



2020-2024 Young Parent Policy Blueprint

NMCAN.org

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NMCAN's *Young Parent Policy Blueprint* calls for a new approach to supporting young parents and families in the State of New Mexico, particularly young parents who have experience with the foster care and/or juvenile justice systems. We envision a new system that values racial justice and authentic engagement, one in which families will be able to access community-based support without stigma, begin to heal from generational trauma, and lead fulfilling lives in safe communities.

This blueprint builds on the research completed in NMCAN's *Environmental Scan: Understanding the Needs of Young Parents Impacted by Foster Care*, developed in 2019. Through this research, we learned more about the current gaps in the service landscape that supports young parents:

- Programs and services are not designed with the special needs of young parents in mind, much less the needs of young parents who have experienced foster care.
- Statewide data collection on young parents in and impacted by systems can be improved.
- Service providers lack awareness and understanding of young parents who have experienced foster care and their needs and experiences.
- Young parents need a voice in program and policy development.
- Community building opportunities for young parents do not exist.
- Housing supports for young parents are needed.

We envision a new system that values racial justice and authentic engagement.

As New Mexico continues to build out the early childhood department and other community initiatives that focus on families are being developed, we must not forget about the distinct needs of young parents impacted by systems. For young people impacted by foster care, the pregnancy rates are greater than their peers. National data show former foster youth are twice as likely as their peers to become pregnant or father a child by age 19. Seventy-one percent of young women who were in foster care were pregnant by age 21. Of the systems-impacted young people involved in NMCAN's programming, 27 percent are parents or are expecting.

NMCAN's *Young Parents Policy Blueprint* was created, and is continually updated, in authentic partnership with young parents, many of whom spent time in the foster care or juvenile justice system. NMCAN brought young parents together for numerous group and individual conversations where they reflected on their experiences, needs, and strengths as parents, and identified the areas of greatest priority and potential solutions. NMCAN then helped walk the recommendations into this blueprint.

Proposed policy interventions are intended to provide possible state solutions within each priority area. Of course, some solutions might impact multiple priority areas. Proposed interventions are only examples of possible policy solutions and not inclusive of all solutions. In addition to state solutions, we will support federal efforts that align with our identified priorities. Racial equity is an important lens through which each policy area must be examined, and data needs to be disaggregated and analyzed. Systems must be accountable for treating families equitably.

NMCAN partners with young people to build community, promote equity, and lead change. Since 1990, we have leveraged community partnerships and volunteerism to improve children and youth's experiences in foster care. Today, we have grown to authentically engage young people impacted by the foster care and/or juvenile justice systems, as well as homelessness, to improve their transition to adulthood. Together, we work to:

- 1. Reduce systemic barriers that negatively impact their lives**
- 2. Help them learn how to build positive community networks and strengthen their sense of belonging**
- 3. Access tools to achieve goals related to education, employment, health, housing, and personal finance**

We are steadfastly dedicated to young people as partners and understand the complexities of these systems. NMCAN is a leader within the child welfare community, driving positive and equitable change in New Mexico.

In addition to pursuing the proposed policy solutions below, we are committed to working in partnership with young parents to ensure that they have a respected voice and full participation in the development of the programs and policies designed to support them, and to confirm that existing laws and policies are meaningfully and consistently implemented statewide. For additional recommendations about how to better support young people in systems broadly, please see NMCAN's [Policy Blueprint 2020-2024](#).

This is a living document that is revisited, reviewed, and revised on an ongoing basis. Contact Director of Policy and Advocacy Arika Sánchez at arika.sanchez@nmcn.org to learn more.

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OUR POLICY APPROACH AND SUCCESSES

NMCAN's policy work is more than just advocating for legislation. We are building a movement where young people and partners come together to establish new ways of collaborating and rebuilding ineffective systems. We work to achieve this by:

- Engaging young people in the policy process and supporting them in developing their confidence and skills as advocates and leaders,
- Creating policy solutions that are identified, developed, and advocated for by young people who have experienced systems, and
- Educating and building partnerships with community-based organizations, local businesses, educational institutions, service providers, lawmakers, and funders.

