. One organizational representative described relatability as a strategy for enhancing interactions.

“(It would be helpful to provide) younger staff to draw (young parents’) attention a little more. I understand that there is a lot of stuff that I do not relate to. They know that the community person or staff understands them because they live there and they know what they are going through. Age is important because personally I have that experience.”

Parents often described how feeling related to, heard, and understood were important factors that contributed to effective support. One parent described the need for organizations to *“listen to understand, instead of listening to respond.”* Another participant mentioned that *“(even if) you can’t relate on the circumstance, you should be able to show empathy.”*

Another parent wished social service providers could *“be humble enough to not want something in return. (Just show) the generosity of being there for the child and the parent.”*

Taken together, these themes indicate that the system of support available to young parents of color could be enhanced by efforts to increase empathy and relatability and avoid judgment and bias. Addressing these areas could improve relationships and increase the likelihood that young parents of color access and benefit from services.

Lack of Organization and Structure

Young parents noted that a lack of organization was often a barrier to effective support and described experiences in which 1) organizations were not well-informed of their needs, 2) the intake and referral processes were not streamlined, and 3) their information was lost due to a large amount of clients at the organization. The quote to the right shows how organizations may promise support, but their lack of organization interferes with effective services. Other parents expressed frustration regarding the amount of time that passed without hearing from an organization or service provider.

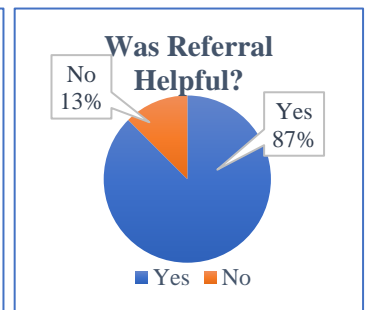
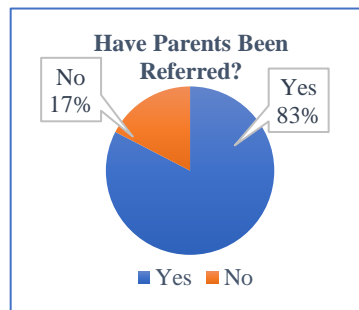
“(Organizations could) set up a time to meet and be receptive and actually help organize information and not have months go by without doing anything.”

Also related to organizational challenges, one participant described how she had been unable to initiate programs because she became overwhelmed, which could relate to a perceived lack of organization and structure in certain programs.

“When I look for something that I want to be in, my mind gets overwhelmed and to stop this feeling I just shut it down.”

The Inefficiency of the Referral Process

A lack of organization was also described in relation to the referral process. When an organization cannot provide a specific service, they often refer clients to another organization who can provide that service. The figures to the right demonstrate 1) the percentage of young parents in the large focus group who had been



referred to another organization to receive services and 2) the percentage of those parents who felt the referral had been helpful.

Young parents frequently noted that this process was complex and burdensome, even though it usually led to the services they needed.

“There were a lot of things I had to do and they had just closed because of the virus. A lot of phone calls that had to be made. They say they can’t give out certain information without your consent. (There was) a lot of frustration with the process and (I) ended up not being able to participate.”

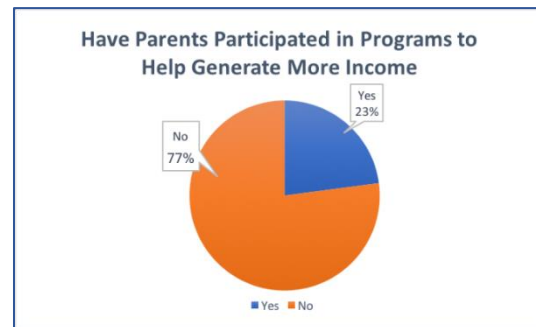
Another concern was that referring organizations may not be aware of the eligibility requirements of the organizations to which they are sending clients. One young parent described an experience in which she was referred to a service for which she did not qualify:

“They (the referring organization) thought (the other organization) could help, but they did not do their own research. It needs to be appropriate for the situation.”

Communication Barriers

Communication barriers frequently exist between young parents and organizations and were shown in focus groups by young parents’ lack of awareness of programs that could potentially be beneficial.

When the young parents were asked if they had participated in programs dedicated towards increasing their income, 77% of respondents stated that they had not. Furthermore, most stated that they did not know of any programs offering those types of supports, although they would be interested in learning more about them.



Due to language barriers and legal concerns, communication challenges can be especially consequential (and difficult to overcome) for Spanish-speaking parents, who generally reported that they had not participated in more than one or two social programs or services.

