

# Growing Together

Young Parents Share  
Successes, Struggles, and  
Recommendations  
for Change



**UPLAN**  
UNITED PARENT LEADERS  
ACTION NETWORK

Spring 2020



## Letter from the UPLAN Governing Council

### Dear friends,

We are members of the Governing Council of the United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN), a network of parent leadership organizations and parent leaders across the country making change. We invite you to read our new report “*Growing Together: Young Parents Share Successes, Struggles, and Recommendations for Change*”. It chronicles stories, challenges, and beautiful moments that young parents and their families experience every day throughout the United States.

**We spoke with more than 100 young adult parents** (ages 18-24), largely young mothers of color, to hear directly from them about their parenting joys, what makes it hard to be young parents leading their families, and what they think needs to change.

**Young parents experience higher rates of poverty than other young adults**, with almost one out of every three young parents living in poverty. Young parents of color face the same challenges that other young people of color experience—fears of law enforcement including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), limited access to jobs in their communities—and then they also face the challenges that other parents face—finding affordable childcare and housing and achieving economic security.

**In spite of these barriers, many young parents are succeeding.** They are assets to their communities and their families. They are motivated to make life better for their children and themselves. **And they don’t see themselves as problems that need to be fixed, but instead as a key part of the solution.** As one young parent said, “It’s not what young parents lack. No, it is what our society lacks.”

We know that the world has changed since many of us first became mothers. Things are harder now than ever for young parents and their families. Still, we see and hear the hopefulness, passion, and desire for growth and change that young parents bring to their lives and their children every day.

Please read this report and hear the voices of diverse young parents. Young parents uniquely know what is needed to improve their families’ lives. Listen to their recommendations for change and take action to make life better for hundreds of thousands of young parents and their children. Thank you.

Sincerely,  
The Parent Leaders of the UPLAN Governing Council



*“Looking back at when I was a young parent, I realize that despite the major challenges I encountered, having a child motivated me to make my life better and to make the world a better place for my child.”*

— Marisela Ruiz Sinaloa,  
Governing Council member



## Background

### Listening and engagement process

This report centers the real voices and everyday experiences of young adult parents. These experiences and recommendations for change were gathered through listening sessions with 105 young parents.

Between August 2018 and June 2019, five UPLAN member organizations held nine listening sessions with young parents (ages 18-24) to gain their perspectives. Seven sessions were held face to face, while two used Zoom technology and phones to engage the young parents. Also, in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with five young parents. Participating organizations were:

- Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI); Chicago, IL
- National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI); engaged Connecticut parents
- Parent Voices—Community Voices / Crystal Stairs; Los Angeles, CA
- Partnership for Community Action (PCA); Albuquerque, NM
- Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP; Washington state.

The parents who participated reflect the demographics of UPLAN’s membership—largely low-income mothers of color. The racial demographics of participants were: 45% Latino; 37% African-American; 8% Multiracial; 6% White; 3% Native American; 1% Asian. Ninety percent were female and 10% male.

The listening sessions were rooted in UPLAN’s core value of parents in the lead. Sessions were largely facilitated by parent leaders from the organizations and three were held in Spanish. Young parent participants received honoraria in recognition of their time and their expertise. On-site childcare and transportation assistance were provided.

Young parents reviewed a draft of this publication and provided feedback which was incorporated.

### How this publication was born

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a longstanding funding partner of UPLAN. This publication and the young parent engagement process involved were requested by the Foundation after receiving feedback from UPLAN members on an earlier publication about young parents. UPLAN parent leaders felt the report didn’t focus enough on the incredible strengths of young parents and they recommended a greater focus on the inadequacy of policies, not families.

This learning experience led the Foundation to partner with UPLAN so that young parents could share their experiences and stories on their own terms. As you will see, many of the parents’ recommendations echoed those from the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s KIDS COUNT Policy Report, “Opening Doors for Young Parents” (2018), including, for example, the need to support home visiting programs and onsite childcare on college campuses.

UPLAN and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are working together to engage parents as full partners in the design and implementation of joint projects. This is just one part of our collective journey to practice authentic family engagement and leadership where the voices of those most affected are central in identifying recommendations for change and advocating for them.



Five UPLAN member organizations held listening sessions with young parents (ages 18-24) to gain their perspectives.

# Growing Together

All parents are motivated by a vision for their children’s future—perhaps even more especially with young parents. For many young parents, having a child increases their motivation to make life better for themselves and for their children. One young parent said, “I want them to have better opportunities, to go to college, and to have their own career.” Many of the young parents interviewed reported that having a child was a turning point; they realized they had little ones counting on them. Their commitment to their children led many of them to go back to school and to try and improve their economic situation.

