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# CENTERING THE MARGINS

A FRAMEWORK AND PRACTICES FOR PERSON-CENTERED  
FINANCIAL SECURITY POLICY



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We aim for nothing less than a more inclusive economy with reduced wealth inequality and shared prosperity. We believe that transformational change requires innovation, trust, leadership, and entrepreneurial thinking. Aspen FSP galvanizes a diverse set of leaders across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to solve the most critical financial challenges. We do this through deep, deliberate private and public dialogues and by elevating evidence-based research and solutions that will strengthen the financial health and security of financially vulnerable Americans.

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# Introduction

Since the first cases of the COVID-19 were reported in 2020, the US has entered an era of unprecedented unemployment, lost wages, and hardship. Federal policymakers mobilized to push money to displaced workers and their families through provisions in the CARES Act, including \$1,200 direct payments to most households, as well as a \$600 a week top-up of typical Unemployment Insurance (UI) payments. The results were clear: early evidence shows that the measures enacted by the CARES Act decreased poverty rates nationwide in April and May.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these successes, there were clear failures leading to the delay or absence of critical resources, which fell most heavily on those who could least afford it. As of October, for example, around 12 million people, disproportionately Black and Latinx households, had yet to receive their Economic Impact Payments.<sup>2</sup> Further, the Century Foundation estimates that less than 60 percent of the 33 million UI claims made by the end of May had been paid, leaving millions of families experiencing or on the brink of financial hardship.<sup>3</sup>

The federal response to COVID-19 highlights the failure of existing programs to perform to meet human need as well as the lack of sustained political will necessary to avert this outcome. The inadequacy, inaccessibility, and unresponsiveness of the safety net was already well understood by the people for whom the economy already wasn't working. Failure hasn't been a case of programs now buckling under the weight of an anomalous crisis. They have been performing precisely as designed, but at scale—and with a level of visibility that has brought their failures into plain sight.

Rather than a failure of any one program in isolation, the performance of the public systems charged with meeting human need is an indictment of an approach that is at best

disconnected from—and at worst indifferent to—the people our policies are impacting.

**The lesson is clear:** to change these outcomes, we have to flip the current top-down model of policy design, replacing it with a person-centered approach that originates with—and is accountable to—the people that policy is impacting.

The non-profit service organization Springboard to Opportunities in Jackson, Mississippi, is a pioneering model of what this approach could look like in practice. With a “radically resident driven” mission, Springboard launched the Magnolia Mother’s Trust in 2018. This pilot program provided 20 Black women living in public housing \$1,000 per month with no strings attached for a year. An expanded demonstration project reaching 110 women began in March of 2020. Critically, the Magnolia Mother’s Trust was co-designed by women living in these housing communities. The Magnolia Mother’s Trust is meant to study not just the impact of regular cash infusions to families in need, but to display the power of community-driven program and policy design and to refute existing pejorative and racialized narratives around welfare policy.

This paper is a partnership between Springboard to Opportunities and the Aspen Institute Financial Security Program. (FSP), seeks to operationalized Springboard’s “Radically resident-driven” approach to the design and evaluation of financial security policy.

Of course, the current top-down model of design practices is pervasive both within institutions that set policy, like government, as well as those that influence policy. As such, this person-centered framework and practices can provide a tool for philanthropic foundations, social service agencies, and other stakeholders that set priorities and shape systems that will affect people experiencing financial insecurity.



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This paper:

1. Establishes a rationale for “centering the margins,” shifting power and influence to the people excluded by our current economic and political systems—and Black women in particular—within financial security policy;
2. Defines a framework for designing person-centered financial security policy as being *Holistic, Systemic, and Power Building*, and;
3. Identifies a set of practices for applying a person-centered framework to the design and evaluation of financial security policy.

By examining ways to institutionalize the voice and influence of impacted communities at every step of policymaking—from identifying what is needed, to determining how it should work and evaluating its effectiveness—this framework aims to ensure that policy is accountable to those the policy is intended to serve. In doing so, **this framework offers a positive alternative to policy design, one that honors and thrives on the insights and experiences of people underserved under the current approach** and supports their capacity to drive the creation of policies that serve their needs.

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For more information on the central role of benefits, read **“A Modernized System of Benefits is the foundation for an Inclusive Economy.”** To learn more about Benefits21, visit [aspeninstitute.org/programs/benefits21](https://aspeninstitute.org/programs/benefits21)

## The Lived Reality of the Social Safety Net

The inadequate and inequitable performance of the safety net at a time of a national crisis was presaged by the everyday experiences of Black women living in Mississippi. Even before the economic fallout from the pandemic, recent research from The Insight Center for Community Economic Development finds:

- The median wage among the 50 most-common occupations in Mississippi is just \$12.09 an hour.
- The fastest-growing occupations in Mississippi pay relatively low wages, with a median wage of \$11.37 an hour.
- Black women are locked out of 62 percent of all jobs, the highest percentage among all groups.
- In the Jackson area, three of the top-five occupations in which Black women are overrepresented pay less than \$15,000 a year.
- Black women in the Jackson area are crowded into the occupation of home health aide where they comprise an overwhelming majority (88 percent of workers) and are paid only \$8.00 an hour.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these difficult labor market conditions, the state nonetheless takes full advantage of its flexibility to administer public benefits programs and tighten eligibility requirements. As a result, Mississippi provides among the most meager and least accessed assistance in the nation. The state has the highest poverty rate in the nation, and in 2019, 43 percent of its Black children were in families living below the poverty line, compared with 14 percent of White children.<sup>5</sup> Yet, only 6 percent of families living in poverty participate in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program and those who do receive a maximum benefit of \$170 per month, a value that diminishes each year due to inflation.<sup>6</sup>

## SPRINGBOARD TO OPPORTUNITIES: PERSON-CENTERED PROGRAM DESIGN IN ACTION

Springboard to Opportunities in Jackson, Mississippi, responded to these dynamics by launching the Magnolia Mother's Trust in December of 2018, the nation's only guaranteed income project tailored to poor Black women.