Through this approach, we have achieved great success in passing legislation and driving changes to administrative code:

- Partial Credits requires schools to offer credit for work completed in previous schools (2020),
- Fostering Connections Act allows young people to opt into age-appropriate supports between ages 18-21, including case management, living stipends, and court review (2019),
- Tuition Waiver for Foster Youth was originally passed in 2014, but now offers access to free public college if young people were in foster care at any time on or after their 14th birthday (2019),
- Employer Tax Credit incentivizes employers to hire current or former foster youth (2018),
- Support for Transferring Students requires schools to provide student records to the student's new school within two days of transfer; offer priority placement in required classes, and a diploma if systems-involved youth meet state graduation requirements, even if district requirements are different; and access to participation in sports and activities (2017),



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- Prudent Parenting Standard normalizes the foster care experience by allowing foster parents to make day-to-day decisions for children and youth (2016), and
- Medicaid to 26 provides health insurance to foster youth regardless of which state they lived in (2015).

As systems change is realized through the implementation of these strengths-based policies and others, NMCAN supports young people to build their leadership and civic engagement skills by advocating for and co-facilitating presentations/trainings. They regularly present on issues such as authentic youth engagement, normalizing the foster care experience, and accessing trauma-informed opportunities. In 2019-2020, 48 young people participated in 90 community events, such as trainings, presentations, committee/partner meetings, legislative activities, and more. Examples include events in partnership with the American Bar Association; NM's Children's Court Improvement Commission; Family Representation Task Force; NM's Children's Law Institute; NM's Children, Youth, and Families Department; and more. Based on survey data collected from event attendees:

- 84% reported their awareness and knowledge of the subject that was presented has increased through the workshop
- 91% plan to implement knowledge and/or lessons learned in this workshop into their work
- 89% believe that NMCAN is a valuable resource that they can use to learn how to partner with young people impacted by systems

NMCAN Young Parent Policy Blueprint Priority Areas:

- **All families deserve support without stigma or judgment**
- **Services must meet the needs of and be accessible to young parents**
- **Parents' basic needs must be met for families to thrive**
- **Youth development must be a priority before young people become parents**

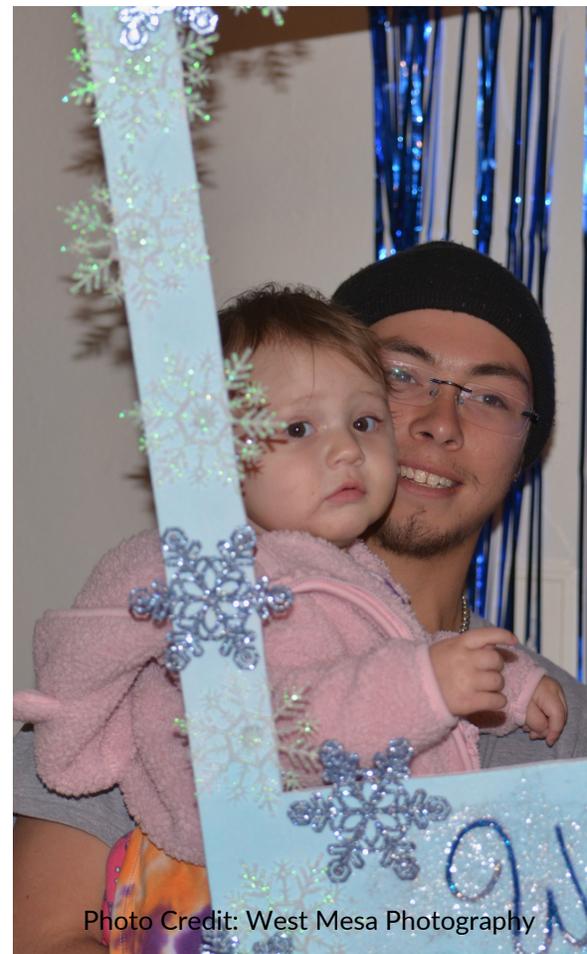
Racial equity is an important lens through which each policy area must be examined, and data disaggregated and analyzed. Systems must be accountable for treating families equitably.

