Financial Stability within the Whole Family Approach

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The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University - Camden produces and highlights research leading to sound public policy and practice, and with that as a foundation, aims to convene and engage stakeholders in making the connections across research, policy, and practice in support of Southern New Jersey residents. From 2012 to 2022, WRI has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach initiative across 18 nonprofit collaboratives in Southern New Jersey. The Whole Family Approach is a preventative, family-led strategy that provides adults and children tools to set, plan for, and achieve goals together. Collaborating agencies work together with families with two adult caregivers to develop long- and short-term goals to thrive. WRI's evaluation of the Whole Family Approach includes:

- A longitudinal, quasi-experimental evaluation of families' changes in forming healthy relationships, child wellbeing, and financial stability,
- A process evaluation to understand how the Whole Family Approach was implemented across collaboratives, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document review, and
- Multiple focused evaluations that examine the impact of the Whole Family Approach in areas of interest including student social, emotional, and behavioral growth, service model delivery, family-community partner relationship development, and the cultural responsiveness of the Whole Family Approach.

The report presented here discusses families' financial stability throughout their engagement with Pascale Sykes Foundation funded collaborative organizations and the Whole Family Approach. The Whole Family Approach financial stability pillar provides the lens to better understand, through financial stability-related survey items and economic indicators from quantitative surveys and dozens of focus groups, interviews, and observations, how families' financial stability shifted over time.

EVALUATION METHODS AND DATA ON FINANCIAL STABILITY

In the context of this evaluation, financial stability is construed as an aggregate of families' (primary and secondary caregivers and their families) responses to questions and content which related to financial well-being, financial stability, and related economic indicators from the data-collection methods employed through the evaluation. To better capture financial stability throughout the course of the Pascale Sykes Foundation Strengthening Families Initiative Evaluation, financial stability is measured and explored using a variety of methods over the duration of the entire evaluation, including the main longitudinal adult survey, additional surveys through side and focused studies, focus groups, interviews, and observations of families engaged with collaboratives (and matching comparison families who did not work with the collaboratives), as well gathering information from the collaborative organizations who worked with these families.

Items from the main longitudinal survey administered to adults in collaborative-engaged target families (and matching comparison families) included questions about family members' employment, household bills and contributions to those bills, household income and financial obligations, ability to obtain food and fulfill outstanding financial obligations, ability to seek healthcare services, and ability to fulfill social and professional obligations in relation to the availability of child care.

In the main survey, finance-related indicators were drawn from the Employment of Adult Participants Employment Demographics and Bills Demographics Question sections, the Household Income and Finances section, and the Financial Challenges section, which mirrors the validated material hardship scale. Material hardship is a consumption-based measure of economic prosperity that refers to current resources available and the ability to manage those resources effectively in order to meet basic needs[1,2]. In short, material hardship is the ability to meet basic needs.

Specifically, data in this report has been drawn from all interim and annual reports generated for the evaluation from 2012–2022, twelve smaller-scale side studies, and four focused studies (Child Connection Center Evaluation; COVID-Impacts, Supporting Collaboratives; Family Strengthening Network Family Advocacy Evaluation; and the Whole Family Culturally Responsive Approach Evaluation) - all reports which combine the various data collection methods and results outlined above.

BACKGROUND ON THE SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY ECONOMY

Southern New Jersey is a major industrial center, an important transportation corridor, and a long-established destination for summer vacationers. The top key industries across all counties in Southern New Jersey are healthcare and social assistance, government, retail trade, hospitality, and food services (including tourism). According to the 2019 data from the New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development, most of the economic and employment growth in Southern New Jersey over the past ten years has been seen in six sectors of the economy including administrative service, hospitality, healthcare, professional services, real estate services, and transportation; these service-provision industries now constitute more than 90 percent of employment in the region.[3]