Altogether, the themes discussed in this section demonstrate that there are several impactful barriers that disrupt the ability of young parents of color to benefit from available programs. It is notable that these barriers impede participation in programs related to employment and education as well as programs designed to address basic needs, which may need to be addressed before young parents can engage in economically-focused opportunity pathways.

Strategies for Enhancing Support for Young Parents of Color

The previous section of this report described several factors that interfere with young parents’ ability to access, fully participate in, and benefit from community programs and opportunities for social mobility. This section outlines several strategies for responding to those barriers at the community, organizational, and individual levels.

In addition to the strategies suggested here, it is important to keep in mind that affordability is a key barrier to young parents’ economic mobility, which relates to systemic issues, such as the availability of affordable housing and childcare as well as access to jobs that pay livable wages. As an example, many young parents relayed that they needed to pick up second or third jobs to support their families. While policy solutions such as increasing the minimum wage or

decreasing the cost of essential services are not described here, it is important to note that advocating for such changes could yield meaningful benefits for young families.

Additionally, as mentioned by leaders from employment organizations, collaboration across multiple levels of the Charlotte community will be needed to remove systemic barriers and streamline the process for young parents of color to access support. Furthermore, collaboration could increase the community's capacity to support the whole family. As another representative from an employment organization suggested, *“children and parents can't move along opportunity pathways unless they have a safe place to live and food on the table.”* Therefore, in addition to creating and strengthening economic opportunity pathways for young parents of color, systems must be in place to address the *“core stabilizers”* of healthy families (e.g., food, housing) so that families can participate in those pathways and sustain positive outcomes.

The following recommendations are intended to address systemic barriers to promote a holistic approach to supporting young parents of color. These recommendations are guided by input from young parents and representatives from community organizations in Charlotte.

Increase access to affordable childcare

Young parent participants and organizational leaders recognized that lack of affordable childcare makes it difficult for young parents to enroll in or fully participate in programs that would otherwise be helpful. Parents also mentioned that they would be more likely to participate in programs that offered childcare, and many organizational leaders indicated that offering childcare was a key component of their programs that allowed them to effectively support young parents. For organizations to have an equitable effect across demographic groups (including young parents of color) they should ensure that this prevalent barrier is addressed.

One strategy for overcoming this barrier is to offer high-quality on-site childcare, which allows young parents to participate in programs or services without the stress associated with being physically distant from their children. If offering on-site childcare is beyond a nonprofit's capacity, other options may be worth considering.

First, nonprofits can partner with nearby daycare centers and explore the extent to which these centers offer subsidized care. If nearby daycare centers are available, but parents would likely be deterred by the cost of care, organizations should explore options for addressing those costs, potentially through grant funding.

Another option is to identify parent participants interested in working at a daycare center and support them through the process of acquiring the necessary qualifications to provide daycare. If this option were pursued, it would be important to partner with the educational institution and local early care and education centers to create an enriching training experience and prepare graduates to provide high-quality care. Once a parent (or a cohort of parents) completes the training program, they could begin offering care at the site of the organization's programming or off site. This option (or a variation on this general idea) could yield multiple benefits:

1. Provide training and employment for young parent participants, directly promoting their social mobility.
2. Increase access to childcare services and address a common barrier to the participation of young parents of color in potentially beneficial programs.

Regardless of the method chosen, funding organizations may be able to encourage service providers to address the childcare barrier by asking how the program will provide childcare and

ensure that young parents can participate. Furthermore, allowing organizations to develop a plan (and providing support as the plan develops) may help promote creative solutions that fit the organization's specific context (e.g., location, clientele, etc.).

Consider creative options to provide transportation or reduce the need for cross-city travel

Addressing the transportation barrier could not only increase young parents' access to services, but also decrease the amount of time required for clients to receive needed supports or services.

One strategy for reducing this barrier, would be to create virtual platforms for participants to apply for or receive services, rather than requiring them to travel and potentially wait in line to see if they even qualify. A lesson learned by an organizational leader during the COVID-19 pandemic was that they could *"provide services virtually to anyone who has some technology, even just smart phones."* Another organizational representative noted that they have been offering virtual information sessions, which *"promote greater access for parents to get more information (about available services and programs)."*

Other options include partnering with transportation services (e.g., Charlotte Area Transportation Services, Medicaid, Uber, Lyft) or offering mobile services that allow individuals to participate from home (or other accessible locations), rather than requiring them to travel to an organization's location.

Enhance collaboration and communication across organizations to promote a person-centered support system

Young parent participants frequently mentioned their frustration with being denied services because they did not meet certain eligibility requirements or being referred to an organization that either could not serve them or required them to go through the enrollment process again. These challenges add inconvenience and take time, which parents noted could be better spent working, studying, or parenting.