*“I was a high school dropout. My son motivated me to go back to school.”*

Young parents shared that their young age was a strength of their parenting. Many stated that they will have more time over the course of their lives to enjoy their children. For example, one mother said, “I can get out there on the basketball court with them.” Another said she will “experience life with them” and she “can still do stuff with them, not like an old mom trying to fit in.”

*“It’s hard, but he’s growing up and I’m growing with him. I’m learning more about life. I’m grateful that I’m going through it.”*

When young people become parents, it is a critical moment in their lives and in the lives of their children. Both parents and children are in a place of rapid growth. Parents ages 18 to 24 are transitioning to adulthood and negotiating new roles as parents. They are focused on their own growth and development so that they can be better parents. Research shows that becoming a parent is a time in which young parents have a chance to remodel their brain architecture—meaning the transition to parenthood presents an opportunity for new parents to learn, grow, and develop more quickly.

At the same time, brain science shows us that the earliest years of a child’s life is a critical time for brain development. Every second, young children from babies to age three create one million new neural connections.<sup>1</sup> They’re learning about relationships and gaining language skills.

Opportunities to earn more money for parents with young children have been shown to increase positive outcomes for their children. Research shows that when low-income families with children under age six have an increase of \$3,000 a year in income, their children are more likely to earn more as adults and have more work hours.<sup>2</sup>

This moment creates an opening to support young parents in making change in their lives that can have exponential impacts on families for the future. Two-generation approaches, those that work with both young parents and young children at the same time, can maximize this growth period for both young parents and their children, as recommended by both the young parent listening session participants and the “Opening Doors” KIDS COUNT report.



***“We all want better for ourselves and our children. Parents are motivated to make changes and make things work for their families. We just need a little help so that we can get to the point of not needing assistance anymore.”***

— Parent participant



Young adult parents want to better their situation for their children.

**Y**oung parents face unique challenges in leading their families. They specifically noted that many policy and program barriers get in the way of them leading their families, supporting their children financially, advancing their own educational and financial goals, and nurturing the healthy development of their children. Many of these barriers are rooted in policies and systems that make it more challenging for young parents. Here are the challenges highlighted by the mothers and fathers along with their recommendations of what could make it better for young parents.

### Challenge: Young parents feel alone and without support

Young parents reported feeling isolated and alone in the world and some shared that these feelings contributed to them experiencing stress and even postpartum depression. Parenting in general can be isolating, but even more so for young parents, as many reported not having friends their age with kids. One parent said, *"It's hard because you don't really have a social life. Friends are iffy, once you have a kid."* Some immigrant young mothers literally had no one in the United States that they felt they could turn to. Many of the young mothers no longer had relationships with their child's father which added to their feeling of being alone. For many undocumented immigrant young parents, the inability to gain insurance contributed to this challenge. *"As an immigrant parent, I need healthcare and insurance which I cannot access. I have postpartum depression and desperately need help finding resources and have no idea where to seek support."*

### Young Parents' Recommendations

**1. Fund home visiting programs for young adult parents and their children.** Many of the young parents interviewed talked about how home visiting programs were so important in providing support, helping them connect to resources, and supporting their transition into parenthood. One parent from Albuquerque stated, *"They helped me understand how to raise, support, and feed my baby. They have supported me greatly with everything I need. Without their support, I was feeling alone, and one cannot share those feelings with our families. They helped me to grow as a mother and person, as well."*

**2. Create more young adult parent support groups and resource centers.** Parents need support from other parents. For young parents, finding this support is challenging. Many parents interviewed suggested creating more support groups for young parents and places where they can go to find resources and meet other young parents in their same situation. *"We would like to have support groups once a month. There are a lot of programs that go unseen because people don't reach out to people. We suggest outreach to schools, or WIC (Women Infant and Children Nutrition Program) agencies where parenting tools are located, at day cares."* Another parent stated, *"Support groups would be beneficial; I have no family or friends. When I need information or answers to questions, I go to Google, 'Is this normal?'"*

**3. Support parent leadership development programs for young parents.** This is a prime time in young parents' lives to participate in parent leadership development programs. Many of these programs focus on the parents themselves setting goals. Some of the parents interviewed also reported learning how to advocate for their own child through a leadership development initiative. Learning to advocate for one's child is a critical skill that can benefit the child throughout their life. Moreover, while many parents start with advocating for their own child, they go on to advocate on behalf of children at large, calling attention to and sometimes impacting change around policies and practices that get in the way of children's healthy development and learning. When parents are partners and leaders in program and policy development that support children's development, systems work better for children and families.

**4. Increase access to health insurance for young parents.** In general, young parents are less likely to have insurance than either non-parenting young adults or older parents.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, young undocumented parents interviewed shared that their status makes it impossible for them to get access to health care for themselves, yet many of their children are able to access health care. One potential solution to help uninsured young mothers: states can include screenings for maternal health as a part of children's health insurance so that more young mothers can be screened for postpartum depression at their child's appointment. Also, the states that have not expanded Medicaid access should do so without adding work requirements.