Springboard, led by Chief Executive Officer Aisha Nyandoro, is a direct service organization currently working in 11 low-income affordable housing communities in Alabama, Maryland, and Mississippi. The organization serves more than 5,000 residents annually, 98 percent of whom are single Black women and their children.

Operating within affordable housing communities, the families Springboard serves have very low incomes. To be eligible for federal housing assistance, applicants cannot exceed 50 percent of the median income in the surrounding area (80 percent for public housing), and at least 40 percent of families newly admitted to programs each year must have an income that is no greater than 30 percent of the area median. In 2013, this ranged from \$7,800 to \$36,600 for a family of four, depending on the area; the average household in public housing had an income of \$13,800 that year, while those in Project Based Rental Assistance on average made \$12,000 annually.<sup>7</sup>

### *The "Radically Resident-Driven" Approach*

All of Springboard's services are shaped by its "radically resident-driven" ethos, which emphasizes the need for those being served to be included in every aspect of program development, implementation, and evaluation. As a result, Springboard has successfully developed inclusive processes to ensure that the voices of residents are included in all aspects of the organization's work.

For example, Springboard engages its residents in participatory budgeting; inviting them to have a voice in budgetary decisions regarding programming. This inclusion of resident voices was intentional to the organization’s model because in many instances families that live in poverty have limited positive contact with individuals “in power”; in many instances these relationships are hierarchical.

In September 2016, Springboard to Opportunities staff conducted focus groups with 70 residents of four affordable housing communities in Jackson. All participants identified as Black or Black mixed race, and all but five identified as female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 77 years, and the average participant was 38 years old with two children and some college education. Discussions were facilitated to address topics including participants’ personal understandings of the terms “wealth” and “poverty”; their experiences with affordable housing; their awareness of, experiences with, and perceived impacts of other government services and supports; and their long-term housing and employment plans and barriers to reaching them.

Using the perspective of families, findings from this research demonstrated that the top-down methodology currently used to implement social service policies are creating households where families have little to no access to discretionary cash, thereby creating not only immense economic stress but emotional stress as well. The stories of the women who informed this research were punctuated with experiences where efforts to improve their lives in meaningful ways—like returning to school for additional education and training—are thwarted by the instability of their immediate circumstances, or, too often, held in tension with their ability to smooth over the rough edges of living in poverty and make life more comfortable for their families now. As one of these women, Tracee, observed, “It’s like you have to pick one.”

Accordingly, Magnolia Mother’s Trust was envisioned not just as a program to meet a

clear and immediate need for cash among residents that Springboard was serving. It was made to inform a reimagined set of policies that were dictated by the people those policies are serving. In other words, a set of policies driven by Springboard’s own “radically resident-driven” theory of change. As Aisha Nyandoro described, “If you bring new people to the table, but everyone else around the table stays the same and still believes the same philosophies and ideologies, you’re not changing the table, so you aren’t changing the narratives that are the basis for poor program designs. You have to change the narrative, and to do that, you have to change the narrator. That means making sure that individuals with lived experiences of poverty have an opportunity to tell their truth and not have someone else tell that story on their behalf.”<sup>8</sup>



**You have to change the narrative, and to do that, you have to change the narrator. That means making sure that individuals with lived experiences of poverty have an opportunity to tell their truth and not have someone else tell that story on their behalf.**



### *The Magnolia Mother’s Trust*

In December 2018, just in time for moms to prepare for the holiday season, the Magnolia Mother’s Trust (MMT) was launched. Over the next year, 20 women would receive \$1,000 a month, with no strings attached. Since the average income of participants was \$11,030 annually, MMT doubled their income.

At the end of the first year, the women reported a range of improvements:<sup>9</sup>

- 80 percent were able to pay bills without additional support (up from 37 percent);
- Collectively, participants paid off over \$10,000 in predatory debt; and
- 85 percent had completed their high school degree (up from 63 percent).

Notably, these increases in financial security translated into substantial gains in other parts of the moms' well-being, with all participants

reporting being less worried about meeting their financial needs, having greater positive engagement with their families, and feeling hopeful about their lives in five years.

Magnolia Mother's Trust was relaunched as an expanded 110-mom demonstration project in March 2020, just as the country was entering into the first wave of COVID-induced business and school closures and massive unemployment.