Historically, Southern New Jersey went from a primarily natural resource-based industry to a manufacturing-based industry. Today, it mainly relies on service (social service and food service), health, and technology-based industries. In coastal counties like Atlantic County, there is an economy centered around hospitality and tourism due to the rise in the gambling industry after its legalization in 1978[4]. Construction, automotive, and personal care services are also key industries in the coastal counties (Atlantic, Cape May, Ocean Counties), in addition to the continually developing aviation and technology industries. Coastline counties' share of jobs are often limited and dependent on the summer months each year.[5] In counties like Gloucester, industries are closely linked to the labor market in Philadelphia, with many healthcare and educational institutions and industry representation in professional, retail, food production, and manufacturing services. In these western counties (Gloucester, Camden and Burlington), a variety of small businesses and an array of large corporations are more prevalent than in other parts of Southern New Jersey.

Both Salem and Cumberland county historically developed with glass making, food processing, textiles, and maritime trade industries, and today these counties possess a strong agricultural base with healthcare, construction, hospitality, tourism, and advanced manufacturing sectors.[6] Salem and Cumberland are two of the least populous counties in the state and face other unique conditions, such as a lack of transportation infrastructure.

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[1] Ouellette, T., Burstein, N., Long, D. & Beecroft, E. (2004). Measures of Material Hardship. Final Report, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of the Secretary Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation.

[2] Pilkauskas, N., Currie, J., & Garfinkel, I. (2012). The Great Recession, Public Transfers, and Material Hardship. *Social Service Review*, 86(3), 401-427. doi:10.1086/667993

[3] New Jersey Department of Labor & Workforce Development. (2019).

[4] Perniciaro, R. Casino Gambling in Atlantic City: Lessons for Economic Developers. https://web-b-ebscohost-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/ehost/ detail/detail?vid=0&sid=8b450. (1995).

[5] Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs. Seeking Work in Southern New Jersey: What job seekers and employers in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden see as workforce barriers and opportunities during the COVID-19 Pandemic. (2022).

[6] Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs. Seeking Work in Southern New Jersey: What job seekers and employers in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden see as workforce barriers and opportunities during the COVID-19 Pandemic. (2022)

BACKGROUND ON FINANCIAL STABILITY IN SOUTHERN NEW JERSEY

Based on Economic Policy Institute's 2018 data, the cost of living of Southern New Jersey is slightly lower than New Jersey overall. The average monthly cost of living for a family of four is $8,143 in New Jersey ($97,716 annually) while it is $7,720 in Southern New Jersey ($92,640 annually). Ocean County has the highest monthly cost of living in the region, which is $8,447 per month ($101,370 annually) for a family of four.[7]

Comparing various economic indicators across the four counties (Atlantic, Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem) involved in this evaluation provides context for the economic environment where participating families and collaborative organizations worked, played, and lived from 2012-2022.

According to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's 2022 County Health Rankings section, New Jersey has a large income inequality gap within Southern New Jersey counties. The County Health Rankings highlight income inequality using a metric known as "county value" - defined as the ratio of households in the 80th percentile income level compared to those in the 20th percentile income level. Higher county values indicate higher levels of income inequality. For context, the best performing county in 2022 was Sussex with a score of 3.7.

Nearly all the counties in Southern New Jersey rank in the bottom half. In Atlantic County, the highest income level was recorded at $127,941, and the lowest income level was $25,141, with the county having an overall county value of 5.1. In Cumberland County, the highest income level was $111,669, while the lowest was $21,724; Cumberland County's overall value was also 5.1. Salem County had the highest level of income inequality out of the four counties involved in this evaluation, with its highest income at $131,679 and its lowest at $23,359; a county value of 5.6. Gloucester County fared slightly better, with the high-water mark for income levels at $160,383 and the low-water mark at $39,474, and a county value of 4.1. Gloucester County was the only county in Southern New Jersey with an income inequality county value lower than New Jersey's average of 5.1; the remaining counties were either around the average or higher.[8]

Median Household Income Across Select Southern New Jersey Counties, 2013-2021[9]