## Challenge: Finding and keeping affordable housing

The challenge that young parents most often shared was finding and keeping affordable housing, including lack of access to housing assistance programs. One parent from Los Angeles said, *“Most important, we need help with housing. It’s difficult to get vouchers and some young parents are left with nothing. Homelessness is common among those I know.”* Young parents shared a long list of problems they experience relating to housing, including long waiting lists for Section 8 and public housing assistance programs, high rents that they can’t afford, and unaccommodating landlords. Often young parents ended up squeezing into an already overcrowded house with members of their family. Despite many young parents’ desires to move out onto their own and have independence for their new families, often they couldn’t afford it. Young parents in transitional housing programs feared that they would end up homeless once their time within the program ended and some shared that by participating in the program, they lost their place on the waiting list for public housing assistance. Fears of deportation led many young immigrant parents not to apply for home ownership assistance programs.

## Young Parents’ Recommendation

**Increase the number of programs and the number of slots available for young parents in housing assistance programs.** As described by a parent in Connecticut, there are some housing programs specifically for young parents and their children; however, there are so few slots compared to the need. Stable housing is a key piece in children’s development and young parents recommend that these programs be increased.

## Zoey’s Story

“Ledon,” the name of Zoey’s son, literally means “the gift” in French, and that is what Ledon was for her. Zoey became pregnant while in her last year of college and was set to graduate until Ledon came early, at 30 weeks, born during mid-terms. Despite not going back to school immediately after his arrival, Zoey credits Ledon with changing the direction of her life. *“I am a new woman. I didn’t have realistic expectations and an understanding of consequences.”* She felt she was going down a path that was not particularly healthy for her. Instead, she prioritized Ledon’s needs, saying being a parent “increased my accountability.”

Being a young parent has its unique challenges. Zoey and Ledon’s father separated and he stopped paying child support. Zoey and Ledon were evicted in February 2019. Now, Zoey and three-and-a-half-year-old Ledon live in a homeless shelter in Connecticut.

In the shelter, Zoey found support from other young single moms, something she hadn’t had when Ledon was younger. *“I would go to ‘Mommy and Me’ groups, but they were all made up of thirty-year-olds. I couldn’t find other young moms going through what I was going through. When I had Ledon, none of my friends had kids. Friends would ask me to go out, but I never could. Eventually they stopped asking me and that was hard.”* Moreover, while many people Zoey’s age are dating, Zoey struggles to date with a child.

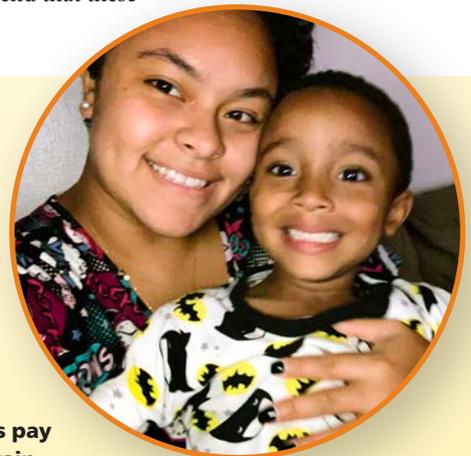
Now, Zoey works full time and Ledon is in

an early childhood program with support from childcare subsidies. One of Zoey’s major challenges is “finances” and she knows a lot about assistance program “cliffs.” According to Zoey, she lives “right at the border” of those cliffs, which she calls “tragic.”

In fact, **Zoey has negotiated for less pay and benefits so that she can maintain her food stamps and Medicaid.** If she were to earn pennies more an hour, she would lose the benefits that right now help make her life work for her family. On top of this, Zoey and other young parents report that they are often discriminated against in the job search, as she was told directly, “If you are a single parent, this is not the job for you.”

Connecticut offers a housing voucher specifically for homeless people, aged 18-24. Zoey thinks that there aren’t enough slots each year. She can’t imagine how she will be able to make it paying market price rent one day, especially with student loan payments. Zoey wishes there were more programs like the youth housing voucher. She wishes that programs aimed at young parents were more holistic, not just providing housing, but also providing “wrap-around support” and services.

Zoey eventually graduated from college and is currently getting her Master’s in Family and Marriage Therapy.