## Personal Testimonies from Magnolia Mother's Trust Participants

*The following are excerpts from interviews that took place in October 2020 with women participating in the Magnolia Mother's Trust. Their experiences broadly showcase the ways that a power-building design process resulted in a program that supported their power and agency within their own lives. More specifically, they highlight the ability of a program designed to meet their everyday needs to also support their financial and emotional wellbeing during a pandemic. Note: all names are pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.*

### **Desree: The Power of Choice**

For Desree, the school closings during COVID were a double whammy. Not only was she now responsible for supporting the virtual learning of her teenaged son, she had also lost her job as a substitute teacher in the public school system. This was a job she loved for five years—and one that seemed to love her back. “The principals liked me so much,” she said, “they’d have me there as much as they could.” Though she was employed on a contract basis through a staffing company, she was functionally working for the school system full-time. Principals over the years had tried to hire her directly, which could have brought additional benefits, but it also brought a deal-breaking disadvantage: the schools paid monthly, and she needed the weekly paycheck provided by the staffing service.

“[MMT] has taken care of me,” Desree said. “If I didn’t have this, I’d be forced to take anything to make it.”

### **Tamika: The Power of Family**

The schools closed within a week of Magnolia Mother's Trust dispersing its first \$1,000 checks.

For another mom, Tamika, the checks couldn't have come a moment too soon. No longer able to work providing childcare as she had for the previous 17 years, Tamika was similarly spending her days supervising her three teenaged daughters as they transitioned to distance learning. She wanted this transition to work well for them and not derail their academic progress. She spoke with perceptible pride of her youngest, who at 13 was among a select group of students who earned a trip to the White House last July to acknowledge their educational achievements. But it was a trip with a steep price tag. Tamika had to use her tax refund and then some to cover the \$4,500 cost. But it was worth it, she said.

After she lost her job, MMT was her only source of income. Though she had applied for Unemployment Insurance, she didn't start receiving it until August—after her initial application which was rejected for being incomplete. Though it was paid retroactively, the months of waiting had been tough. “Every little bit helps, but it's a process,” she said. “Then you could be in the process of losing everything in that process.”

Maintaining stability for her children is what Tamika is most focused on using MMT to provide. The constant financial stress was a barrier to giving them the attention she wanted to. She's used to things being tough, just as they were for her when she was a child, but she sees family as being a source of strength for making it through and wants to model that for her children. “We struggled, but we all struggled together.”

Now, Tamika says she's able to provide them everything they need. She was even able to throw “the birthday party of their dreams” for her two youngest daughters. She was grateful but also understands MMT is temporary and that having the financial and mental resources to give her children what they need shouldn't be a luxury. Moving forward, she wants policymakers to **“Sit down and talk to single mothers. Ask them about those struggles. Then see if they could make it with that little money.”**

### **Bonita: The Power of Community**

Bonita, the mom of an outgoing and athletic 10-year-old, shares Desree's sense that policymakers—people in a position to make profoundly consequential decisions impacting her life—aren't making those decisions based on what's best for her and her family. “Mississippi is a state known for racism. It always has been. They expect us not to know anything about politics. They expect us not to vote. They just expect us to be on assistance our whole lives...They don't expect things from you...I know that I have to work harder to get the things that I want. I have to carry myself a certain way to be accepted and be heard.”

The monetary value of MMT has certainly had an impact. After she lost her job as a hotel clerk at the start of the pandemic, she'd been getting by on the Social Security survivor benefits her son receives since his dad passed away three years ago. She was able to buy him a laptop for virtual learning without having to worry and is able to be more available to support his education.

Beyond the immediate value of the money, though, Bonita says that the leadership development program—a monthly, now-virtual meeting of moms who chose to participate provides peer-support, trainings, and other opportunities for social capital development—has been transformational. “They teach us how to open up, communicate with each other, uplift each other as people, as women, as African American women. We're fighting this fight together. Not just ourselves.”

This is an experience that she describes as allowing her to picture a life for herself beyond what she has now, inspired by the leadership of the Black women facilitating the trainings. “We only get to see powerful African American women on tv or hear about them in the newspaper. But to see them come to you and they hold themselves differently and have wisdom it shows you that you have power in yourself.”

Financial security policies are not experienced in purely financial terms. Through their “radically resident-driven” process, Springboard created the program that supports the participant's financial needs while also building a shared sense of cohesion and community and

affirmation of their own power. As such, the Magnolia Mother's Trust provides a critical reorientation of policy design around the people being served—and a set of practices for moving in that direction.

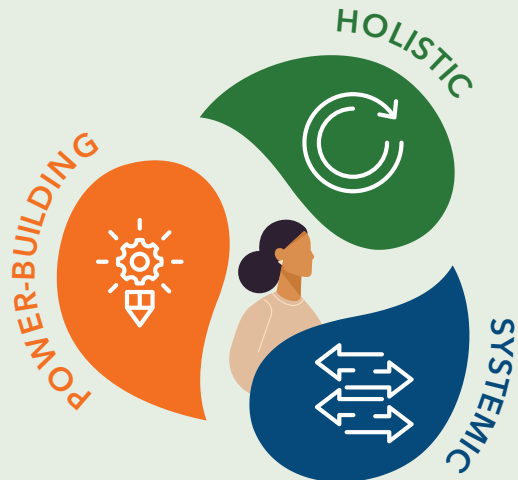


# A “Radically Resident-Driven” Framework for Person-Centered Financial Security Policy

The experiences of the Magnolia Mother’s Trust—alongside movements grounded in the needs of poor, Black women such as the National Welfare Rights Organization—elevate three core, interrelated features defining a framework for constructing person-centered policy.

