

ISSUE BRIEF



Application of 2-Gen Approaches in Family Homelessness Prevention Settings

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Two-Generation approaches require programs to design and deliver services that intentionally strengthen the whole family, so that all generations within the family can experience improved economic, housing, and educational outcomes. As a result, the whole family becomes more resilient to future disruptive events.

2-Gen programming has increasingly become a focus of social service programs that work to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and to stabilize families. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation noted in a recent policy report,¹ 2-Gen approaches, which seek to simultaneously improve outcomes for, and strengthen the resiliency of, all members of a family, may well provide the key to disrupting these generational cycles and reversing decades of increases in children living in poverty.

In its first issue brief on this topic, the Siemer Institute offered a definition of 2-Gen or “whole family” approaches in case management and program development in the context of family stability work. Although this is critical to setting the context for this work, the Siemer Institute recognizes that programs may need concrete examples and guidance to help them implement this kind of approach or improve their existing programs. This brief offers a practical review for how 2-Gen principles can be implemented in programs that work to prevent family homelessness and/or to improve school stability for children, by drawing on the experience of Siemer network programs who implement these approaches in their efforts.

To achieve this goal, the Siemer Institute identified programs within its network that were working to develop 2-Gen approaches in their own practice. They identified both larger programs that provided comprehensive family support services, including housing and intensive counseling and employment and educational assistance, as well as programs with a smaller footprint that relied more heavily on partnerships to address family needs. Independent researchers confidentially interviewed two staff members from these programs—one at the executive director or director level and one at the case manager level. This allowed researchers to gather a diverse set of perspectives to shed light on why and how 2-Gen approaches help to prevent family homelessness.

Nearly every interviewee reported that 2-Gen approaches are crucial to the success of families. 2-Gen approaches include all family members as assets to changing the current situation. In addition to encouraging cooperation and mutual support, exploring the strengths and areas for growth of each family member can “give us a deeper understanding of what’s going on with the family...” One case manager suggested this approach draws on the

¹ Gencer, A. (2014). *Creating Opportunity for Families: A Two-Generation Approach*. KIDS COUNT Policy Report. Annie E. Casey Foundation. Chicago

natural strengths that many multiple-generation families already embody. “Multi-generational families are often very effective when they work well together. They figure out how to capitalize on each other’s strengths.” Finally, 2-Gen expands the range of goals set by a family and with that expansion, increases the chance of small wins. Perhaps it’s not feasible for parents to attain a GED in 6 months, for example, but those same parents might be able to work toward that goal while successfully learning to advocate for their child in an educational setting, empowering themselves and encouraging their children’s achievement.

In other words, for those who have implemented a 2-Gen approach to how they serve families, the benefits of this approach seem clear. The natural next question, then, is how can other programs implement a 2-Gen approach into their programming? Some programs may be just dipping their toes into the water of programming that serves the whole family while others may want to deepen their expertise. To help with this transition, this issue brief offers insights from Siemer Institute partners that operate effective 2-Gen programs. What lessons have these programs learned, and therefore can be used by others, when it comes to integrating 2-Gen into their approach and practice?

Key Insights for Implementing 2-Gen Practices in the Family Homelessness Prevention Context

- » Hire and properly train case managers.
- » Establish rapport with clients.
- » Lead from behind and be flexible.
- » Partner with other strong programs.
- » Utilize data.



Hire and Properly Train Case Managers

Directors can encourage case manager success with this endeavor in several ways, ranging from screening and hiring the right people, supporting their efforts (and sometimes difficulties) with families and providing training that enhances their ability to build family assets and resilience. Specifically, directors told us:

- » *Anyone can work in a 2-Gen framework, but some case managers may more naturally embrace it than others.* Case management in this framework is inherently cooperative. Staff must embrace families as experts on their own situation and allow them to take the lead on setting goals. Additionally, case managers must be open to meeting the family where they are both literally (by making more outreach visits to clients’ homes or trusted community locations), and figuratively (by doing honest assessments of the unique needs of each family). Some programs use vetting questionnaires in their hiring process which assess staff philosophy, attitudes toward, and comfort

Meet with families in the community or in their homes.



levels with different the types of practice to assess fit with the 2-Gen approach to case management that those programs employ.