Enhancing communication and collaboration across organizations could address these barriers by increasing the efficiency of referrals, reducing young parents' feelings of being given the *"runaround,"* and reducing duplicative paperwork. For instance, if a parent approaches a housing program and also shows need related to an employment program, the parent's experience could be much smoother if the housing program (the original point of contact) could quickly check the eligibility requirements of an employment program and send application materials along with the referral. Furthermore, a more streamlined referral system would increase system capacity to be person-centered; If a parent has needs that the initial program cannot meet, the organization would have the tools necessary to connect the parent with appropriate supports and services, rather than simply turning them away.

One tool that could be helpful in streamlining the referral process is NCCare360, which provides a virtual platform for organizations to share their mission and programs with one another. Importantly, the platform encourages organizations to share eligibility requirements that participants must meet, increasing the likelihood that clients are referred to services or programs for which they qualify. Additionally, NCCare360 allows client information to be shared with referrals, which reduces the need for duplicative enrollment forms. The platform also makes it possible to track clients and monitor whether they access a referred service. As one organizational leader who has used NCCare360 noted, it is helpful *"to track our clients within the system to see who they have connected with."*

While the NCCare360 platform may still have issues to address (e.g., confidentiality, client control, monitoring organizational accountability), the system has the potential to yield several important benefits for clients and organizations. Importantly, NCCare360 could make it possible for any organization to serve as an “entry point” to a community-wide system of support for parents, families, or individuals in need, while also streamlining the referral process.

To capitalize on the potential of the NCCare360 platform, it will be important for platform designers to work in collaboration with local organizations to ensure that the platform addresses needs, interests, and concerns of key stakeholders. For instance, the organizational leader who had used the tool remarked that it would be more helpful if it could show when participants were employed or when employment falls through. Additionally, because the platform relies on organizations entering and updating their information, it will be crucial for organizations and funders to encourage and potentially incentivize consistent use of the system.

Encourage organizations to reduce or clarify eligibility restrictions

Many participants described how it was frustrating to find out that they did not qualify for a certain service or program because they did not meet a seemingly arbitrary eligibility requirement. Encouraging funders and service providers to remove excess restrictions whenever possible would help create a more inclusive system of support.

As one parent mentioned, *“if I am asking for help, it is because I need help. Why does my age or income matter?”*

If it is not possible to reduce program requirements, one beneficial step would be to ensure that eligibility requirements are clearly stated and publicly available. Doing so will make it easier for young parents and referring organizations to identify appropriate programs and reduce the time and frustration required for participants to connect with that service.

Offer trainings to service providers that promote positive interpersonal interactions with young parents of color

As noted by young parent participants, negative interactions with program staff was a common barrier to effective support. While these concerns clearly do not indicate that all or most organizations have judgmental staff, the percent of young parents who reported negative experiences suggests that training may be beneficial. As young parents described:

“You need empathy – people to care about you and want to help no matter where you are.”

“A program could be more helpful if they were more understanding and not be so quick to judge.”

A few trainings worth considering are trauma-informed care trainings, racial equity workshops, self-awareness and bias trainings, and cultural humility/responsiveness workshops. One organizational leader described the mindset that he tries to encourage among his staff:

“I tell my staff to assume that (participants’) interactions with the system have not been good. We need to be intentional so that we don’t mirror that system.”

As another strategy, one organizational leader described sharing the following passage to remind staff that everyone has a unique, complex story:

“Each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you’ll never know existed.”

Trainings or strategies such as the ones described here could help reduce judgment and enhance the quality of interactions among participants and program staff.

Provide diverse training and employment programs for young parents

Young parent participants described goals related to entrepreneurship as well as diverse career paths. In response, it will be helpful to collaborate with local education institutions (e.g., Central Piedmont Community College, the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Johnson C. Smith University, Johnson & Wales University) and employment organizations to offer diverse training programs. One current example is the program provided by Atrium College, which trains participants and places them in health science careers, such as nursing or radiology. Similar programs offering training in other areas could be established and/or expanded upon to provide access to diverse educational and employment pathways.

It will also be helpful for organizations to communicate about the unique programs they offer, rather than solely focusing on their similar programs. One organizational representative described meeting with other training organizations to *“talk about the programs that they do NOT have in common”* so that they could match prospective students with the best program for them, even if it were offered by another organization. Facilitating this type of communication and collaboration across employment-focused organizations could increase the likelihood that young parents of color can be matched with programs that align with their unique goals.

In addition to programs that provide professional training, it will also be important to **offer support for young parents’ entrepreneurial interests**, which were frequently mentioned in focus groups. One strategy to support entrepreneurship would be to connect young parents of color to applied apprenticeship or internship opportunities, where they can develop skills and learn about running a small business. As one example, the parent interested in opening a tattoo parlor could be connected with an existing tattoo parlor to gain experience and see how the business works. Providing education in business administration and increasing access to small business loans would also be helpful. However, as an organizational representative described, many young parents do not have *“access to affordable credit”* and *“do not trust financial systems,”* suggesting that additional barriers must be addressed for this support to be helpful.