People-centered policies should be:

1. Holistic
2. Systemic
3. Power-Building



## MAKING POLICIES HOLISTIC

People-centered policies should consider 1- the array of interactions a policy will have, and 2- the full financial, social, and political dimensions of how policies are experienced.

### *Consider the array of interactions a policy will have.*

For the moms participating in the Magnolia Mother’s Trust, the program has given them a respite from the stress of constantly negotiating the gaps between what they have and what they need—and the hardship they experience when there simply isn’t enough. As Desree said, “Working people need help too. If you’re making next to minimum wage, you’re not making it. You’re just doing the best you can do.” This daily stress is exacerbated by the knowledge that neither their work nor the policies that are nominally there to bridge the gaps between wages and basic needs is reliable or sufficient.

Indeed, MMT has highlighted the ways that the design of policies intended to fill gaps themselves can instead be a source of instability. Since the \$1,000 per month participants receive is counted as income for the purposes of program eligibility, many of the moms have had their benefits reduced or lost eligibility completely. During the pilot mothers had an average reduction of benefits of \$300-\$400 monthly. This was the case for Bonita, who lost her SNAP benefits of around \$250 per month and experienced a rent increase from around \$60 per month to over \$350.

Across federal housing programs, tenants typically pay 30 percent of their income as rent. This means that rent is capped at a relatively affordable level.<sup>10</sup> Across the US, the majority of all renter households below the poverty line spent more than half of their incomes on rent in 2018, with a quarter of renters in poverty spending over 70 percent of their income on housing costs.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, this payment

structure means that residents in affordable housing programs face a 30 percent marginal tax on each additional dollar they earn; if your earnings double, so does your rent.

For Bonita, the additional resources from MMT more than covered this loss. Though MMT is only a yearlong program, she reports being grateful that she knows where her next meal is coming from, if only for the time being. Her experience, however, underscores the punitive design of many of these programs where benefits decrease as income increases, frequently creating a “benefit cliff,” where families can lose coverage all together.

***Consider the full financial, social, and political dimensions of how policies are experienced.***

Beyond inflicting immediate financial harm, the experience of navigating the conditions imposed by these programs, often ultimately to be denied resources or lose them due for what seemed like arbitrary reasons like a modest increase in income, also create social and political consequences that Magnolia Mother’s Trust is presenting a policy alternative to.

Experiences like this help to demonstrate how the stigmatized treatment these women receive create “soft deterrents” from pursuing the financial support they need. Further, they also engender a belief that government is indifferent to their needs and unresponsive to their actions, setting low expectations for their own political value.

Magnolia Mother’s Trust presented a countermeasure to these experiences—both in its inclusive design process that prioritized the needs of the women Springboard was serving and a design outcome—automatic, unrestricted cash payments—that affirmed the agency of the women who were receiving them.



## MAKING POLICIES SYSTEMIC

People-centered policies should be considered among a broader set of market conditions and governmental actions directed at individuals.

Centering households in the economic margins in policy analysis exposes the multiple systems in play that create financial insecurity and obligates solutions to either compensate for these failures or reform these systems directly. For families like Bonita’s benefit cliffs illustrates the counterproductive ways that income and benefits can interact at the household level. As serious as the consequences can be for the families who experience them, the problem presented by benefit cliffs belies the much larger problem of families experiencing housing insecurity with no benefits to lose.

Indeed, housing assistance is not an entitlement, meaning that households who meet the eligibility requirements are not guaranteed assistance. As a result, the programs are poorly equipped to respond to economic downturns like the recent recession, and only accommodate a fraction of the housing need among low-income households. Only about a quarter of eligible families receive any form of federal housing assistance, and waitlists for housing vouchers are routinely many years long. In 2017, HUD classified 8.3 million households as having “worst-case housing needs,” meaning that they were eligible for housing assistance but were not receiving it, had incomes below 50 percent of the local median, and were spending more than half their income on housing.<sup>12</sup>

It is unsurprising then that guaranteed income pilots across the country are popping up to address gaps in critical needs created by inequitable markets and inadequate policies—such as housing insecurity in Newark, New Jersey,<sup>13</sup> or maternal and infant health in San Francisco.<sup>14</sup> Nor is it surprising that current participants in guaranteed income efforts report using the resources for a range of purposes, from food to out-of-pocket health expenses. Both underscore the outsized need that families have

for discretionary cash, and critically, the clear limitations of cash alone.

Cash is a tool that allows families to mitigate the harm created by systemic failures but is not a substitute for reforming those systems themselves. In other words, cash is a downstream solution to an up-stream problem. This is a fact recognized by the agendas of the NWRO, the “Black Women Best” framework, and the spectrum of additional program Springboard offers both within the MMT and in other arenas of their work. These agendas raise the need to reconsider social goods like education and housing as rights instead of consumer goods. They seek to de-couple the provision of basic human needs like health care from wage labor (a point made especially now in the wake of millions of people losing employer-based coverage due to the mass unemployment during COVID), as well as ensuring sufficient, dignified employment was available to anyone able and willing to work—while also pushing for a definition of “productivity” that expands beyond wage labor.