- » **2-Gen programming takes more effort.** By asking case managers to consider how the whole family is functioning and the resilience of each family member, this approach will increase case managers' work, at least initially. As one case manager said, "There is a lot more to remember, document, and coordinate, even if the surface issues don't look that different. It's very customer focused." Structuring case notes to help case managers easily review all family members' progress and reducing caseloads (if possible) can help.
- » **Train staff appropriately.** Throughout the interviews, two key themes surfaced when it comes to training staff to be successful in a 2-Gen approach: family centered coaching and trauma informed care. These approaches reinforce the cooperative nature of casework in a 2-Gen approach and the unique needs that families who are unstable and in need of housing assistance may have. Motivational interviewing, mentioned by multiple programs, can be a central component to the coaching approach. Additional topics mentioned included training to recognize secondary trauma experienced by case managers, encouraging case managers' self-care, and facilitative leadership.
- » **Diversity in viewpoints can be an asset.** It's important to note that no one approach to coaching in this framework was identified—a diversity of staff personalities and skills can help meet the unique needs of different families in different ways; this can sometimes occur by matching case managers to clients, if possible. One director said he has hired anthropologists, engineering majors, and even architects as case managers. The key traits they share are experience with the population the program serves and a passion for serving them. He attributes his staff's unique ability to problem-solve and overcome barriers to this diversity of perspectives.

Train on trauma informed care, coaching techniques and motivational interviewing and facilitative leadership.



These staffing considerations can be seen as barriers or opportunities. Successfully overcoming them can lead to a more fulfilling experience for case managers. One director said, "[The whole family approach] really re-energized our case managers. It made them feel like they were a part of something larger—seeing the impact on the entire family. [This approach] got people excited about the work they were doing, the impact they could have."

Establish Rapport with Clients

Not unlike most successful client and case manager relationships, 2-Gen approaches require a trusted connection between the two parties. This is a bit more complex when involving family members other than the identified client, typically the parent(s) in a household. Beyond the logistical challenges of working with multiple clients, some families may have negative experiences with Child Protective Services or other entities that have a strong monitoring component to the assistance they provide. Others may simply see questions or discussions about other family members as coming out of the blue and not relevant to the work they think they are doing. Interviewees suggested the following strategies to establish rapport and prevent client resistance to 2-Gen approaches:

» **Know the client and the family.** 2-Gen approaches require case managers to know and work towards meeting goals for not just a single identified client (e.g., a head of household) but also others who are part of that client's household. This level of involvement delivers multiple benefits. It invests the family in planning and helps with rapport because they know their case managers care enough to know and remember them. It also gives the case manager more room to maneuver and help the family achieve small wins. Employing a case notes system that documents the current status and goals of ALL family members is key.

» **Clearly communicate how the program operates to build trust.** It's important to introduce 2-Gen programming to families from the beginning to avoid mistrust due to some of the probing questions that 2-Gen programming may require case managers to ask. One case manager suggested the phrase "whole family" as something parents intuitively understand. Another said she encountered much more resistance to queries about family goals and priorities before she learned to help set expectations during intake by explaining the purpose of the program as strengthening the family to increase stability. "It can be weird to jump from housing counseling to asking about kids if it's not set up right," she said. The goal of these efforts is to help the

client understand that the program serves all family members, encourages their working together as a unit, and builds on the strengths of everyone in the household. With this context, questions about children and grandparents seem less threatening and more natural. As she put it, "Be honest when meeting with your families about how the dynamic of meetings will be up front. In other words, that it's a safe place for them."

Settle on language that emphasizes the 2-Gen approach early and introduce it from the first meeting with clients.

