



IN THIS
TOGETHER

A CROSS-PARTISAN ACTION PLAN TO SUPPORT
FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN IN AMERICA

CONVERGENCE COLLABORATIVE ON
SUPPORTS FOR WORKING FAMILIES
2023-2024

CONVERGENCE



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About the Collaborative

The *Convergence Collaborative on Supports for Working Families* met regularly throughout 2023. We are a cross-partisan, cross-sector group of leaders who have dedicated our careers to improving the lives of children and families in America. To our knowledge, we are the most ideologically and sectorally diverse group to address family policy that has convened in recent decades. We came together against a backdrop of historic polarization and political divides. This report is our action plan to help low-to-moderate income families with young children flourish.

About Convergence

Convergence is the leading organization bridging divides to solve critical challenges through collaborative problem solving across ideological, political, and cultural lines. For more than a decade, Convergence has brought together leaders, doers, and experts to build trusting relationships, identify breakthrough solutions, and form unlikely alliances for constructive change on seemingly intractable issues. Our process is improving the lives of Americans and strengthening democracy for a more resilient and collaborative future.

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A Note from the Director



I didn't quite know what I was getting into with this project. I was familiar with the subject matter. I knew about the partisan divides. I knew many of the participants personally. But I was unfamiliar with Convergence and what type of process could help soften ground between entrenched political positions and groups. What a delight it was to find out.

We live in a hyper-partisan and polarized environment. It has crept into nearly every facet of life, including how to support parents and children. During our time together, a contentious 2024 presidential election loomed. Our Collaborative took place in the shadow of the expiration of pandemic-era support for families, the failure to pass the Biden Administration's Build Back Better proposal, and the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, with states taking radically different approaches in the aftermath. These factors, among many others, have made it difficult to take meaningful actions to support children and families with a wide base of support.

Such divides, I've since learned, turn out to be fertile ground for a Convergence Collaborative. We chose members for the Collaborative first and foremost for their leadership in the field of supporting children and families. The second criterion was selecting people whom we knew had deep policy and political differences as well as organizations that did not partner together, either out of ideological difference or due to being based in different sectors and geographies. Many members of our Collaborative had never met each other before in person. Others had spoken against each other's positions in publications, media, and Congressional testimony.

As a planning team, our goal for the project was to uncover and cultivate a shared set of principles and actions to better support working families with young children. At a minimum, we sought to create constructive dialogue among a group with significant political difference; to hold neutral space where conversation was private and not performative to get to the heart of the matter; to convene multiple times to build trust and relationships, and; hopefully, to end up with a better understanding of those who – even after hours of conversation and sharing of perspectives – continue to see the world very differently.

I believe we accomplished all of the above as the following pages attest. We couldn't have done it without a lot of support. It has been a tremendous privilege to partner with Convergence on this project and in particular **Breelyn Stelle, Russell Krumnow, Isabel Hinestrosa, and Mariah Levison**. We all benefited from seeing skilled facilitators **David Fairman and Ona Ferguson** from the Consensus Building Institute in action (providing the couples-therapy equivalent of policy negotiation). We are grateful to the Packard Foundation who invested in this effort when it was unclear where such a diverse group might end up.

To the Collaborative members themselves, I give you a big, heartfelt, thank you. You are generous, spirited, kind, and thoughtful. You joined the effort in good faith. Collectively, you contributed more than 1,000 hours of your limited time amidst running non-profits, performing pediatric otolaryngology, writing books, running businesses, running for public office, and raising children of all ages. I am grateful to have seen you work together up close, and I believe that I am not alone.

American families with young children are in urgent need of support. That's why millions of families around the nation – fed up with politics and being overlooked – are grateful to you too, even if they don't know it yet. This type of bridgebuilding and understanding and compromise and coming to the table, again and again, is the future upon which our divided society rests. Not only did you set down differences to identify areas of common ground and action to support children, but you modeled the grown-up behavior of constructive dialogue I wish children could see with more adults.

For that, we all thank you,



Abby McCloskey

Director, Convergence Collaborative on Supports for Working Families

Founder, McCloskey Policy LLC

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WHO WE ARE

We came together as the *Convergence Collaborative on Supports for Working Families* during 2023-2024. We are business leaders, early childhood educators, child advocates, researchers, physicians, and academics. Many of us are parents ourselves.