## Challenges → Young Parents' Recommendations

### Challenge: Access to affordable high-quality childcare

Young parent after young parent described their struggles to find accessible and affordable high-quality childcare. Families reported that the never-ending waitlist for subsidized childcare made it almost impossible. As many young parents work shiftwork and non-traditional hours or are in school, they have a hard time finding quality childcare that is flexible enough to accommodate their changing work schedules or their evening classes. They described the daunting search for infant and toddler care and expressed concerns about the quality of home-based non-family providers. In one of the Albuquerque listening groups, only three out of 16 young parents had their children in care beyond themselves and their families. One shared: "I prefer my kids to be with my family." Many young parents who speak Spanish said that finding bilingual care was particularly challenging. In a survey done of young parents, 41% said that they were jobless at different points due to their challenges with childcare.<sup>4</sup>

### Young Parents' Recommendation

**Increase funding for subsidized childcare and childcare slots—especially for young infants and toddlers**—so that more young families can access it and decrease the waitlists. Only 5% of young parents receive childcare subsidies despite the fact that 63% need childcare.<sup>5</sup> Lack of sufficient funding for childcare subsidies create long waitlists which discourage young parents from finding work, as many are unable to pay for childcare without assistance.

### Itzel's Story

Itzel's son, Eleazar, waited on the list for subsidized childcare for two and a half years. Just a few months after finally gaining a spot in the childcare program, he was "kicked out" because he was about to turn three and the program was for under three year olds.

Eventually, she got her son into a Head Start program. At that point, Itzel had a baby daughter, Valeria, who was one year old and had been diagnosed with autism. Itzel was on the verge of quitting her job. Again, she couldn't access subsidized childcare. Itzel's mother was helping her with childcare on her mother's days off, but Itzel's mother, also a single mom, needed to work for her own income. Itzel tried to reduce her work schedule to three days a week, but the company said they needed her five days a week, not three. Itzel felt she had no other option but to quit her job and go on CalWORKs, California's TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) program. Just then, she got a call from a local San Diego childcare program. They had a subsidized slot for Valeria.

When Valeria was diagnosed with autism, Itzel found it "heartbreaking"; however, over time, Itzel has learned to advocate for her children—especially for Valeria who is not verbal. Itzel credits her local parent organizing initiative with helping her find her voice. "What I've been learning is how to fight for my rights. Through

Parent Voices, I learned if there is something you don't like, you have to speak up."

**Itzel is speaking up, using her experience to call on policymakers to better fund childcare so that families can better access subsidized childcare.** She also wants every pregnant and parenting young adult to have the support of a home-visiting program, as she had a nurse throughout her pregnancy starting when she was age 19 and up until her son was three. "If we could have a nurse, we would have the extra support needed for every pregnant person. Nobody is born knowing this. There is no manual. You learn as you go. I was so emotional not having his dad around. Lots of emotional things going on and I was depressed. When I didn't know what to do or needed anything, the nurse helped me."

"Being a parent has made me stronger and more patient. I always put my kids first. We have to be stronger for our kids. I love the life I'm living with my kids—enjoying every moment with them—and every challenge. Days where I am tired of everything, my son says 'mom, I love you' and it motivates me to keep going."



## Challenge: Getting a degree and reaching educational goals

While young parents may be more motivated than ever to reach educational goals, they still noted many barriers. Even with educational programs that provided childcare on site, young parents still experienced challenges returning to school. One parent in Albuquerque said, “We have childcare, and my kid stays there when I’m at school, but I have no time to do homework or study.” Moreover, higher education often is expensive and young parents regularly have the immediate costs of taking care of their family that take priority over their own education. Often young parents feel the need to work instead of going to school and put off their own educational goals for the future.

### Young Parents’ Recommendation

#### **Create and fund more education programs specifically for young parents.**

Several of the young parents interviewed attended and graduated from public high schools and community colleges because they provided specific supports for pregnant and parenting young people. These programs provided on-site childcare and helped students figure out and connect with other resources that could help them. “I learned about a school called New Futures for young mothers. There was support, a day care, a clinic on site so you don’t have to leave. I was depressed, but my son motivated me to stay,” said a young mother in Albuquerque. At the national level, Congress should increase its funding for Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), the only federally funded program focused on providing childcare on college campuses for student parents.



*“I was depressed, but my son motivated me to stay.”*

— Parent participant

## Challenge: Making money and keeping it

Young parents are more likely to be working than their non-parenting peers and yet the average income for families led by young parents is just above the poverty line.<sup>6</sup> Also, a majority of young parents experience periods of joblessness. Young parents shared stories of job discrimination. Some were told explicitly that the job they were applying for would not work for single parents. Moreover, young parents asked for better financial literacy classes, which would surely be beneficial, but also must be coupled with the recognition that public policy makes it easy for young parents to get into debt and hard to get out of it, with payday and predatory lending, unrepayable student loans, easy credit, and the over dependence on fines and fees by municipalities. Predatory debt is a huge threat to young families’ economic security and educational advancement.

### Young Parents’ Recommendations

**1. Fund more targeted young parent job training programs.** Many young parents expressed the desire to have job programs that were designed with young parents in mind, so that they can understand and help parents navigate having a family and getting job training. One Chicago parent stated, “I successfully completed the Bright Endeavors program and got a permanent job. That program was very helpful because they help you find a good job and they help you in between you and your child’s schedule to find something that works.”