Priority Area: ALL FAMILIES DESERVE SUPPORT WITHOUT STIGMA OR JUDGMENT

While young parents are focused on their growth and development as they deal with change and learn to be parents, they face stigma for being a young parent, and even more if they have experienced systems or addiction. This leads some parents to avoid services or feel uncomfortable when they do receive services, and therefore they do not persist. All families deserve to live in a community where they are happy, healthy, and safe, and can turn to their community for support.

Proposed Policy Interventions:

- *Respect young parents* - The perpetuation and institutionalization of narratives and public policies that portray young parents negatively create damaging stigma. Healthcare providers and other agencies and organizations serving families must treat young parents with dignity—acknowledging their assumptions and stereotypes and cultivating environments of trust and understanding. State and local laws and policies must be written in a way that values rather than stigmatizes young families.
- *Shift the narrative around accessing services* - The narrative around seeking support must shift—everyone should have access to support in overcoming life's challenges, and all families are worthy and deserve respect. Supports and services need to be viewed as opportunities for all families in our community to be happy, healthy, and safe. Service providers need to offer programs that authentically and proactively engage families.



- *Remove the stigma faced by young parents impacted by systems* - Children and youth enter the child welfare system because their family was in a crisis and the state thought they would be safer in foster care, not by any fault of their own. Their experience in care should not be used by the state or service providers to judge their ability to parent when they start their own families. Parents who have been in foster care should not be scrutinized where other parents are not, and their past experiences should not be used in child removal decisions. Policies within CYFD should be put in place to address this.
- *Support parents facing and recovering from addiction* - People recover from drug and alcohol addiction—it can be successfully managed for life. One’s addiction does not define them as a parent or a person, nor does it foretell their future choices. The stigma and stereotypes associated with addiction have no place in government or community programs. Punitive practices that discriminate and prevent people with past addiction from accessing housing, education, and employment must end. Rehabilitation programs that support families need to be created and expanded, including residential programs that provide living arrangements for the parent and children as well as childcare while the parent attends on-site counseling, support groups, and parenting classes.

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- *Educate young parents about their rights* - Everyone has basic rights under the constitution and civil rights laws. It is important for young parents to know what rights they have around race, gender, and disability discrimination, being stopped by police, voting, and more, as well as pregnancy and parenting rights. This includes the right to breastfeed in public, employer requirements that support breastfeeding by providing break time and a space to pump, and school requirements that give parents excused absences for the birth of their child and when caring for the child necessitates missing class. Programs should be established to educate young parents on their many rights.

- *Eliminate the unnecessary removal of children* - Removing children from their families and homes creates emotional distress and trauma that should be avoided whenever possible. They are better served by remaining safely at home while their parents receive the community services and support they need. The effective implementation of a multilevel response system can help do this. Unnecessary short-term removals by law enforcement can be eliminated by requiring court authorization prior to removal except under pressing circumstances.



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- *Address the impact of racial inequities* - Efforts to support young parents must address the racism, discrimination, and inequities that people of color face. Communities of color disproportionately lack resources that help children and families thrive. Structural barriers and discriminatory policies throughout history have created these disparities in resources and opportunities, including access to quality healthcare, education, employment, transportation, and social services. Race also determines the rates at which children are removed from their homes, how long they will be in foster care, and whether they will be reunified with their parents. Race must be part of all conversations on program and policy design and improvement. Service providers should ensure their programming is culturally responsive and does not create barriers to access that disproportionately impact people of color. Laws and policies impacting families must be viewed through a racial equity lens and assessed for inequitable impacts.