County	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Atlantic	$54,235	$54,392	$54,461	$54,456	$57,514	$59,989	$62,110	$63,680	$66,388
Cumberland	$50,750	$50,603	$49,984	$49,537	$50,000	$52,593	$54,149	$55,709	$58,389
Gloucester	$74,524	$76,213	$76,727	$78,592	$81,489	$85,160	$87,283	$89,056	$94,412
Salem	$59,718	$60,768	$61,831	$61,341	$63,934	$64,309	$66,842	$64,234	$69,886
New Jersey	$71,629	$72,062	$72,093	$73,702	$76,475	$79,363	$82,245	$85,245	$89,296

Out of the four counties represented throughout this evaluation, only Gloucester county had median household income levels on par with or above New Jersey's median income levels. Throughout the 10 years of data collection, Atlantic, Cumberland, and Salem counties had median income levels significantly below New Jersey's average, with the lowest income of $49,537 in Cumberland County in 2016 and the highest income of $69,886 in Salem County in 2021, which remains $20,000 below New Jersey's 2021 median income.

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[7] "Family Budget Calculator," Economic Policy Institute. (March 2018). https://www.epi.org/resources/budget/

[8] Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, County Health Rankings and Roadmaps. (2022). https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/new-jersey/2022/measure/factors/44/data

[9] US Census Data, Median Income 2013-2020 http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/

Poverty Rate Across Select Southern New Jersey Counties, 2012-2021[10]

County	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Atlantic	14.6%	18%	15.5%	14.3%	14.4%	14.8%	12.9%	11.1%	13.5%	15.9%
Cumberland	18.8%	20.6%	19.8%	16.9%	19.2%	19.2%	14.6%	13.2%	16.0%	13.3%
Gloucester	8.7%	9.8%	8.0%	7.2%	7.6%	6.2%	7.8%	7.7%	7.0%	7.8%
Salem	10.7%	18.4%	13.9%	11.4%	13.3%	15.8%	11.6%	12.4%	13.8%	12.6%
New Jersey	10.8%	11.4%	11.1%	10.8%	10.4%	10.0%	9.5%	9.2%	9.7%	10.2%

Similar to the trend across median household incomes, among the four counties involved in this evaluation, only Gloucester County had poverty rates, on average, lower than overall New Jersey average poverty rates. Across these counties, Cumberland County experienced some of the highest poverty rates from 2012-2021 reaching its highest level in 2013 at 20.6% and its lowest in 2019 at 13.2%. Salem County poverty rates have typically lowered year to year over the 10-year period, while remaining slightly above New Jersey poverty rates.

Unemployment Rates Across Select Southern New Jersey Counties, 2012-2021[11]

County	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Atlantic County	12.8%	11.9%	10.5%	9.5%	7.4%	7.1%	5.7%	4.8%	17.2%	9.5%
Cumberland County	13.2%	12.0%	9.9%	8.7%	7.4%	6.8%	6.2%	5.2%	10.4%	7.7%
Gloucester County	10.2%	9.2%	7.3%	6.0%	5.0%	4.6%	4.1%	3.5%	8.9%	6.0%
Salem County	11.9%	10.6%	8.5%	7.3%	6.4%	6.0%	5.3%	4.6%	9.3%	7.3%
New Jersey	9.4%	8.4%	6.7%	5.7%	4.9%	4.5%	4.0%	3.4%	9.5%	6.3%

All four counties consistently experienced higher unemployment rates higher than New Jersey's unemployment rate. Gloucester County had the lowest unemployment rates of the four counties and remained the closest to the state average, with its unemployment rate peaking at 10.2% in 2012 and dropping to 4.1% in 2018. The remaining three counties have had unemployment rates notably higher than the state's rates, with Atlantic County having the highest unemployment rate in 2020 at 17.2%. Prior to the pandemic, in 2019, Atlantic County's unemployment rate of 4.8%, Salem County's unemployment rate of 4.6%, Cumberland County's rate of 5.2% and Gloucester County's rate of 3.5% were the closest to the state average of 3.4%. All counties, as well as the state, faced a large increase in unemployment and many unemployment fluctuations during the pandemic, with Atlantic and Cumberland counties seeing the largest unemployment rate increases that year.