We span the ideological and political spectrum and come from very different professional domains and life experiences. To our knowledge, we are the most ideologically and sectorally diverse group to address family policy that has convened in recent decades – and not a moment too soon.

We disagree on many issues, yet we wholeheartedly believe that more can be done to support family flourishing at the government, employer, and community level. This report presents where we found common ground as well as where we aligned on principles, but not on actions. In each area, we offer more than one option for consideration.

Our aim is to catalyze public dialogue and action across party lines to help millions of families with young children flourish.

OUR WORK TOGETHER

Our Collaborative convened monthly for a year during a time of historically high polarization and partisanship. We listened to each other, learned from each other, and collaboratively built a cross-partisan and cross-organizational action agenda to better support low-to-moderate-income families with young children.

The issues facing families with young children in our country are numerous and well-known. Children’s early environments have lifetime and intergenerational impacts, yet child-rearing occurs at a moment in parents’ lifecycle when they tend to have limited resources. The share of the federal budget devoted to children is relatively small and declining as other spending – particularly old age entitlement programs and interest on the debt – rises. Parents frequently want different arrangements for care and work than they can afford or negotiate, and parents’ jobs may not leave enough time or flexibility to care for young children. The share of people having children is declining, with many citing cost concerns. Meanwhile, people with children are citing higher levels of pessimism about the future that awaits their kids.

Our work is not about restating these challenges or embarking on new research, since many other groups and efforts have done so extraordinarily well. It is about bringing people with different ideologies together to find common ground to support working families with young children in the face of historic polarization in America. Even within our two political parties, there are differing views about how to support families, and we wanted to include that diversity in our group.

In many ways, our group was inspired by the vision and impact of the previous generation’s National Commission on Children,¹ which also crossed partisan, organizational, and geographical divides in its search for common ground. This effort led to significant policy changes at the end of the 20th century, including the creation of the Child Tax Credit. We believe that crossing similar divides today can once again lead to significant breakthroughs.

¹ National Commission on Children. (1991). *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families. Final Report of the National Commission on Children*. National Commission on Children, Washington, D.C. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED336201>

Our recommendations focus on the following demographics:



Families with young children ages 0 to 8

While there are important needs across children’s developmental stages, our effort focuses on families with young children for several reasons. First, there is overwhelming evidence of the importance of early childhood for life outcomes. Second, as a country, we have invested relatively little in this demographic. And third, support for young children is a source of significant ideological and political disagreement.



Low- to moderate income families across race, ethnicity, geography, and family structure

We focus on families with relatively fewer resources and who often face more barriers. This scope allows us to consider targeted investments alongside more universal ones.



Families where at least one parent is in the labor force

There are important issues to discuss in our nation’s welfare and poverty programs and interventions for parents who cannot work. Our collective expertise, however, is in families where at least one parent is earning income in the labor force or aspires to be in the labor force.

THE BIG PICTURE: HELPING FAMILIES TO FLOURISH

We came together knowing that we were deeply divided on policy issues and politics. To elevate the conversation, we began with the big picture question: *What does it mean for families to flourish?*

We often use different measures of success for supporting families, such as: improving children’s developmental outcomes, increasing women’s labor force participation, maximizing parental care at home, knocking down systemic barriers, or reducing child poverty. At times these can be interrelated and at other times conflicting.

Our Collaborative’s contribution is the creation of a new shared framework for what it means for low-to-moderate income families with young children to flourish. This framework includes economic security, along with stable and healthy relationships, resiliency and hope for the future, and freedom, choice and agency. We believe that actions to support families should consider these four areas as touchstones.

What it means for Families to Flourish

1 Essential needs are met.

Families have access to jobs that pay enough income to meet essential economic, health, and safety needs.

2 Relational and community connectedness.

Families have relationships of acceptance, belonging, and reciprocity within the family as well as with the community. They are not isolated.

3 Resiliency in the face of challenges.

Families have a wide network of support to overcome obstacles and set-backs and have a sense of hope and optimism about the future.

4 Choice, agency, and diversity.

Families have actual choices when it comes to living their lives and caring for children that align with their values and preferences and are not limited by structural barriers.