As an additional note, any of the programs described in this section should identify and implement strategies for addressing the barriers described in this report that decrease access for young parents of color, such as childcare, transportation, and relatability.

Hire program staff from the target population

Young parents of color and organizational representatives mentioned that relatability was an important factor affecting the interactions among program staff and participants. Based on comments from organizational representatives, an appropriate strategy for improving interpersonal interactions would be to hire members of the population served whenever possible. One organizational representative described the strategy of *“hiring people who can understand themselves and understand and relate to others.”*

Encouraging organizations to hire young parents of color would enhance the community support system by improving interactions between program staff and young parent participants (and vice versa). Additionally, this practice would directly promote social mobility for the young parents of color hired.

Notably, the practice of hiring young parents of color could be incorporated into many of the recommendations described here, including the development of the daycare workforce, the provision of cultural bias trainings, and the utilization of an online referral platform.

Facilitate opportunities for young parents of color to support and learn from one another

One other finding that was not discussed at length in this report is the potential benefit of providing opportunities for young parents of color to support and learn from one another. At the end of focus group sessions, multiple parents mentioned that they appreciated the opportunity to connect with other young parents of color. For instance, one mother posted the comment to the right in the Zoom chat window.

“I’ve been having a lot of emotional issues and being a part of this made me feel nice. Thank you so much.”

At other points, parents asked about services in certain areas, such as expungement and housing. Before facilitators could respond, other young parent participants suggested organizations that they had worked with in the past and found to be helpful. Thus, creating opportunities for young parents of color to discuss the issues covered in these sessions may provide opportunities for psychological support (which many indicated they lacked) as well as the sharing of information about helpful community resources. Additionally, the sessions facilitated for this project demonstrate that virtual gatherings can provide opportunities for young parents of color to give and receive support, suggesting that in-person meetings (and the barriers associated with in-person meetings) may not be necessary.

Connect young parents to an accountability partner or life navigator

Related to the idea of enhancing social support, one young mother suggested that an *“accountability partner”* would help her achieve her goals. She explained that an accountability partner would be aware of her goals and encourage her to continue making progress. The person in this role could also help young parents navigate the complex community systems that affect them. The participant described the potential benefit of an accountability partner by saying:

“I know that being a pediatric nurse is something that I want to do and that I will enjoy doing, so I want to get into that as soon as possible. I feel like I need someone to push me to do that.”

When asked whether an accountability partner should be a friend or family member, she replied that it should be someone with whom she is less close, who could push her harder. This suggests that an accountability partner or life navigator could be someone who builds a relationship with a young parent, helps them identify and follow up on beneficial opportunities for training or support, and encourages them to keep moving forward. It is also possible that this could be another young parent in a similar situation, so that the partners could support one another, learn from one another, and push each other to make progress on their goals.

Conclusion

In summary, this project sought to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the strengths and goals of low-income, young parents of color, as well as the challenges that keep them from achieving their goals. In addition to providing themes in these areas, this report summarized the perspectives of young parents and community stakeholders to highlight several barriers that disrupt the provision of effective support to young parents of color. These barriers include:

- Inaccessibility due to lack of time, transportation, or childcare
- Restrictive eligibility requirements and obligations for participation
- Negative interpersonal interactions with program staff, which may relate to:
 - Judgement and discrimination
 - A lack of relatability or empathy
- A lack of organization and structure
- Inefficiency in the referral process
- Communication barriers

Based on feedback from young parents of color and community stakeholders, this report provided several strategies to address these challenges at the system-level and organization-level. These recommendations include:

- Increasing access to affordable childcare
- Providing transportation or reducing the need for cross-city travel
- Enhancing collaboration and communication across organizations and streamlining the referral process
- Reducing or clarifying eligibility requirements
- Offering trainings for program staff to avoid judgement and promote positive interactions with young parents of color
- Providing diverse training opportunities that support young parents' goals of employment or entrepreneurship
- Hiring young parents of color as program staff when possible
- Facilitating opportunities for young parents of color to support and learn from one another
- Connecting young parents to accountability partners or life navigators

While several suggestions for implementing these recommendations are provided here, continued collaboration and creativity will be necessary to achieve the overarching goal of creating and strengthening economic opportunity pathways for young parents of color. Building on the approach taken for this project thus far, it will also be crucial to ensure that actions are guided by the perspectives of key stakeholders, including representatives from employment and non-employment organizations, and perhaps most importantly, young parents of color.