### **In short, the need for cash is a symptom of much larger problems.**

Guaranteed income has persisted as a policy solution because so too have the problems that necessitated it. Like any policy solution, the value and impact of guaranteed income must be considered among the other systems and circumstances in which it would interact. Situating this analysis within the households most in need of this policy by drawing on their experience and perspectives allows us to anticipate these interactions and make design choices accordingly.



### **MAKING POLICIES POWER-BUILDING**

People-centered policies should provide people agency within their own lives and power and influence over the policies that impact them.

Even policies designed to be holistic and systemic will have limited impact without also being power-building. The Magnolia Mother’s Trust’s example of agenda setting directed by people placed in the margins of our economic system is a stark contrast to the current model of policy design. However, it’s part of a long tradition of poor Black women drawing from their experiences to articulate and lead the changes necessary to bring about the conditions for greater dignity and belonging for everyone. Over 50 years earlier, for example, National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), predominately lead by poor, Black women, advocated for a Guaranteed Adequate Income (GAI) plan. **In this way, Magnolia Mother’s Trust serves as both a validation of guaranteed income as a policy goal—and as an indictment of the political system that has left this goal unmet over generations.**

Indeed, the experiences of the women of the NWRO demonstrate the limitations of a plan without power within the political decision making process. The treatment of the NWRO women at the welfare office diminished their expectations that the policymakers who created the conditions they were organizing against would change them willingly. As such, a key tactic for bringing about this guaranteed minimum income was to overwhelm the welfare offices with qualified applicants, triggering a “bureaucratic and fiscal crisis” that would necessitate broader reforms to relieve poverty. The welfare-rights movement also made extensive use of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (the precursor to TANF) rule g that recipients receive a “fair hearing” before their benefit claims were denied.<sup>15</sup>

While producing some immediate success, these tactics triggered a new wave of backlash against welfare recipients in the 1970s, especially as the national economy suffered a downturn. In particular, the movement’s advocacy for a guaranteed income that was not tied to work—an effort led by low-income Black women—intensified racialized criticisms of the “undeserving” poor.<sup>16</sup> At the same time,

policymakers' support for a national minimum income, which had actually gained substantial support across party lines only years before, all but disappeared.

Today, just as it was 50 years ago, contestation is a necessary strategy for advancing agendas within a political context where government is resistant to acting on the change being demanded. To be clear, government acting in opposition to agendas grounded in the provision of basic human needs is acting in favor of the continued precarity of, and harm experienced by, an ever-increasing number of people in our society. **For guaranteed income and other ideas grounded in human needs to gain political traction and to provide a safeguard against retrenchment, the interests and influence of people within our nation's economic margins must be institutionalized within government itself. So, while MMT was conceived as a model for informing policy, it's greater value can be seen as a model for policymaking itself by offering a set of practices that directly engage the people who would be impacted on the identification of problems and development of solutions.**

## Person-Centered Practices for Financial Security Policy

As the Magnolia Mother's Trust demonstrates, individuals who have experienced poverty or are receiving assistance are uniquely positioned to define and lead the change that is necessary to achieve financial security. To translate these person-centered insights into financial security policy, we need a set of practices that institutionalize them within policymaking.

Importantly, MMT isn't alone in bringing person-centered methods to the design process. From the Community Action Agencies created during the War on Poverty to Washington State's Poverty Reduction Working Group today, there are a range of models of institutionalizing person-centered practices within public decision-making, both in how policies are created and how their performance is evaluated.

### EXAMPLES IN PRACTICE

How a problem is understood and addressed depends on what questions are asked and how the answers are interpreted. As such, a research and design process directed by the perspectives and experiences of the people the policy should be serving is key. The War on Poverty's Community Action Agencies, ALL IN Alameda County, and Washington State's Poverty Reduction Working Group offer examples of practices governmental institutions have adopted to support the agency and expertise of individuals experiencing poverty into the decision making around policies that would impact them.



## ***The War on Poverty's Community Action Agencies***

In the 1960s, the War on Poverty showed potential for ushering in a new era of participatory poverty policymaking, particularly with its calls for the “maximum feasible participation” of people affected by poverty in the design and implementation of its programs. The rationale for this mandate was grounded in the pragmatic understanding that people experiencing poverty were uniquely positioned to identify poverty’s causes and determine responsive solutions, and that governmental action on those solutions would require their ability to wield power within decision-making bodies.<sup>17</sup>

To operationalize this approach, the government funded the creation of community action agencies (CAAs), which were locally administered bodies undertaking efforts to reduce poverty “with the maximum feasible participation of residents of the areas and members of the groups served.” By 1968, more than 1,600 CAAs were in place across the country.

However, initial legislative requirements that the CAAs’ projects include “rigorous planning, evaluation, and demonstration components” were dropped from the final bill, as was the requirement that result-oriented research be incorporated into program design. Further, as a result of these changes, the federal agency charged with coordinating all of these efforts, the Office of Economic Opportunity, had little capacity to systematically engage with the CAAs and coordinate data on effective approaches and best practices.

Finally, different visions about power, decision-making, and representation—against the backdrop of the civil rights and welfare rights movements—complicated the CAAs’ role and created barriers to their effectiveness. In 1974, the Nixon administration abolished the Office of Economic Opportunity, effectively bringing this experiment to an end. Today, while there are some notable nonprofit-led efforts to incorporate

lived experiences of poverty within policymaking in the US, without government commitment these efforts face significant barriers to impact.