» **Give clients space.** It's not necessary to fully engage in 2-Gen programming from day one. One case manager suggested just listening and backing off on the components involving other family members until trust develops. This, she says, "eventually gets them to full engagement...when they understand 'I'm here as a guide, to support you...not to run everything in your life.' When they think, 'I feel like I have someone who is listening to me, someone who is saying, "What can we do together?"'"

Once trust and rapport is established, the real work begins. Case managers must be ready and able to embrace the 2-Gen framework, which can be a shift from other case management strategies they've employed. Staff must be willing to actually partner with families and not simply serve them by recommending or connecting them with services.

Lead from Behind and be Flexible

A defining characteristic of 2-Gen programming is that families take the lead. Case manager effort is no less crucial to success; it just must be channeled in a different way; specifically, toward facilitating families' efforts to

build themselves up, working side by side with family members to achieve goals for the whole family. Moving the focus of goal setting and brainstorming solutions to the family also empowers family members to have ownership of those goals.

Several programs mentioned a visioning process they use with families. Though they differed in specifics, they all helped families think through what they most wanted their families to be and brainstorm ways to get there. One case manager explicitly mentioned asking families about their hopes and dreams, which not only helps focus on whole family goal setting, but also encourages families to realize how important they are to the success of later generations. As a secondary benefit, this communicates to families that case managers care enough to understand their perspective.

Use visioning exercises to help families define key goals.



Other programs utilize assessment approaches that are simple enough (for at least some components) that children could complete. This helps boil family situations down to their most basic components, focusing on what truly must be changed.

Meeting families where they are and providing the assistance they need is central to this approach. As one case manager put it, “We bundle the services they need. If we offer too little, they will still be stuck. But if we offer too much, we create dependency. The best way forward is to let them be the leader. People are the experts on their own lives. We’re a helper. Folks are really resilient and we need to give them credit for that.” Another said, “Success is when it feels like a package, not a la carte services bundled together.”

Flexibility was mentioned by several interviewees as crucial for a variety of reasons. It allows case managers to tailor their approach to each family and opens the door for them providing somewhat unconventional assistance that may prove crucial for family success. This dovetails nicely with the Siemer Institute’s flexible funding that can be used for a variety of purposes, beyond funding case management services. One case manager mentioned how much she appreciated using those funds to buy beds for children, which are often overlooked in family stability efforts. Beds, she maintained, are critical for kids—they help them sleep better which improves school functioning and behavior within the family, improves self-esteem and makes the housing situation feel more permanent. Siemer funds were also used to buy clothing or school uniforms, which help children feel like they “fit in” better at school.

Partner with Other Strong Programs

Program staff do not need to be experts on all the issues a family might face. Just as they lead from behind with families, they can also locate and work together with experts from other organizations who know the problems facing some families better than they do. One organization, for instance, formed a coalition of community partners that seeks to cover all needs identified in the Arizona Self-Sufficiency matrix and explicitly divides responsibility for different components among partner agencies. This organization seeks out partners that have expertise in specific domains of the matrix where it may be less strong, and carefully plans its

collaboration with partner agencies, which helps families to have appropriate expectations for how they will move through the programs. This organization specifically mentioned that training on collective impact was especially helpful to their efforts in forming and maintaining good working partnerships within their coalition.



Train in collective impact models to structure sound partnerships.

Strengthening existing partnerships will help refine referral techniques, maximize the resources of programs and help avoid uncomfortable situations. One case manager stressed the need to really know the agencies to which case managers refer families. He shared a story of a referral to a shelter that eventually led to

the involvement of Child Protective Services with one of his families, a referral he would not have made if he had anticipated that development.

Partnerships with schools are among the most commonly mentioned by 2-Gen programs. They see these as crucial to helping children in families experiencing homelessness and schools are obviously critical to maintaining educational stability. At least two programs interviewed maintain a physical presence in partnering schools (usually by having office hours there at least a few times per week). They see this as critical to 1) encouraging a genuine partnership with school staff, both by increasing their own visibility and making it easier to identify the correct point person to interact with; 2) making it easy to meet with parents and older children; and 3) gaining the trust of educators, children and families. It can be an easy give and take relationship as well. As one director put it, “With schools, it makes sense—you have access to kids, which we want, we have access to parents, which they want. It just makes sense to work together to have models complement each other. Each are experts on their respective audience, and if we coordinate case management, we will make efforts more effective.”