SHARED PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

The most foundational work of our Collaborative was uncovering common values and beliefs to guide our recommendations. These principles did not appear all at once. They revealed themselves as our conversations deepened over time.

Our diverse group unanimously agrees that the following principles should guide actions for supporting families:



Fostering a society in which young children and families can flourish requires the support of communities, civil society, businesses, and government. We support the exploration of ways to increase connection and cooperation within and across these groups.



All parents should have choices that align with their family needs and values and that support their children’s development. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.



The quality of a young child’s care environment has lifetime and intergenerational ramifications. We should be working to support stable and high-quality care environments in the home and outside of it.



We need greater focus on and attention to the well-being of children, as well as a reframing of the narratives about what it’s like to raise children today.



More public support for low-to-moderate-income families with young children is needed. More resources and more effective programs should complement each other.



Public benefits for families with young children should be **predictable, effective, user-friendly, and transparent to understand and access.**

These shared principles guided the recommendations that follow.

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS, EMPLOYERS, COMMUNITIES, AND PHILANTHROPY

As our flourishing framework demonstrates, there are many ways to support families – including supporting healthcare, healthy and stable relationships, housing, education, savings, and more. While there's critical work to be done in all of these areas, our Collaborative believes that our collective expertise and families' needs intersect in four high-priority categories:



Changing the Story.

We believe the stories about raising children in America are often inaccurate, unhelpful, or pushed to the background. We want to change the story. When families flourish, we all flourish.



Rethinking Cash Support for Families.

We believe that low-to-moderate income families with young children should have more effective and easy-to-access cash support, while acknowledging fiscal realities.



Ensuring More High-Quality Care Options for Children.

We believe that parents should be able to make care choices for their children that align with their family needs and values and that support their children's development.



Supporting Parents with New Children.

We believe that all parents should have the opportunity to bond with an infant or new child, while maintaining economic and job security.

We recommend multiple actions in each of these four areas. They are not just federal solutions nor are they one-size-fits-all. Accomplishing them will take broad support across families, communities, philanthropy, nonprofits, faith institutions, different levels of government, and employers. A full list of our recommendations can be found in the Appendix.

We include a fact section in recommendations 2, 3, and 4. Even within our group of experts, we realized that we often point to different data points to understand the scope of the problem or principles to guide intervention. "Facts" are where we had consensus on data. These sections also include "Shared principles," which draw on our overarching principles and provide additional principles specific to the issue at hand.

We believe that actions on these priorities will support low-to-moderate income children and families across our four dimensions of flourishing: improving economic outcomes, strengthening relationships, boosting resilience, and expanding choice.

Our Disclaimer

Many of us support additional policies and improvements that are not reflected here and a few of us do have significant reservations on one or more of the specific policy recommendations. Some of us prefer one set of recommendations over others. Where we have substantial disagreements, we note them.

The recommendations in this document represent where our diverse group – politically, racially, organizationally, geographically, generationally – found the most consensus. We hope it offers a guidepost for others to see where cross-partisan and cross-organizational energy for action can be found.



CHANGING THE STORY

As a Collaborative, we believe the stories about raising children in America are often inaccurate, unhelpful, or pushed to the background. We want to change the story.

The National Commission on Children’s final report, published in 1991, was titled “Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families.”² In contrast, our group kept returning to the importance of rhetoric in nearly every conversation.

We believe that narratives matter, and that somewhere along the way, harmful ones have taken root to the detriment of American families. Our group had many examples of common narratives that stand in the way of constructive debate and fuel partisan divides. We hear stories that some policymakers want all parents to work and have their children in full-time care outside the home, while others want all mothers to stay home. We hear that having a child is a personal choice, like buying a car, and thus society has little responsibility to support their development and well-being. We hear that additional investments in children and families will require onerous tax increases and that current spending cannot be restructured more effectively.

To be sure, changing the narratives around children and families goes well beyond the expertise of this group. We are not communications experts. Some in our group find the conversations about narrative a bit too abstract or tangential for action. Others believe that the narrative work was the surface of deeply held beliefs that need to be further explored. However, most of us view changing narratives and exploring underlying beliefs as either a prerequisite for building political will for change, or as complement to policy reform.