**2. Promote living wages, more family-friendly work policies, and flexibility with employers.** High numbers of young parents are working full time and yet barely making ends meet. Young parents need to be able to make a living wage to support their families. Young parents, like all parents, also need flexibility in their workplaces, including the ability to take time away from work when a child gets sick without fear of losing their job.

**3. Support policies that keep more money in young parents’ households.** Unlike parents older than 25, parents under age 25 cannot receive the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). This is income that young families could benefit from. Moreover, city fines and fees make it easy for families to get into debt and nearly impossible to get out of. Cities should examine these fines and fees for disproportionate impact on low-income families and eliminate these fines and fees, helping young parents keep more money in their households.

## Challenges → Young Parents' Recommendations

### Challenge: Programs and policies with “cliffs” that cut young parents off just when they start to get ahead

The young parents interviewed described many programs and policies that give support to them as they're trying to improve their lives, which then cut them off after a certain point. Just when young parents feel like they are finally able to make their lives work, they feel like the “rug gets pulled out from underneath” them. Many young parents reported that when they earned just a little more at work, they no longer were eligible for subsidized childcare, food stamps or SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), WIC (Women, Infant and Children Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), housing assistance programs like Section 8, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and more. One Washington state parent stated, “You get a job or raise and you lose benefits.” Parents in Chicago commented, “They cut my stamps down because I started receiving TANF. So, they don't really help you get ahead.”

### Young Parents' Recommendation

#### Analyze and remove program and policy cliffs that harm young parents.

Programs and policies with cliffs actually discourage young parents from striving to achieve. Young parents should not be punished for advancing their lives. They need to know that they won't lose their support when they are succeeding.



### Adilene's Story

Adilene dreams of returning to school one day to become a hospice nurse. In the meantime, she works as a caretaker in Albuquerque, using skills that she credits parenting in helping her build—patience, nurturing, and being open-minded. When she had her son, Adriel, at age 19, she wanted to keep going to college, but she realized she couldn't keep all the balls in the air - working, school, and parenting. Adilene is now twenty-one and Adriel is two-years-old. “I have to put off school until he's (Adriel) ready to go to school. I'd like to return to school but since my son is so little the only way I could do it now is if the community college had childcare onsite and it doesn't.”

While she is putting off her own dreams for now, she is grateful to be a young mom. “I feel like I've grown to be more patient, loving, caring, and open-minded. It's hard (to be a young parent) but as he's growing, I'm growing with him. I'm learning more about life. I get to see him grow up and (hopefully I will) be a young grandma.”

Adilene enjoys being a young mother, but wishes that resources were easier to access for young parents. When she put Adriel in childcare, she didn't have a sense of what to look for in a center. Generally, she doesn't have

a sense of where to look for resources for her family. She thinks it would make sense that places and programs that interact with young parents tell them about other resources in the community.

Adilene is now facing a number of medical bills. When Adriel was born, Adilene and Adriel's father were living together and applied jointly for and received Medicaid for their health insurance. However, when Adilene separated from Adriel's father and moved in with her parents, she lost her Medicaid temporarily because of the new family arrangement. During this time, she accrued medical bills which she is still paying off. As family arrangements change often for young parents, **Adilene thinks that there has to be a better way for young parents to maintain their health insurance.** Any debt is a major setback for young parents and their families trying to achieve their financial and educational goals.



## Challenge: Programs and policies that pit young mothers and young fathers against one another

Young parents reported that the child support system pushes young moms and young dads apart. A young Chicago mom shared, “It’s hard to get cash assistance because they will ask the baby’s daddy for child support. So, it’s hard for any of us to get TANF because if our baby’s daddy doesn’t pay up, then he’s going to get locked up. And no one wants to get their baby’s daddy locked up.” Another young parent described how not seeking child support prevented her from getting needed resources, “I just went to the WIC office and they raised an issue about a child support claim I didn’t follow up with from 2011 and they were still using that to keep me from getting WIC.” Also, parents noted that there is an incentive for noncustodial fathers to avoid formal employment because they cannot afford to pay child support and therefore feel incentivized to not report any income.

Beyond child support, other programs create disincentives to young couple staying together: homeless shelters and affordable housing programs that are only for moms and children and public benefit programs that require mothers to be single, for example.

### Young Parents’ Recommendation

**Child support policies should consider the parent’s ability to pay.** Also, child support should not be due from a young parent who is incarcerated. It is an immense burden to come out of prison with overwhelming debt. Additionally, programs and policies that make young parents have to choose between receiving the resources they need and raising their children with the two parents together should be eliminated.