Be physically present in partner schools.



Working with schools can be difficult but persistence often pays off. One case manager said it took three years of being a constant presence at the school to access attendance data. Finding the correct point person—one with the willingness and capacity to assist—was crucial to this success, which was facilitated by being a regular member of the school community.

Utilize Data

Representatives from one nonprofit organization stress the use of data when employing a 2-Gen approach in their homelessness prevention programming. These data take two forms: data about the family and data about the program.

As described earlier, getting to know the family, and keeping careful case notes to ensure this information is retained, is especially important in a 2-Gen approach. This can sometimes make puzzling decisions more understandable. For instance, knowing that a teenager in a family is very invested in his school and has a strong peer group there can help a case manager understand why a parent would be very hesitant to move him from a

school that (objectively) is underperforming. Though these data are less formally collected and analyzed than quantitative data (e.g., grades, attendance), they are no less important.



Use data you already have to identify natural partnerships and referral opportunities.

Understanding your own programming, and that of your partners, is equally crucial. It can highlight organizations that are natural fits for partnerships. Careful data analysis can identify programs that are serving your clients and lead to more formal partnerships. As one case manager said, “I use the data to identify where partnerships already are, I just didn’t know it. We didn’t have to cold touch the community,

we were able to warm touch it with relationships that were already established.” This not only allows homelessness prevention programs to more easily link families to services, it can allow programs offering other services to refer families back for housing stability work.

One program suggested that a 2-Gen approach might especially benefit from client input into any evaluation process that takes place. The number one piece of advice from one director was, “Seek guidance from the people you’re serving...find out what their needs are. Constantly evaluate—is this working for you?” This director meets weekly with his staff to better understand what their work looks like AND what they’re hearing from clients. Helping staff understand how client input can lead to more effective programming may also energize them about the process of data collection and recording—something is that is a necessary, but not always welcome, task, given the range of job duties that case managers must fulfill.

Finally, gathering data on families and their success, as well as what they want to gain from the program and how they feel is the best way to achieve their goal is beneficial at a larger level—it can help programs tell their story to funders and the wider community. Specific strategies mentioned by interviewees

included focus groups with current and former clients and a community council that includes adults and teenagers that is tasked with reviewing data and brainstorming solutions to issues that are identified. A key theme is integrating a client voice to better understand how client needs and services or case management strategies are aligned, and if necessary, to tweak programming to fill gaps.

Let clients tell you what they need and constantly re-evaluate how well you are providing it.



Conclusion

Most case managers consider the needs of other family members at some point, for instance, when they link parents to toy drives for their children, notice mental health issues in adolescents and make appropriate referrals, or simply model appropriate behavior when interacting with families. As one case manager suggested, "... parent concerns are children concerns" and vice versa.

That said, moving toward more intentional implementation of an approach that explicitly considers the stability and functioning of the whole family is challenging. One director advised, "It takes dedication to the approach. You have to become vulnerable. If it's not challenging you to think and react differently, you need to take a (closer) look."

In the end, programs see many benefits to engaging with the entire family. Case managers say that demonstrating concern for everyone in the household

helps build rapport. Furthermore, the case manager can serve as an additional support to children as they coach the family. Focusing on the entire family can also help parents think about their situation holistically, and this shift can help facilitate long-term goal setting and encourage persistence.

Program directors see benefits for case managers, too. Rather than merely connecting individuals with programs and services, the 2-Gen approach encourages case managers to think about the entire family and how they can all benefit from the work the clients are doing. For some case managers, this can reignite a passion for the work.

For everyone involved in the approach, 2-Gen increases the chances of achieving "small wins" because of its focus on teamwork and goal setting, which results in clearly defined steps on the path to self-sufficiency and encourages continued progress.

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