Priority Area: SERVICES MUST MEET THE NEEDS OF AND BE ACCESSIBLE TO YOUNG PARENTS

There has been increased attention, funding, and programming for early childhood services in the state, yet young parents, especially those impacted by systems—those who face the most barriers and have the greatest need for services—are not accessing them, or the services are not meeting the needs of parents with histories of trauma.

Proposed Policy Interventions:

- *Build multi-generational systems to better serve families* - Children and families are best served when the needs of both the children and adults are addressed. A multi-generational approach intentionally links, coordinates, and aligns services for children with services and supports for their parents. Parenting resources and services for children need to be accessible to the parents, meet their developmental needs, and address their trauma. Services that also engage or support grandparents and other household members to help care for the children will provide a family-centered approach

with even greater benefit. Families come in all different shapes and sizes, and they must be able to define this for themselves. A deliberate focus on the whole family is necessary as lawmakers and administrators develop, improve, and assess policies and programs.

- *Promote the well-being and development of young parents in foster care and their children* - Parents in care must receive age-appropriate services and supports that respect their autonomy as parents. They must be placed with their children in a setting that meets their individual needs, whether it is a foster home, residential care setting while the parent receives treatment, or supervised independent living. Parents in care should



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receive enhanced maintenance payments for the amount the state would pay to care for another child—ensuring the parent can adequately provide for their child or the foster parent can provide for the parent and child. Caseworkers, foster parents, and others need to be trained to support young parents and be knowledgeable about adolescent and early childhood development. The state should leverage federal funding and partner with community organizations to provide high-quality, age-appropriate parenting supports and services. To provide these supports, the state needs consistent tracking of whether young people in care are pregnant or parenting.

- *Engage young parents in policy and program development and improvement* - Parents are experts on their lives, circumstances, and experiences, and they are the most knowledgeable about solutions. To ensure state, local, and community resources are aligned with what young parents and families need, systems, agencies, organizations, and providers need to listen to those they serve and integrate their voices into all aspects of planning and improvement. State and local legislators and administrators must include young parents in policy development at all levels. Young parents need to be engaged in an authentic way where they feel comfortable, their time and experience is valued, and barriers to participation are removed.
- *Address the impact of racial inequities* - Efforts to support young parents must acknowledge and address the racism, discrimination, and inequities that people of color face. Structural barriers and discriminatory policies throughout history have created these disparities in resources and opportunities, including access to quality healthcare, education, and social services. Race and equity must be part of all conversations on program design and improvement. Service providers need to ensure their programming is culturally responsive and does not create barriers to access that disproportionately impact people of color.

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- *Respect co-parents* - Co-parenting, whether the parents are together or not, while important for children and families, is not supported by many programs and policies that target young parents. Young parents who maintain healthy relationships with their parenting partners face barriers to housing, childcare, and other services due to single-gender programs, a shortage of family housing options, and single income requirements. Programs should not force parents to choose between accessing support and living with or maintaining a relationship with their parenting partner. In addition, services need to engage and be supportive of fathers, rather than disregarding them or treating them as negative stereotypes.
- *Create supports for parents interacting with the child welfare system* - Young parents deserve enhanced services and support to prevent the removal of their children or to support timely reunification with their children, if removal was necessary. This is especially true for those who were in foster care themselves. Data should be tracked to ensure young parents do not disproportionately experience removals of their children or termination of their parental rights. A specialized unit should be created to ensure these parents are treated fairly and receive high-quality support to be successful parents.

Priority Area: PARENTS' BASIC NEEDS MUST BE MET FOR FAMILIES TO THRIVE

Being able to meet basic needs like stable housing, access to healthy food, and access to healthcare enables young parents and families to transition from day-to-day existence to a place of stability. Stability enables them to maintain consistent employment and harness their own power to make decisions about education and career, ultimately allowing them to pursue their own life goals and interests while also being financially secure.