*“It’s hard to get cash assistance because they will ask the baby’s daddy for child support. So, it’s hard for any of us to get TANF because if our baby’s daddy doesn’t pay up, then he’s going to get locked up. And no one wants to get their baby’s daddy locked up.”*

— Parent participant

## Jasmine’s Story

Three days a week, Jasmine and her three-year-old daughter, Jaelynn, have a two-hour commute on two different buses each way, riding through Los Angeles traffic to get Jaelynn to childcare and Jasmine to her community college. Jasmine, age 23, is studying social work, as she wants to be a probation officer to help young people. And just recently, she got a job working the nightshift. Working, parenting, and going to school is tough to juggle, but Jasmine is driven to create a life for Jaelynn in which she won’t have to struggle as much as Jasmine herself has had to. “If I can get through this, she might not have to.”

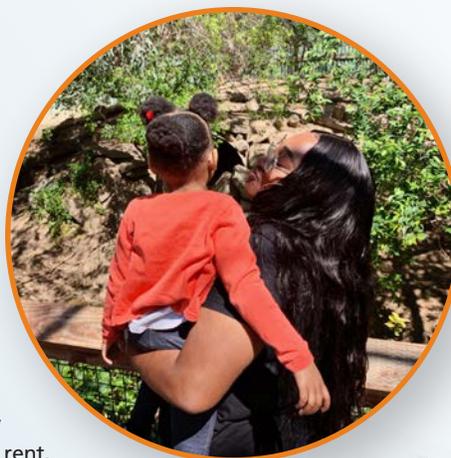
Jasmine wasn’t always able to juggle all these things. During the first years of Jaelynn’s life, Jasmine was trying to figure out from night to night where she and her daughter would sleep. At first, they lived with her daughter’s father in Jasmine’s mother’s home. However, Jasmine and her mom had some conflict and so Jasmine and the baby moved out and spent a lot of time “couch surfing”—moving from one friend’s apartment to another.

Trying to get an apartment on her own was nearly impossible. Jasmine experienced racial discrimination in her housing search and wasn’t

able to meet the credit scores needed to get an apartment on her own. While not in debt, she hadn’t had the opportunity to build credit.

Recently, through a supportive housing program, Jasmine and Jaelynn moved into a fully furnished apartment, where they receive help to pay the rent.

The stability that they have found in having a home has been the foundation for success. With stable housing, Jasmine can concentrate on how to reach her own educational and financial goals and on how to support her daughter. **“You can’t focus on anything else when you don’t have a place to lay your head.”** Jasmine found a childcare center open 24-hours that works great for their family. With subsidized childcare and stable housing, she believes this will ultimately help her and Jaelynn to not just survive, but to thrive together.



## Conclusion

**Y**oung parents and their children are at a critical moment in their lives. Targeted support that recognizes this unique moment in young parents' lives, including their motivation and their challenges, can go a long way to changing life trajectories for both the parents and their children. Young parents are growing and developing, too, while their little ones grow at the same time. This growth period provides a great opening to help better the lives of young parents and children. Listening to the voices of these young parents can and should inform programs, practices, and public policies. Doing so will truly help families with young parents get ahead and keep growing together.



### Shontiesha's Story

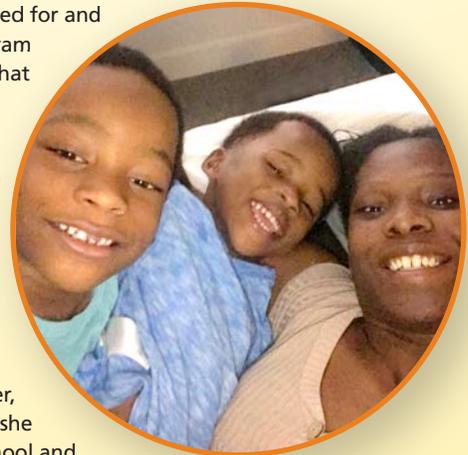
Shortly after having her first son, Kedrick, at age sixteen, Shontiesha left her Chicago college prep high school to work fast food. **She needed to provide for her family and didn't have the resources and support she needed—like onsite childcare at the high school—to be able to continue to stay in school and to work.** At the time she felt like she didn't know how to be a parent and was trying to do it without much guidance. She focused on being able to provide financially, but didn't realize all the other pieces of parenting yet.

Living with her family at the time, she felt the urge to be more independent. Together with Kedrick's father, they wanted to learn how to parent for themselves. At age 20, Shontiesha gave birth to her second son, Kasen, and decided, then, that she would take the step of leaving the family home and moving her young family into a shelter. She, the boys' father, and the two boys moved into a temporary shelter together where they stayed for a year.