[10] US Census Data, Poverty Percentage 2012-2021 https://data.census.gov/cedsci/

[11] Department of Labor and Workforce Development 2012-2021 https://www.nj.gov/labor/labormarketinformation/employment-wages/unemployment-rates-labor-force-estimates/, last accessed Sep. 29, 2022.

I. Financial Stability Among Families, 2012 - 2015/2016

In the beginning of the evaluation, discussions in 2012 and 2013 with families prior to the official launch of the main adult longitudinal survey revealed that most families were open when discussing their financial challenges, such as barriers and obstacles around employment opportunities and inability to find work. Caregivers also noted the impact of excessive work schedules on child well-being and family relationships and challenges with employment faced by individuals with prior convictions. Despite these challenges, families were optimistic about their future. Throughout these years, while caregivers predominantly expressed being able to meet their family's basic needs, they experienced some challenges doing so. Some families utilized local food banks or contacted local service providers or extended family members for financial or material assistance. Furthermore, many families discussed not being able to afford family activities or gifts for special occasions. Adolescents stated that though they felt that their basic needs were met, they desired to earn more and have more than their parents.

When reportable metrics began to be accounted for in 2014-2015, the data showed that a little more than half (55%) of target family adults were currently working, while 33% of these adults were looking for employment (i.e., unemployed or could be currently working, but looking for another job). Approximately 14% of the youth surveyed had either full- or part-time jobs and 41% were looking for employment. Also, 28% of youth sampled indicated that some of their money was utilized to help their family. With regards to household income, a little more than a quarter (28%) of the households had an income of $15,000 or less, while 28% of the households had an income of $60,001 or higher. During this period, the majority of the sampled collaborative families had a household income below the median household income (at the time) in Atlantic, Cumberland, Gloucester, and Salem counties, as well as the state of New Jersey.

II. Financial Stability Among Families, 2016- 2019

The midway years of the evaluation saw some trends in families' financial stability and well-being change, while others remained the same. There was evidence that families were benefiting from the assistance and support provided by collaborative organizations engaged in the Whole Family Approach. One salient sign of families' changing financial stability was that target families in this period were significantly less likely to have moved in and shared housing with friends and family during their involvement with collaborative organizations in the 2016 reporting year. Interestingly, although both matching comparison and target families reported similar incomes at baseline, target families experienced a significant decline in income over the first six months of their involvement with collaboratives, but reported no other changes to their ability to pay bills, rent, or need to borrow money, suggesting that support from collaborative organizations was beneficial to families experiencing financial strain and managing tight budgets. Target families also showed an increase in the use of school meal-assistance programs, although it was unclear whether this was due to an increase in need or in an uptake in obtaining assistance. Both matching comparison and target families reported a comparable and consistent level of support from social service agencies, and target families noted receiving additional specific supports around financial planning, health care, job training, payment assistance, and transportation from collaboratives, all of which may have related to families' debt, budget, and basic needs management.

By 2017-2018, the downward income trends for target families appeared to level out or reverse to some extent - the educational level and household income significantly increased over the course of 18-month measurements for both target adults. For a majority of the financial well-being indicators, the overall trend in this period was toward significant improvement. Both target family adults reported a significant decrease in work hours and number of jobs, which suggested raises in pay or employment change given the simultaneous report on increase in income.

By 2019, the positive trend continued, particularly among secondary caregivers. Specifically, secondary caregivers who were working with the Child Connection Center and the Family Strengthening Network actually reported a large decrease in the number of financial challenges they faced. Over the course of two years of receiving services from Family Strengthening Network, secondary caregivers experienced, on average, an approximately 60% decrease in financial challenges. Secondary caregivers' decreasing financial challenge scores indicate how elements of the Whole Family Approach and support from collaborative organizations