Proposed Policy Interventions:

- *Ensure young parents have safe and stable housing* - Access to affordable housing is a constant barrier to the stability of young families and must be addressed to ensure their well-being and success. Innovative housing supports—like a community where young parents live and grow and sell their own food—should be created to meet the particular needs of young parents, especially those without supportive networks. Barriers to access and burdensome eligibility requirements for housing assistance programs need to be minimized, and slots for families, including two-parent families, need to be made available. Transitional living programs need increased capacity and models that are supportive of parents and families. Incentives can be created to encourage landlords to rent to young parents. Financial assistance, priority access, and year-round on-campus housing can be provided to support college students with children.

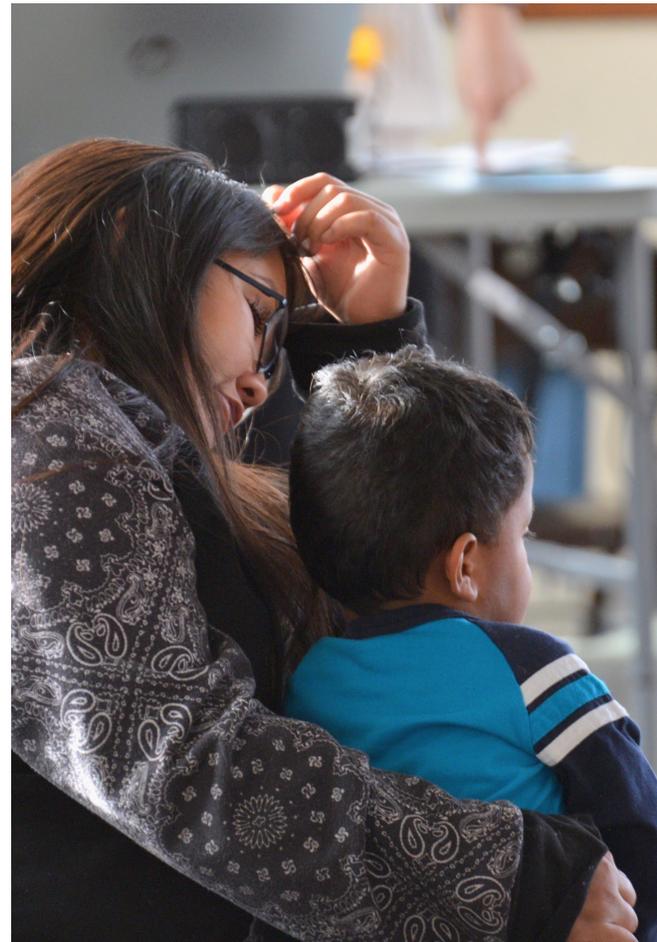


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- *Expand access to food for families* - Many young families experience hunger—they are not able to get enough food, especially healthy food. Programs like SNAP, WIC, and food pantries are helpful but they do not adequately address hunger due to insufficient funding, restrictive eligibility criteria, and shame and stigma associated with them. Efforts to cut benefits, restrict access, or impose additional barriers must be opposed. Removing the stigma around and promoting access to food assistance programs ensures families have the nutrition they need to be healthy and well, cultivating thriving communities.
- *Ensure young families have access to affordable healthcare* - Access to affordable healthcare is necessary for the health and economic stability of parents and the healthy development and well-being of children. Parents need to be informed about and assisted with Medicaid enrollment for their children and themselves. Efforts to cut, restrict access to, or impose barriers to enrollment must be opposed. Healthcare providers need to recognize the role of racism in creating health inequities and work to create welcoming, non-judgmental, supportive environments that engage families. In addition, families need transportation, paid leave, and time off work or flexible appointment times to access healthcare.
- *Promote behavioral health and well-being* - Addressing behavioral health challenges, including past trauma, is critical to the well-being and education, employment, and social stability of young parents. Medicaid makes behavioral health services accessible to many young parents. However, additional providers—therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists—are needed to eliminate long wait times for appointments. Providers also need to reflect the populations they work with and understand the values and cultures of people of color. In addition, families need transportation, childcare, paid leave, and time off work or flexible appointment times to access behavioral health services.