For Shontiesha, this is when her world "took a 180-degree turn." She realized in a new way that she wanted to do differently for her sons. She went back to school and got her GED. She got her youngest son into a full day Head Start program. She recognized that she wanted to be

more positive. She applied for and was accepted to a program for parents ages 18-24 that provides housing and employment support, along with other resources. Soon, she will be moving into an apartment with her two sons, where they will each have their own bedroom and she recently started a job as an AmeriCorps worker, serving as a tutor. Now, she dreams of attending school and studying education herself. She wants to be a teacher or mentor. She believes the patience she's developed as a mom will help her in these careers.

As she looks back to when she first became a mom, she hopes that other young moms will have the resources and support she didn't at first. She believes that support should start while in the hospital and this care should treat young parents with respect, not shaming or discriminating against them. "We're all learning as we grow."



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## Acknowledgements

We are so grateful to the brave young parents who trusted us with their stories, struggles, and dreams and offered up critical recommendations for change to make life better for other young parents and their families. We also thank them for being editors of the final report.

We thank the five UPLAN organizations that hosted focus groups of young parents and for their support in reviewing this report: Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI), National Parent Leadership Institute, Parent Voices—Community Voices / Crystal Stairs, Partnership for Community Action, and Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP.

Thank you to the Center for Economic Opportunity in the Annie E. Casey Foundation for funding the listening sessions and the creation of this critical report. We appreciate your recognition that young parents themselves are the experts in what young parents need for their families. We hope this report will help inform policy, programs, practice and advocacy to better support young families.

### Other Resources

Please check out the following resources for more information and data on young adult parents' experiences and recommendations for change.

“KIDS COUNT Policy Report: Opening Doors for Young Parents” by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018. [www.aecf.org/resources/opening-doors-for-young-parents](http://www.aecf.org/resources/opening-doors-for-young-parents)

“Young Parents Speak Out: Barriers, Bias, and Broken Systems” by National Crittenton and Katcher Consulting, March 2020. <https://tinyurl.com/YoungParentsSpeakOut>

“Looking at Life Differently: Equitable Mental Health Support for Young Adult Parents” by Nia West-Bey, September 2019. <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/looking-life-different-equitable-mental-health-support-young-adult-parents>

“The Cost of Opportunity: Student Stories of College Affordability” by Eleanor Eckerson Peters, Amanda Janice Robertson, and Mamie Voight, Institute for Higher Education Policy, May 2019. <http://www.ihep.org/research/publications/cost-opportunity-student-stories-college-affordability>

### Endnotes

- 1 The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2018) *Opening Doors for Young Parents* (KIDS COUNT policy report). Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from [www.aecf.org/resources/opening-doors-for-young-parents](http://www.aecf.org/resources/opening-doors-for-young-parents)
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.

## Participating Organizations



*"I have seen COFI play a very effective role in our schools because COFI parents are on the ground. They are part of day-to-day activities, extending themselves from parenting to volunteering at schools. Parent involvement is such an important part of the education process. They know the environment. They know the kids. They know the parents. You can respect their judgment and believe what they say."*

—Illinois State Senator  
Kimberly Lightford on her work  
with parents from COFI

### **COFI (Community Organizing and Family Issues) Chicago**

COFI exists to build the voice and power of parents—particularly low-income mothers of color—in all aspects of public life from schools and community leadership to impacting policy and systems at the city, state, and federal levels.

In its 25-year history, COFI-trained parents have won:

- The return of recess for 266,000+ public elementary school children;
- The rewrite of the school discipline code to implement a restorative justice philosophy, to ban school suspensions for children in 2nd grade and younger, and to end group punishments such as the practice of “silent lunch”;
- The creation of an early learning peer ambassador program now replicated across the state and the nation;
- The reform of Chicago’s municipal fees and fines structure.

[www.cofionline.org](http://www.cofionline.org)



COFI parent leaders are taking on important issues and winning changes for low-income families of color in Illinois and nationally.



NPLI parent leaders are working to improve children's outcomes, racial equity, and democracy across the country.

### The National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI)

The National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI) is a non-profit, non-partisan parent-informed democracy initiative. We embrace asset-based learning across race and class to increase the civic leadership of parents at home, in the neighborhood, and in public policy. NPLI trains and prepares communities to build organizational capacity and create change through the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI), a national family civics model established in Connecticut in 1992.



**NATIONAL  
PARENT  
LEADERSHIP  
INSTITUTE**

NPLI impacts more than 60 communities across 14 states. Parent leaders are:

- Creating innovative ways to increase access to high quality early childhood education in communities as well as informing federal policy by testifying at federal forums and meeting with legislators on Capitol Hill.
- Increasing awareness and access to mental and behavioral health services by providing workshops in Spanish.
- Advancing racial equity and social justice by launching a Racial Equity Think Tank for parent leaders and parent leadership initiatives; they are developing tools and resources to raise awareness of Census 2020 and Election 2020 with a racial equity lens.

