



# PUBLIC INVESTMENT FOR BROAD FAMILY ECONOMIC HEALTH

**Scott Wasserman, The Bell Policy Center**

We envision a Colorado where communities recognize that healthy public investment enables broadly distributed family economic health. At the Bell Policy Center, we have documented that the cost pressures that most plague Colorado families are related to the elements that a 2Gen approach to strong family economic health requires: child care, good education access and outcomes, and a pathway to a good job. When voters and their elected leaders acknowledge the role that our public systems play in economic mobility and that these systems are not just for low-income Coloradans, they will take the actions necessary to restore them.

Our goal is for policymakers on both sides of the political divide to embrace the need for greater public investments in essential state services and have a more nuanced discussion about public finance. We also seek to build up a consciousness among low-income advocates that these issues cannot be separated.

We need to break down the mindset that public investments are for the benefit of families with low incomes and are not just as a critical for middle-income and middle-class families. The paradox of a booming state economy that is not translating into widespread economic prosperity is fueling resentment that leads to voting behavior that opposes tax increases and increases skepticism of community leaders.

If we accept that investments in health and human services have consequences not only for low-income families but for families higher up the income scale, we need to address cliff effects, eligibility levels, and cost shifts to non-subsidized families. We also need to be more proactive with how we connect family economic supports with workforce and training opportunities. As an entirely new workforce training ecosystem emerges, we need to make sure that these systems further equity and are adapted to a new economic model.

Our child care systems rise to the top of the list. Our economy generally requires that both parents (if there are two) must work in order to achieve a middle-class life. However, the cost of quality child care is too high for most and eats into savings for other priorities, especially the ability to save for higher education. We also need to raise Colorado children's health plan participation rates.

We recently released the report *Colorado's Middle Class: Characteristics and Cost Pressures*. With that and other extensive writing on the topic, we have

created bedrock research that we and others can refer back to. However, better communications tools are essential to our effort. Through videos and other kinds of digital promotion, we can expose a much larger audience to our research and affect public sentiment. We are trying to undo over 30 years of public will erosion, and this requires larger-scale strategies than those that came before.

We can also use performance management techniques by urging the next governor of Colorado to adopt a middle-class health dashboard that tracks research-based metrics.

### POSSIBLE MEASURES COULD INCLUDE:

- Percentage of families with at least one college degree or higher;
- Number and share of workers and jobs in occupations/industries likely to be middle class;
- Wage data for occupations unlikely to lead to the middle class;
- Child care availability and costs;
- Cost of higher education for identified occupations; and
- Overall number and share of families in the middle class.

There is an entire ecosystem of nonprofits, community leaders, and influencers that need to be integrated into this work. We need to continue working with direct service providers and community advocates so that we hear directly from those most affected by these policy questions and that, in turn, information about the policy levers that have the greatest impact gets back to them.

We, along with the nonprofits and policy organizations that we work with, need to consolidate and refine our message so that there is a consistent narrative driving the public conversation.

Donors, political influencers, and foundations willing to lead are critical to this effort. Many of these topics have been well-researched and documented. Now we need drawn-out campaigns with compelling messages and visuals that connect with popular opinion. We also need prosperous voices in the state to reinforce those messages to elected officials.

We have also made great progress in carving out a unique and credible voice on economic mobility — shaping messages that various communities find resonant. For instance, the “progressive” community is often different and separate from the “two-generation” community, yet they are often addressing the same topics.

Competing demands and sensitivities means that we must thread the political needle with this work, which is difficult. For instance, many of our “progressive” allies see paid family leave as a “must-have” priority, but some of our more centrist funders are extremely wary of the topic.

It can be challenging for organizations like ours to come up with specific agenda items that are actionable for policymakers. As we head into the 2019 legislative session, we

want to make sure that we are not seen as “boiling the ocean”; we need to refine this larger priority into specific action items that everyone can get behind.

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