## ***All IN Alameda County***

ALL IN Alameda County (ALL IN) was founded by County Supervisor Wilma Chan in 2014, the 50th anniversary of President Johnson’s War on Poverty. The initiative’s purpose is to function as a multi-stakeholder innovation incubator, bringing together community residents, business owners, nonprofit leaders, government agency staff, and elected officials to end poverty in Alameda County, California. ALL IN is working toward this goal with attention to making community members living in poverty arbiters of governmental action. It does this by building civic capacity to engage directly with local government and creating mechanisms for ongoing and deliberative collaboration in both the identification of policy priorities and program design.

For example, in 2016, ALL IN awarded mini-grants to 74 community leaders and organizations to convene listening sessions across the county to gauge community needs and identify recommendations to inform future policies or action projects.<sup>18</sup> Of the 1,700 residents who participated, nearly 60 percent earned less than \$15,000 annually and half had received a high school diploma or less.

These sessions surfaced a range of priorities that shaped ALL IN’s strategic planning, as well as a lack of child care as a deep and urgent need. The infrastructure constructed by the listening sessions served as a mechanism for ongoing community feedback and iteration during the development of policy that would be responsive. Ultimately, this process led to county officials introducing a ballot initiative to raise resources to fund additional child care for low-income families and wages for child care workers. The measure received over 64 percent approval when voted on in March of 2020, however is likely to face legal challenges since it did not surpass the two-thirds threshold necessary for adoption.<sup>19</sup>

### **Washington State’s Poverty Reduction Working Group**

In November 2017, Washington State’s Governor Jay Inslee directed the departments of Commerce, Employment Security, and Social & Health Services to form a Poverty Reduction Work Group (PRWG) and develop a 10-year comprehensive plan for reducing poverty and inequality in the state. The PRWG—comprising a cross-section of stakeholders, including the representatives from state human service agencies, community-based organizations, employers, legislatures, and philanthropy—met monthly to identify a set of strategies and recommendations that would be both immediately actionable and build sustained progress toward poverty reduction over time.

Critically, the PRWG convened an independent 22-member Steering Committee of Washington residents experiencing poverty to ensure that the deliberations and recommendations were grounded in the experiences of the individuals the PRWG was charged with acting in service of and that, “if implemented, would actually work.” As stated by the report:



**People experiencing poverty are the foremost experts on their lives and possess considerable knowledge as users of the systems and programs intended to assist them. Incorporating the knowledge and expertise of those most affected by poverty, as well as sharing power and resources with them, is essential to the design of equitable policies, programs, and practices that will increase social and economic mobility for all Washingtonians.**



The Steering Committee held monthly, day-long meetings to establish priorities for the PRWG and vet recommendations responding to those priorities. The Steering Committee’s two co-chairs, elected by the committee, were also participants in the full PRWG and liaised between the two bodies.<sup>20</sup>

In January 2020, the PRWG published a comprehensive report detailing strategies for tackling poverty and inequality in the state ranging from “understanding structural racism and historical trauma, and take action to undo their harmful effects in state policy and programs” to “decriminalizing poverty and reduce reliance on the child welfare, juvenile justice, and criminal justice systems” with specific recommendations on operationalizing each within Washington State agencies, as well as proposing developing implementation plans customized for the multi-sector set of stakeholders necessary for the plan to be realized.<sup>21</sup>

## KEY INSIGHTS FOR PERSON-CENTERED POLICY DESIGN

The examples of the War on Poverty's Community Action Agencies, ALL IN Alameda County, and Washington State's PRWG offer several insights for the implementation of practices in the design process that advance a person-centered framework:



### MAKING DESIGN HOLISTIC

- *Originate design around the experiences and perspectives of participants.* Experiential knowledge should guide direction and decision-making around policy development. This is essential for ensuring that solutions will be effective in the context in which they'll be experienced.
- *Interpret data from the perspective of participants.* Practices that simply solicit perspectives from participants and leave the interpretation to someone else or attaches them to a predetermined agenda is using the insights of those individuals without being accountable to them. This both undermines the efficacy of the solutions being developed but also perpetuates an extractive practice that has deeply eroded trust between individuals and communities and the institutions, however well intentioned, that have power over them.



### MAKING DESIGN SYSTEMIC

- *Direct agendas according to participant decision making.* Participants should be able to direct the actions taken by the governmental body according to their priorities and experiences, rather than a narrowed focus based on the priorities or comfort of the governmental body. This is key to identifying the structural and systemic drivers of the conditions in need of changing and developing solutions to the scale of those challenges.
- *Engage all stakeholders in the planning that will be involved in implementation.* As the co-chairs of the PRWG Steering committee stated in the report, "a plan without action is just a plan." The agenda should be accompanied by a mapping of the stakeholders who need to take action and in what form for the agenda to advance.



### MAKING DESIGN POWER-BUILDING

- *Create a supportive infrastructure that fosters ongoing engagement.* Governmental bodies should establish an infrastructure between the community members and institutional partners to support meaningful engagement and deliberation and enable deepening trust and communication as discussions evolved from problem identification to solutions development.
- *Invest in a design that allows participants to engage on their own terms.* Participants should be able to construct the timing, location, and focus of the discussions in ways that are culturally appropriate and supportive of the open engagement of participants, while the governmental bodies provide the resources and coordination for those activities.