***"As an involved parent I know I wield tremendous power because through NPLI I've been empowered to empower. As a parent I've learned to teach by what I do. I lead by example."***

—Terrence Taylor,  
Decatur, IL PLTI

[www.parentswholead.org](http://www.parentswholead.org)

## Participating Organizations



*"Before I joined Parent Voices I never knew my voice mattered. Today I know better, I am empowered by my experiences with Parent Voices and use it to empower others. I have evolved into a passionate speaker that gives me permission to be true to myself and stand up for what I believe in and what I know is fair. Parent Voices has changed the person I used to be into the person I always wanted to be, strong, confident, and fearless!"*

—Becky, Parent Voices,  
Butte County, California



More than over 700 families gather annually at the California Capitol.

### Parent Voices

Parent Voices CA is a 24-year-old parent-led, parent-run grassroots organization fighting to make quality child care accessible and affordable for all families. Parent Voices is a statewide organization made up of local chapters, including their Los Angeles affiliate, Community Voices.

- Parent leaders fought for and won the creation of the most progressive TANF child care policies in the nation. TANF customers in California receive one year of full-time child care from day one.

Parents have cultivated deep relationships with:

- the California Department of Education through the Preschool Development Grant (PDG) parent policy committee; and
- the State Department of Social Services through their Outcome, Accountability, and Review (CalOAR) process, ensuring that the people directly impacted by the issues have a seat at the table in creating new programs and systems that impact their lives.

[www.parentvoices.org](http://www.parentvoices.org)



## Partnership for Community Action

The Partnership for Community Action (PCA) has worked to build strong, healthy communities in Albuquerque's South Valley and across New Mexico since 1990. PCA focuses on community issues including education, economic sustainability, wellness, and immigrant rights. We invest in people, working in a deeply personal way to engage residents in public life and take action around the issues that affect their lives.

- Through education, training, and commitment to enduring relationships, we help develop strong leaders who are effective advocates for their families and their communities.
- Since 2009, PCA has trained over 2,500 parent leaders in the Abriendo Puertas / Opening Doors early childhood and advocacy curriculum.
- Communities for Education and Action (CEA), a PCA parent leadership initiative, has successfully worked to increase the state's investment in quality early childhood education and is pushing for a fully funded system.
- Through Project ECHO, PCA is expanding its reach using digital tools to connect other cities and counties to create intentional learning communities.

[www.forcommunityaction.org](http://www.forcommunityaction.org)

*"During a meeting, some parents raised a concern about the school's dual language program. Communities for Education and Action (CEA) parent leaders chimed in and very professionally explained the multitude of benefits children receive when they are bilingual."*

—Principal Annittra Altar,  
Adobe Acres Elementary  
School, Albuquerque, NM



Partnership for Community Action's team of staff and parent leaders work together for systems level change for New Mexican families.

## Participating Organizations



*"I am worthy, I do matter! Even though I am only one person, I can make a difference in myself, my family, and my community."*

—Washington State Parent Ambassador

### Washington Parent Ambassadors

The Parent Ambassadors Program is a parent-led leadership and organizing project established by the Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP (WSA). Each year, up to 25 parents with children enrolled in Head Start and the Early Childhood Education Assistance Program (ECEAP), our state-funded preschool program, receive 150 hours of training in the areas of grassroots organizing, conflict resolution, leadership development, presentation skills, and race equity. Once trained, Ambassadors are then deployed to our State Capitol and Washington D.C., to advocate for high-quality early learning and care services that support young children and their families.

Since its founding in 2009, the program has played a critical role in:

- Doubling the number of children participating in ECEAP;
- Helping stabilize child care subsidies for 50,000 children;
- Creating more access to high-quality early learning for children in the child welfare system; and
- Leading the efforts to defeat recent attempts to water down the parent leadership, parent governance and family engagement components of Head Start.

[www.wsaheadstarteceap.com](http://www.wsaheadstarteceap.com)



Washington State Parent Ambassadors advocate in Washington D.C. for increased access and affordability of early learning programs.





# UPLAN

**UNITED PARENT LEADERS  
ACTION NETWORK**

The United Parent Leaders Action Network (UPLAN) brings together parent leaders—very largely, low-income people of color—and parent leadership organizations from across the country to build power to inform policies and programs that matter to families and children, especially families with young children. Its vision is to build a movement of parent leaders who participate fully in public decisions made at the local, state, and federal levels that affect children and families. UPLAN is made up of 33 member organizations, all rooted in a set of shared values and practices. UPLAN creates shared learning opportunities across organizations electronically and face to face and supports parent leaders in advancing systems change campaigns.

[www.unitedparentleaders.org](http://www.unitedparentleaders.org)



UPLAN parents, staff/organizers, and external partners at the UPLAN Convening, September 2019, Washington, DC.