may have influenced target families' relationship with and management of finances. Leaning on the Approach's framework, and with the help of collaboratives, families were able to work towards long-term financial and behavioral goals within the context of their specific financial situations. Establishing thorough plans related to financial activity helped families better understand the financial challenges they faced, what contributed to these challenges, and what behavior objectives might alleviate some aspects of those challenges. Significant reductions in target families' secondary caregivers' reports of financial challenges highlighted the positive impact of families' involvement with the collaboratives. As the subsequent years would show, these relationships with collaboratives would only deepen as families engaged with them for a variety of financial and overall well-being needs. While target families' secondary caregivers experienced fewer financial challenges over time, it is also worth noting that matching comparison families' secondary caregivers experienced fewer financial challenges over time during the 2018-2019 years, which may be a reflection of increases in employment rates at the national and regional level during this time period.

III. Financial Stability Among Families During COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020- 2022

The COVID-19-induced recession of 2020 was far more damaging to the Southern New Jersey regional economy, and subsequently many families' financial stability, than the Great Recession of 2009 and Hurricane Sandy in 2012.[12] Across Southern New Jersey, the lower-income jobs lost were primarily in hospitality, food service, healthcare, and retail industries. A report issued in spring of 2020 found that four in ten (42%) adults said that either they or their partner experienced a job loss or a cut in salary or hours due to the pandemic[13]. Overall, three in ten adults (29%) said they fell behind in paying bills or had problems affording household expenses like food or health insurance coverage since February 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak. Nearly half (46%) of those who had an income loss due to coronavirus said they have had difficulty paying bills or affording household expenses since the outbreak.[14] Many family members who were engaged with Pascale Sykes Foundation funded collaboratives lost their jobs or had their work hours drastically reduced, limiting their ability not only to continue to pursue financial goals and stay on track with loan and bill payments but also to afford basic needs.

As such, the data from the evaluation showed how families involved in the evaluation were affected by the pandemic in a variety of financial ways. Early 2021 data showed that more than one-third (36.5%) of the participants had a yearly household income of less than 20,000 and 14.3% reported income less than $5,000 a year. Nearly one-fourth (23.8%) of adults indicated a yearly household income in the range between $20,000 and $60,000 a year, and 40% reported income above $60,000 a year. The majority of the adults reported that they had at least one other adult in the household who was employed (69.4%) and contributed to the rent and other household bills (72%). Most adults (80.1%) reported that they were able to pay the full amount of monthly rent or mortgage within the past six months of being interviewed. However, 13.8% of participants specified that they borrowed money from friends to help pay the bills. The data from this time showed that adults who had healthy relationships and social support networks (among target families) did not indicate a need for increased assistance with bill payments, and families with higher bills had a significantly higher likelihood of needing payment assistance.

Among matching comparison families, there was an increase in bill costs and a decrease in ability to pay bills during this time. Moreover, generally, the more income

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[12] "The South Jersey Economic Review: One Year on: Assessing the Impact of the 2020 COVID-19 Recession on the Southern New Jersey Regional Economy," William J. Hughes Center For Public Policy. Stockton University. (2021). https://stockton.edu/hughes-center/sjer/documents/2021-0616-sjer-summer-2021.pdf

[13] "Double Jeopardy: Low Wage Workers at Risk for Health and Financial Implications of COVID-19," Rachel Garfield, Matthew Rae, Gary Claxton, Kendal Orgera. Kaiser Family Foundation. (2020). https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/double-jeopardy-low-wage-workers-at-risk-for-health-and-financial-implications-of-covid-19/