New Narratives

Our Collaborative proposes a set of new narratives that reach across partisan, geographical, and organizational divides. We believe that family advocates, philanthropy, media, government, and employers can help to move these new narratives to the center of public debate.

- ▶ All children deserve the opportunity to flourish.
- ▶ When children flourish, we all flourish. It’s not zero-sum. Parents are shaping the hearts and minds of the next generation of adults and thus of society. Providing them with stability and flexibility makes it more likely that parents and their children will contribute to our communities, now and in the future.
- ▶ Childhood and parenthood can be better for the next generation. We should be seeking to make it so, which may include providing benefits and opportunities that many families today and in the past didn’t have.
- ▶ We can provide families with more choices that align with their needs and values around raising their children.
- ▶ Families, communities, governments, businesses, faith groups, and civil society all have a role to play in supporting flourishing families and children.
- ▶ Our public budgets reflect our priorities. We are spending a smaller and smaller share on children, while increasing the debt burden on future generations. Improving intergenerational equity in the budget is essential for ensuring a vibrant future for America.
- ▶ Government policies and programs should be assessed with evidence and on a case-by-case basis, rather than using blanket statements about whether government action is helpful or harmful.
- ▶ Workplaces can better accommodate the needs of families with young children.

² National Commission on Children. (1991). *Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families. Final Report of the National Commission on Children*. National Commission on Children, Washington, D.C. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED336201>

Recommended Actions

Our Collaborative believes that the following interventions would move the well-being of families forward in the national conversation and bridge the partisan gridlock.



A.1 Launch a public narrative campaign to raise awareness about the importance of early childhood.

Most Collaborative participants believe there is great value in launching a public campaign to change perceptions around raising children today. The purpose of this campaign would be to create a broad base of understanding and support around childhood to break down the partisanship in this space. It could be similar to the “Got Milk” campaign or the “Shaping Us” campaign currently underway in the United Kingdom.³

We believe that this campaign must be drawn from a broad cross-section of political perspectives so that it would be a tool to move the conversation forward, rather than deepen divides. Additionally, we believe that orienting such a campaign around children is likely to have the best chance of success. There are precedents for public messaging campaigns to increase focus on kids’ needs. Kansas ran a “#1 Question” campaign in the 1990s to elevate the needs of children, which changed employer practices to include more flextime for parents and influenced zoning rules.⁴

We urge the philanthropic community to explore options for the content and strategy of such a campaign. This could include bipartisan message testing and case studies aimed to change media coverage and public perceptions. An incremental version of this campaign could be a communications or education toolkit about how to better support families, targeted at a range of audiences and sponsored by a broad cross-section of organizations. Those in the Collaborative who are less supportive of a campaign are primarily skeptical about its potential for impact; none oppose the idea in principle.



A.2 Focus policymakers’ attention on children and families.

Our Collaborative calls for creating structures that move children to the forefront of the policy conversation. Children have no political voice and thus can easily be overlooked in our political system.

At the federal level, this could be done through the formation of a families caucus or Congressional committee. The House had a Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families in the 1980s that disbanded in 1993.⁵ Restoring it along with instituting one in the Senate should be considered. Another path forward could be forming a committee focused on kids and working families, akin to the Senate Special Committee on Aging or a Senate Gang. Congress also could establish a 21st century National Commission on Children.

Due to our historic levels of polarization, it’s possible that a bipartisan Congressional body might better reflect a diversity of viewpoints than the Executive Branch. However, in the Executive Branch, this Administration or the next could create a “Families Czar” or an appointed Cabinet position.

³ Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood. (n.d.) *Shaping Us*. Retrieved November 30, 2023. <https://shapingus.centreforearlychildhood.org/>

⁴ The Community Tool Box. (n.d.). Example 1: *The #1 Question Campaign: A campaign to promote the well-being of children and youth in the greater Kansas City area*. Retrieved October 13, 2023. <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/implement-social-marketing-effort/examples/example1>

⁵ Children, youth, and families: Beginning the assessment. Hearing before the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families; House of Representatives, Ninety-Eighth Congress, First Session.” *United States House of Representatives*. Washington, DC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED245830>