## PERSON-CENTERED EVALUATION PRACTICES

Once policies are created, evaluation of their impacts and outcomes is a critical mechanism for ensuring that they are performing in accordance with their goals. Currently, programs goals are dictated by statutory or other formal authorization. These goals may have little or nothing to do with the priorities or needs of the people impacted by these programs and policies.

Though ideally the design and evaluation are developed in coordination and harmonized around a person-centered set of methods, by applying a person-centered framework to program evaluation, we can immediately begin assessing the performance of existing policies and assessing the potential for possible reform options.

Importantly, these metrics should move beyond traditional assessments based on numbers of families served and dollars spent. These outcomes fail to reflect broader indicators of impact, such as the marginalization that can occur through stigmatizing programs. They also fail to look at the performance of policies supporting the same goal, such as housing, health care, or providing non-wage income, across the different platforms through which they are administered, such as direct spending programs vs. tax expenditures, or public benefits vs. private employer provided benefits. They also fail to take into account the ways in which the design and delivery of policies can either enhance or undermine their accountability to the people who are impacted by them. Finally, they fail to account for disparities in how policies perform by according to the race of their participants.

Applying the person-centered framework to existing financial security policies allows us 1- to reorient our understanding of how these policies are performing against those components, and 2- to develop a set of evaluation practices that embed this framework within how we determine

successful financial security policy. As a contrast to the experiences of the women participating in the Magnolia Mother's Trust, existing cash-transfer policy provides an instructive use case in applying a person-centered framework.



### MAKING EVALUATION HOLISTIC

People experience policies in the full context of their lives. Evaluation should use metrics that provide a holistic accounting of these experiences and align with the priorities of the people they are impacting.

TANF has four established programmatic goals: reduce dependency of parents, reduce out of wedlock pregnancies, provide income that allows children to be raised at home, and encourage two-parent families. The only metric, however, that states must report to the federal government is the workforce participation rate (WPR).

Not only does this metric give a very limited insight into the overall financial well-being of a household, it reinforces work for work's sake as a condition for receiving assistance. This approach perpetuates racist narratives about people in poverty, creates barriers to necessary resources, diminishes recipients' sense of political value, and can coerce recipients into exploitative work arrangements at a cost to their agency and dignity.

Additionally, these work requirements may be harmful or unfeasible during an economic crisis, as in the case of those workers unable to find jobs or forced into unemployment as a result of the coronavirus. As such, if TANF were evaluated across economic, social, and political metrics, it would be clear that simply increasing benefits levels in isolation would have limited impact.

Critically, aggregate numbers obscure the extent to which Black families are harmed by the political choices shaping TANF's design and delivery. While TANF participation has eroded for all families in poverty - from 68 percent of eligible families in 1996 to 23 percent in 2017



– almost 40 percent of Black Americans live in states where TANF is serving only 10 percent of poor families.<sup>22</sup> Further, states with larger Black populations are more likely to have lower benefit levels, more restrictive eligibility policies, and harsher sanctions, which may result in temporarily reduced or suspended benefits, or even permanent termination.<sup>23</sup> And, recent research shows that these administrative choices made by states increased the number of Black children living in poverty by 256,000 between 2012 and 2014.<sup>24</sup>



## MAKING EVALUATION SYSTEMIC

The person-centered framework requires evaluating how a single policy will perform among the other systems it will interact or be administered through. For example, while the Economic Impact Payments distributed through the CARES Act affirmed the goal of providing cash to households destabilized by the economic disruption of COVID-19, they relied on delivery systems that either excluded or presented barriers or costs to the people who needed those resources the most.

The CARE Act stimulus package authorized a one-time infusion of \$1,200 per adult family member and \$500 per child. As of late October, however, around 12 million people, disproportionately Black and Latinx households, had yet to receive their Economic Impact Payments because they were exempt from tax filing due to their low incomes and were disconnected from other programs providing payments automatically, including very low-income families with children, many unhoused people, and others who have been out of work for long periods. Additionally, undocumented workers and their families were ineligible for the Economic Impact Payments, and the delivery of the payments without adequate safeguards against garnishment or efforts to include the unbanked left many of those with the fewest resources without access to this support. Further, receipt of payments was either delayed or came with a cost for recipients disconnected from the

formal financial system who lacked direct deposit and had to seek out alternate cash checking or other services to access their payment.

Evaluating current policies based on the lived realities of the people who are excluded or underserved by them allows us to identify the systems responsible for these exclusions, as well as the reforms necessary to close these gaps. The case of the CARES Act payments demonstrates the clear need to establish inclusive and frictionless payment rails for the delivery of resources and inclusive financial products and services so individuals can easily access and transact these resources without cost.

Of course, while these outcomes highlight clear failures for the people who needed these resources the most, they also highlight a process that was seamless for the millions of households who were already connected to those systems, those easiest to serve. This is why a design process that provides power and influence, and is ultimately accountable to, the people most underserved by the current approach is essential to anchoring design choices that will benefit them.



## MAKING EVALUATION POWER-BUILDING

The way that policies are experienced can either enhance or undermine the ability of the people impacted from holding those policies accountable for their performance.