[14] "Double Jeopardy: Low Wage Workers at Risk for Health and Financial Implications of COVID-19," Rachel Garfield, Matthew Rae, Gary Claxton, Kendal Orgera. Kaiser Family Foundation. (2020). https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/double-jeopardy-low-wage-workers-at-risk-for-health-and-financial-implications-of-covid-19/; and Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs. (2022). Seeking Work in Southern New Jersey: What job seekers and employers in Southern New Jersey and the City of Camden see as workforce barriers and opportunities during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

that families made, the greater the likelihood their child's health was rated as "excellent," "good," or "very good." Household income was positively correlated with adults' self-perceptions of their overall health; as families made more, they felt that they were healthier. Interestingly, matching comparison families reported an increase in healthcare coverage from pre-COVID-19 to during-COVID-19, which could be attributed to telehealth options or free healthcare resources during the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic (classified as March 2020 - April 2021), matching comparison adults received more free food or meals (m = 1.38) than they did pre-COVID-19 (m = 1.24) (prior to March 2020). This is unsurprising given the many-fold impacts of the pandemic on families, who frequently experienced financial hardships as the result of a loss of income, which contributed to difficulties with having enough money to pay for food. Overall, more families received free food or meals during COVID-19 (m = 1.59) than pre-COVID-19 (m = 1.15). This finding is also highlighted in a study by Parekh et al. and suggests that, among other things, the pandemic negatively affected food security, worsening the food insecurity already experienced by families pre-COVID.[15]

During the pandemic, matching comparison families experienced slightly fewer service shut-offs by a gas, electric, or oil company (m = 1.00) than pre-COVID-19 (m = 1.06). While a portion of this may be attributable to the moratorium on service shut-offs for nonpayment, this finding is still meaningful, as it indicates that when families might have been struggling to pay bills, they were still able to use these critical utilities without interruption.

Target adults paid more for their electric bill during COVID-19 (m = 232.63) than pre-COVID-19 (m = 183.07). This is also unsurprising given the stay-at-home nature of the pandemic, but the impact of families spending more money on their electric bill, coupled with potentially spending less time working, has far-reaching financial implications. Matching comparison adults similarly paid more for their electric bill during the pandemic (m = 232.63) than prior to the pandemic (m = 183.07). During COVID-19, target families were less likely to be charged a specific dollar amount for water and sewer (67%) when compared to pre-COVID-19 (75%) or post-COVID-19 (79%). This may indicate that post-COVID-19, families, at about the same rate as pre-COVID-19, were being charged a specific dollar amount for water and sewer, and so families who might not have needed to pay as much or at all during the pandemic and who adjusted their budgets accordingly were then left facing an increased financial obligation.

Qualitative data from this time period also showed how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic drastically impacted the financial well-being of many families being served through the Pascale Sykes Funded collaboratives, and the flexible nature of the Whole Family Approach in supporting families financially during this time was exceptionally critical. As families struggled with filling basic needs of shelter, food, technology access, and paying bills in the first few months of the pandemic, the Pascale Sykes Foundation provided collaboratives with additional cash funds to support their direct service provision work. The additional financial support provided early on by the Foundation during the pandemic allowed some collaboratives to provide technology to families who became or were in the process of becoming financial unstable during this time, including families who might have previously only owned one iPad or one computer for the entire household.

Families benefited from direct grants and gift cards (provided by several collaboratives) to address basic needs such as food and utilities. One collaborative staff member noted the flexibility of $250 mini-grants for families, observing that the grant allowed the collaborative to help families pay whichever bills were the most pressing, and that this same grant enabled collaboratives to give families a $100 gift card for use toward groceries. Some collaboratives shifted to providing direct financial assistance, including covering families' utility bills. In addition to continued basic needs support, staff provided support accessing government assistance when possible, though exclusions in the criteria for assistance qualification and delays in the unemployment system limited the effectiveness of interventions in this area. These additional financial

[15] Parekh, N., Ali, S. H., O'Connor, J., Tozan, Y., Jones, A. M., Capasso, A., Foreman, J., & DiClemente, R. J. (2021). Food insecurity among households with children during the COVID-19-19 pandemic: results from a study among social media users across the United States. Nutrition Journal, 20(1), 1–73. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12937-021-00732-2

supports provided resources to and filled immediate, critical needs for dozens of families and reflects a flexible approach in providing funds and resources to those in need during times of crisis.