Still another possibility would be for the Administration for Children and Families to move out of Health and Human Services (HHS) and become a true Department of Children and Families.⁶

The Collaborative also calls for coordinated structures that move children to the forefront of state- and community-level policy initiatives. Colorado, for example, recently introduced a new Department of Early Childhood to break down silos, encourage greater coordination on policies surrounding children, and create more choices for preschool. New Mexico launched the New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department in 2020.⁷ Wyoming's governor appointed an Early Childhood Governance Task Force.⁸ Other states are also streamlining and elevating their early childhood departments.⁹

Last but not least, the upcoming 2024 election presents a unique opportunity to promote a set of cross-partisan principles or actions for candidates to support. This document provides a bipartisan starting point for candidates of both parties.



A.3 Establish a trusted, cross-partisan fact base for understanding family flourishing.

Many in our Collaborative would like to see the philanthropic community invest in a shared fact base or scorecard that multiple organizations across the political spectrum could trust and promote. In our polarized environment, we often are looking at different aspects of family well-being or may dismiss polling results based on the perceived political orientation of the sponsoring organization.

A shared fact base or scorecard could help to elevate parental and children's well-being to the forefront of the national conversation and break down partisan silos. It could follow our group's flourishing framework to ensure that it's capturing the big picture. This could include household economic stability, but also relational health within and outside the home, parents' optimism about the future, and the extent to which family preferences for work and care and having children are being met. Some in our group are hesitant about how feasible it would be to do well or think that it might be duplicative to other efforts or data sets.



A.4 Explore new ways to elevate employers whose family-friendly policies help low-and-moderate wage workers.

Some members of the Collaborative believe we need a more public comparison of employers' family-friendly benefits for low-to-moderate wage workers. A public comparison could both incentivize employers to offer better benefits and improve transparency for families. Over time, it could change the narrative around what's expected of companies.

An alternative approach is a communications campaign that elevates companies with family-friendly practices for low-to-moderate wage workers. Still another approach is the creation of a voluntary benchmark, where companies can learn how their practices compare to their peers and exemplary family-friendly workplaces are promoted. There are local and state-based initiatives like these, such as the Best Places for Working Parents, which could be more focused on benefits for low-to-moderate wage workers.¹⁰

Some in the Collaborative think this type of effort might be duplicative or difficult to verify and do well.

⁶ Administration for Children and Families. (n.d.). *About*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/about>

⁷ New Mexico Early Childhood Education & Care Department. (n.d.) *About ECECD*. <https://www.nmececd.org/about-ececd/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20Gov.,launched%20on%20July%201%2C%202020>.

⁸ Regenstein, E. (July 2020). "Making Sense of Governance in Early Childhood." EdNote. <https://ednote.ecs.org/making-sense-of-governance-in-early-childhood/>

⁹ Regenstein, E. (July 2020). "Making Sense of Governance in Early Childhood." EdNote. <https://ednote.ecs.org/making-sense-of-governance-in-early-childhood/>

¹⁰ The Best Place for Working Parents. (n.d.). *Home*. <https://bestplace4workingparents.com/>



RETHINKING CASH SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Our Collaborative believes that low-to-moderate-income families with young children should receive more effective and easy-to-access cash support, while acknowledging fiscal realities.

The economic stability of a household has direct implications on children's well-being and future outcomes. Even with one or both parents in the workforce, many low-to-moderate income families face thin financial margins because of rising costs, low wages, and child-related expenditures.

Our Collaborative recognizes the benefits of cash to low-to-moderate income families through programs such as the Child Tax Credit (CTC) and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). We are in strong agreement that we should build on this success by directing relatively more resources to low-and-moderate income families with young children, improving the effectiveness of existing resources, and exploring how to increase the flexibility and ease of these payments for parents.

However, differences remain. Some members strongly support maintaining the universality of the CTC, while other members are concerned about the high cost to taxpayers of these payments given their universality. There is particular disagreement about whether these payments should hinge on work and if the CTC should be thought of as an anti-poverty program or tax relief for working families. While the cost of government action came up repeatedly in our discussions, that concern was particularly salient here given the significant size of the Child Tax Credit.