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- *Make transportation accessible for families* - Reliable, safe, and efficient transportation is necessary to meet all of the other basic needs of families—food, healthcare, childcare, the ability to go to work, and more. Public transit should be free for young parents and children. However, there is first a need for adequate transit systems—transit that reaches all communities, offers frequent buses, requires few transfers, and shortens commutes. Personal transportation needs to be more accessible for families. While in high school, young people should have affordable access to driver’s education and support in completing supervised driving requirements for those who do not have access to vehicles. Programs should be created to offer affordable vehicles, fair financing, and inexpensive and trustworthy vehicle repair for young families.



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- *Build awareness of childcare options and build trust with families* - Childcare is an essential support for families, allowing parents to work while their children learn and grow in a safe environment. While many families qualify for childcare assistance, a small percentage access it. Information about childcare assistance and childcare options needs to be disseminated through services families already access. Streamlining application processes for various benefits would remove some barriers to access. Most importantly, providers need to be judgment free, culturally responsive, and respectful of parents to engage families and build trust so young parents feel safe and comfortable leaving their children in their care.
- *Implement paid sick leave and parental leave* - Young parents typically work in jobs that do not provide sick days or paid family and medical leave. As a result, they have to choose between their health or their children’s health and losing income from having to miss work and sometimes even losing their jobs. Laws should be enacted to require paid leave for employees.

Priority Area: YOUTH DEVELOPMENT MUST BE A PRIORITY BEFORE YOUNG PEOPLE BECOME PARENTS

All young people need support in developing the skills, knowledge, and tools needed to navigate the complexities of adulthood. When we invest in young people, we allow them to grow to their full potential, break the cycle of poverty, strengthen their future families, and build a stronger community.

Proposed Policy Interventions:

- *Build multi-generational systems to better serve families* - Children and families are best served when the needs of all are addressed—viewing children and youth as separate from their parents and families has not been effective in improving outcomes for the community nor has siloing the stages of child and youth development. Lawmakers and administrators must intentionally focus on the whole family as they develop, improve, and assess policies and programs. Existing systems need to be re-envisioned. There should be a comprehensive unified department responsible for supporting families. Policies for children and youth should be made using a life-cycle perspective—from neonatal to early childhood to adolescence to parenthood.
- *Invest in youth development* - All young people deserve a fair opportunity to successfully transition to adulthood. Investing in youth at a time when they are developing identities, capabilities, and skills creates great benefits for them, their future families, and the community. Policymakers need to invest in programs to support youth development, building soft and hard skills to prepare young people for education, employment, financial stability, and other responsibilities of adulthood and parenthood (see NMCAN's [Policy Blueprint 2020-2024](#) for young people impacted by systems for additional policy recommendations).
- *Ensure young people receive sexual and reproductive health services* - Access to preventive and supportive sexual and reproductive health education, services, and supports is vital to the overall well-being of young people of all gender identities. Young people need to be prepared and have resources available to them to be successful parents or to postpone becoming parents.

- *Support the development of healthy relationships and social capital* - The development of social relationships and networks is essential to the healthy development of all young people. With strong social networks, young people increase the likelihood of succeeding in school, finding a place to live, securing and keeping a job, and laying a healthy foundation for long-term stability and a community to turn to in times of crisis. Young people need to learn about healthy relationships and develop the relational skills needed to form and maintain healthy relationships. They need opportunities to build connections with peers and caring adults. Youth development resources and programs need to address relationships and social capital.
- *Expand tax credits to young people* - The federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the state Working Families Tax Credit are refundable tax credits for low- and moderate-income workers designed to reduce the likelihood of these workers being taxed into poverty, and to create numerous long-term positive outcomes for children, adults, communities, and our economy. Currently both tax credits exclude young people 19-24 years old who do not have children. The eligibility age needs to be lowered and the maximum credit for those without children should be increased.

Strong social networks increase the likelihood of succeeding in school, finding a place to live, securing and keeping a job, and laying a healthy foundation for long-term stability and community.