Following the most drastic period of the pandemic in 2020 through early 2021, post-COVID-19 (May 2021 - end of data collection in 2022) data showed that target families were less likely to report receiving free food or meals (26%), compared to pre-COVID-19 (60%) and during COVID-19 (59%) where both matching comparison and target families increased the need for free food or meals. From the 2022 data, no adults reported that they went hungry in the past 6 months and no adults reported that their child went hungry in the past 6 months. These findings suggests that post-COVID-19 (May 2021 - end of data collection in 2022), more families had allocated sufficient resources to food that they either did not have or did not allocate before or during the pandemic, a somewhat counterintuitive finding.

Fewer target families borrowed money from friends or family to help pay for bills post-COVID-19 (10%) than pre-COVID-19 (20%) or during COVID-19 (18%). There are several plausible explanations for this ranging from a general lack of availability of resources among friends and family (as communities experienced the multitudinous hardships of the pandemic and families returned to their pre-COVID financial obligations in post-COVID financial situations) to a reduced need for or difficulty with paying bills; further examination of families' finances and an analysis of their perspectives and experiences is necessary in order to determine the root cause of this finding.

Overall, the pandemic placed many working families in deeper poverty or financial hardship, and increased the financial burdens and instability of collaborative families who were already experiencing hardships.

Across the entire evaluation, financial challenges were most experienced due to lack of employment or underemployment, debt, inability to pay bills, food and housing insecurity and/or lack of transportation. While these challenges ebbed and flowed throughout the evaluation, data also revealed that families were less likely to share housing and had small increases in income. The presence of a significant reduction in financial challenges was most pronounced for the second caregiver in the evaluation, supporting the notion that financial supports and knowledge can help both specific family members and family units overall.

The Role of Collaborative Organizations in Supporting Financial Stability & Well-Being, 2012-2022

The data across ten years showed that families who were engaged with the Pascale Sykes Funded collaborative organizations were predominantly working, making incomes below county and state median incomes, and experiencing different levels of basic needs insecurities over varying years. Many of the changes in families' financial status mirrored state and national economic and employment trends, and the onset of the pandemic deeply affected the region and families engaged with collaboratives. Coping with the experience of these shifts in employment and economic situations, developing financial stability and sustainability plans, and responding to immediate financial and basic needs, were often related to direct engagements with programming and staff by collaborative organizations.

Collaboratives working with families throughout the evaluation often included financial stability and/or well-being as a core component of their offerings and support model through the Whole Family Approach. Over the years, various collaboratives often hosted both one-time and recurring programming that helped families (and sometimes their teens) become familiar with financial concepts and increase their financial knowledge and literacy - concepts and skills which could be related to subsequent financial stability. Collaborative staff members and programs supported families through activities such as opening bank accounts and setting up debit cards; offering debt management counseling and sessions; teaching bill and budget management strategies; providing budget templates; providing FAFSA, student loan and scholarship assistance and sessions; and related activities and exercises.

For many of the collaboratives who incorporated a family advocate model, debt and financial management

was often a large component of identified family goals, and collaborative staff would work with families to better understand their debt, plan where savings could be made, develop budgets and savings strategies, and work together to pay off debts and loans, saving up for a house down-payment or a car. The financial skills offered through collaboratives not only helped families overcome financial burdens and achieve financial goals but also provided families with the tools needed to continue to employ successful budgeting strategies which were sustainable and promoted long-term financial stability. Data from 2021 showed a significant correlation between the presence of healthy relationships or social support networks and a lower need for assistance with bill payments. This inverse relationship between social support and financial distress may be even more salient for adults who are working with collaborative organizations because of the specific and tailored resources they may receive from collaboratives in addition to the support systems with which they already interact. As shown through the data, the ongoing work done by collaboratives in implementing the Whole Family Approach to support financial stability remains essential. Financial stability, then, could be influenced by collaboratives' implementation of the Whole Family Approach through financial support strategies, resources, and workshops, all delivered by engaged and dedicated collaborative staff, which serve to address financial distress and provide sustainable support strategies and techniques to families.

For more information visit the **Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs**, the **Pascale Sykes Foundation**, and the **Whole Family Approach** websites.

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