Despite these differences, we agree on the following facts, principles, and actions for rethinking cash support to families:

Facts

- ✓ Children have better outcomes when they grow up in economically stable households and essential needs are met.
- ✓ The CTC and EITC are the largest child-related tax credit programs in America. The CTC covers almost 60 million children and 35 million families.¹¹
- ✓ The CTC has a history of bipartisan support. It has been expanded under both Democratic and Republican administrations and reform proposals have been put forward on both sides of the aisle.¹²
- ✓ The temporary pandemic expansion of the CTC was associated with a significant drop in child poverty both because the size of the credit was increased and it was made fully refundable.¹³
- ✓ Some economists are concerned about the potentially negative work incentives of a fully refundable CTC and the cost of a larger credit.¹⁴
- ✓ Current CTC levels are set to expire in 2025 and to be reduced across-the-board thereafter. This provides a near-term opportunity for reform.

¹¹ Wielk, E. Lutz, A. Snyderman, R. (2023). "Assessing the Potential Employment and Poverty-Reduction Effects of an Expanded Child Tax Credit." Bipartisan Policy Center. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/employment-poverty-reduction-effects-ctc/>

¹² Tax Policy Center. (2022). What is the child tax credit? *Briefing Book*. [https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/what-child-tax-credit#:~:text=The%20original%20credit%20was%20%24400,income%20tax%20credit%20\(EITC\).](https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/what-child-tax-credit#:~:text=The%20original%20credit%20was%20%24400,income%20tax%20credit%20(EITC).)

¹³ Wielk, E. Lutz, A. Snyderman, R. (2023). "Assessing the Potential Employment and Poverty-Reduction Effects of an Expanded Child Tax Credit." Bipartisan Policy Center. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/employment-poverty-reduction-effects-ctc/>

¹⁴ Calder, V. (2022). "New Analysis Finds Expanded Child Tax Credit Reduces Work and Growth." Cato Institute. Available at: <https://www.cato.org/blog/new-analysis-finds-expanded-child-tax-credit-reduces-work-growth>

Shared principles

- The Collaborative believes that lower-and-moderate income families should be the primary beneficiaries of cash support.
- We believe that government benefits for families with children should be well publicized and easy for families to access.
- We believe that benefits should be stable over time to help families plan for their children's futures. Fluctuating levels undermine a cash benefit's contribution to economic security.
- We believe that there are upsides to better targeting of existing cash benefit programs for younger children.
- Families, communities, governments, businesses, faith groups, and civil society all have a role to play in supporting flourishing families and children.
- We support efforts to meet the challenge of federal fiscal sustainability while providing additional resources to families.

Recommended Actions



B.1 Direct more cash support to low-and-moderate income children, while acknowledging the need for federal fiscal responsibility.

Our Collaborative believes that more effective cash support for low-to-moderate income children is required. At the same time, many of us are concerned about the unsustainable fiscal trajectory of the U.S. government and the decreasing share of resources dedicated to children. Reallocation from other public spending areas and/or increased revenue are likely required to help offset the necessary scale of investment in families with children. One step forward in this regard would be to increase intergenerational equity in the budget.



B.2 Enact a simple, predictable, and easy-to-access cash benefit for children.

The Collaborative supports a stable child-related cash allowance that primarily benefits low-to-moderate income families. We believe that administrative simplicity, predictability, and ease of access for the recipients should be key design goals.

We encourage policymakers to explore the timing of CTC payments. At current levels, a family able to claim the full amount of the Child Tax Credit will receive \$32,000 per child, distributed equally over the first 17 years of that child's life.

Many in the group were interested in targeting a larger share of the existing payments to younger children or giving families more flexibility, which can help to better meet families' needs without increasing public spend. Others in the group were interested in allowing parents to pull forward their CTC benefits, as Senators Sinema and Cassidy and others have proposed.^{15,16} Additionally, a once-a-year pay-out through tax filing is not what is likely most beneficial to families, especially those with few resources.

We are uncertain what would be the most effective and efficient mode of payment for the allowance, be it the CTC, EITC, or a new vehicle delinked from tax administration. We are not in agreement on whether this benefit should be available to all families with children, irrespective of income or work. Some of us believe that a child allowance should incentivize work (by connecting the scale of the benefit in part to income from work), while others do not want such an incentive, because they believe that parents should have as much flexibility as possible to care for their young children. The phase-in is an area of bipartisan compromise, although it could start sooner or phase-in more quickly.