The concept of policy feedback helps explain how a person’s experience of a policy shapes their perceived political value and extent to which they believe they can administer accountability for its performance. Predictably, if your primary experience with the state is as a target of suspicion, surveillance, and stigma, your faith in the capacity of government institutions to do good—and your ability to affect those institutions’ actions—will erode. Generally, experience with means-tested programs is associated with lower voter turnout

and engagement relative to participation in universal programs. Stigmatizing and punitive programs like TANF have been shown to have the most negative effects on measures of political participation.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, programs can also confer a social identity that confers their standing as a political constituency and shape public support or opposition. Benefits administered through the tax code, for instance, reinforce the identity of the beneficiary as a taxpayer. Not only does this association confer political benefits previously mentioned, it makes the receipt of benefits a point of pride and confers a positive social identity as well.<sup>26</sup>

This is in deep contrast to the identity assigned to individuals receiving benefits through direct spending programs negative stereotypes dominate public and political discourse. Importantly, these racialized depictions of who receives “welfare”—despite the fact that historically White families are the primary beneficiaries—are successful at provoking public opposition to increased investment.<sup>27</sup>

## KEY INSIGHTS FOR PERSON-CENTERED POLICY EVALUATION

The use-case of existing cash-transfer policies offers several insights for the implementation of practices in the evaluation process that advance a person-centered framework:



### MAKING EVALUATION HOLISTIC

- *Establish metrics that offer a full assessment of the ways a policy is experienced.* Social and political impacts should be considered alongside financial.
- *Establish metrics that align with the goals of the participants.* Participants should be able to define the terms of a policy's performance.



### MAKING EVALUATION SYSTEMIC

- *Evaluate impact of specific design features across key performance metrics.* There is wide variation on how policies perform depending on features their level of conditionality, complexity, and flexibility of use and access of benefits. These variations should be transparent, and policymakers should be required to justify choices that decrease the performance or increase racial disparities.
- *Evaluate policies across administrative platforms based on their intended goal.* Policy administration is siloed across platforms, such as direct spending and tax spending programs. Policies should be aggregated according to goals, like housing, health care, or cash-transfer, to enable comparisons of their performance as a policy system.
- *Develop an assessment tool for determining whether a policy is replicating or mitigating harms or privileges present in other systems.* Policies, such as work requirements, that layer benefits on inequitable foundations reproduce those inequalities. Policies should not exacerbate existing market and policy failures and should affirmatively seek to repair those harms.
- *Develop an assessment tool for determining whether a policy is exacerbating or mitigating historical harm or privilege.* Policies impact people at a moment in time but are acting on conditions, such as wealth, that have cumulative benefits or disadvantages. Policies should not exacerbate the previous policy failures that created this inequality and should affirmatively seek to repair those harms.



### MAKING EVALUATION POWER-BUILDING

- *Assess policies based on the ability of the people they impact to hold them accountable for their performance.* Policies should confer a positive social identity, encourage public support, provide a positive experience that affirms the participants expectation for responsiveness, and provide the material preconditions for engaging in political work.
- *Create feedback loops within policies to make them responsive to participant experience.* Policies falling short of metrics should automatically trigger reassessment and offer opportunities for reform.

## Conclusion

Though families of color and those headed by women—like the moms of the Magnolia Mother’s Trust—are the most insecure within the labor market and face the greatest challenges meeting the financial burdens associated with raising children, the substantial benefits from programs meant to support the financially burdened disproportionately flow to higher-income, disproportionately White families. And, when these policy systems are assessed according to a broader set of metrics that more fully capture the ways that these policies are experienced, it is clear that the disparities in financial resources are driving disparities in social and political benefits as well.

These policy outcomes are a predictable outcome of a political choices that are disconnected from—and unequally accountable to—poor and working-class families, especially when those families are Black.

Importantly, this view of people in poverty as the objects of policy rather than essential stakeholders is also pervasive outside of government. Even well-intentioned organizations can design or advocate for interventions that are misaligned with the aspirations and needs of the families they serve, undermining their effectiveness. More detrimentally, these organizations’ passive disregard of the expertise and perspectives of communities directly experiencing the conditions they seek to address dilutes the urgency for change and the direction that change takes. As a consequence, the actors most visible and powerful in shaping policy reform can more readily accept progress as they define it and outcomes that are merely less bad, while conceding the possibility of a just system that fully affirms the equal deservingness of us all.

This paper draws on the alternate vision of programs like the Magnolia Mother’s Trust and other examples of programmatic and policy design that affirm the power, creativity, and leadership of individuals and communities

on the economic margins to chart a more equitable, inclusive, and responsive path forward. Importantly, this person-centered framework and set of practices can be applied in any institutional context—from research and policy to program and product design.

As powerful as the potential for this approach may be, this paper is simply a first step. Further, it simply scratches the surface of organizations engaged in the day-to-day struggle for social justice and the institutional practices that would create onramps for the agendas of these organizations to embed within government. To switch the default of how financial security policy is made to center the power and influence of the individuals and communities currently in our nation’s economic margins, the next step will require building a community of practice and collective action to grow this knowledge base, broaden our set of practices, and apply them at the direction of the people these actions are serving. We hope you will join us.



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