While we did not reach agreement on what should be done with the 2025 tax reform opportunity for CTC, the principles of a relatively larger share to low-and-moderate income families, targeting more funding earlier, and ease of access should be features of the political debate, along with cost considerations.



B.3 Encourage continued state and community experimentation of child-related benefits.

The Collaborative supports continued state and community experimentation with child tax credits, baby bonuses, savings vehicles, and charitable donations to parents and children. For example, Maine has a \$300 fully refundable dependent tax credit that replaces the state's dependent exemption credit.¹⁷ The credit is indexed for inflation. Even at this relatively modest amount, there are expected to be significant anti-poverty effects.

At the city level, a program called "RX Kids" is being piloted in Flint, Michigan, which provides all mothers with a one-time, \$1,500 cash transfer during pregnancy, followed by 12 monthly payments of \$500 during their infant's first year of life. This effort is funded, in part, by charitable donations. Researchers at Michigan State University-Hurley Children's Hospital Pediatric Public Health Initiative and Poverty Solutions at the University of Michigan will study the effects. This is the first city-based universal program of this scale in the U.S., and it underscores the untapped possibilities of local solutions.¹⁸

Additionally, state and local agencies that support families can provide more guidance and assistance (e.g. family navigators) to help families access the cash benefits available to them.

¹⁵ S.2976 - Advancing Support for Working Families Act, 116th Cong. (2019-2020). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/2976/committees>.

¹⁶ Stevens, K. Weidinger, M (2021). "Improving Early Childhood Development by Allowing Advanced Child Tax Credits." American Enterprise Institute. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/improving-early-childhood-development-by-allowing-advanced-child-tax-credits/>

¹⁷ 36 MRS §5129-SS. <https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/36/title36sec5219-SS.html>

¹⁸ RX Kids: Citywide Cash Program. (n.d.). "Send cash to moms and babies in Flint, Michigan." Given Directly. <https://www.givedirectly.org/rxkids/>



ENSURING MORE HIGH-QUALITY CARE OPTIONS FOR CHILDREN

Our Collaborative believes that parents should have access to care choices for their children that align with their needs and values and that support their children's development.

The majority of parents with young children work, and yet workplaces are often not accommodating to family needs. High-quality child care options outside the home are limited and cost-prohibitive for most parents. Parents who want to care for their own children full or even part-time may not have the financial resources to do so, especially if they are in low-to-moderate income households.

Our Collaborative calls for a new, holistic care agenda for young children. Nurturing the next generation is a societal good and full-time responsibility. It often involves a combination of parental care, care provided by family, friends, and neighbors, and formal child care and education settings that range from in-home to center-based to faith-based care. We believe that child care policy debates and investments in early care should promote and respect this diversity of family needs and options.

Most of us believe that increasing the funding and flexibility of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) is the most viable path forward for increasing access to paid, non-parental care for families who need it while preserving bipartisanship, state flexibility, and parental choice. We also believe that approaches to expanding workplace flexibility and boosting wages should be explored, to enable parents to spend more time raising their own young children if they so choose. Many of us are interested in exploring better integration of family support resources through community-based Family Hubs.

Some in the Collaborative support increased federal spending on child care infrastructure, wage support for child care workers, and/or a new or enhanced child care tax credit available to more families. Others worry that current policy is tilted in favor of out-of-home, nonparental care, and want policy and programs that give parents full choice between child care in and outside the home, making stay-at-home parenting a viable option for far more families.

Despite these differences, we agree on the following facts, principles, and actions for creating more high-quality care choices for children:

Facts

- ✓ The quality of a child's early care environment has lifetime and intergenerational ramifications.
- ✓ Parents have a wide variety of care preferences and needs for their children, including care by parents, center-based care, faith-based care, in-home care, and care by friends and relatives.¹⁹
- ✓ Caring for children is expensive and time-consuming and comes at a time when parents are earning less than they will be later in their income lifecycle.²⁰
- ✓ Current child care support is not reaching enough low-to-moderate income families. According to one estimate, only 1 in 9 eligible children for CCDBG received a child care subsidy in 2019.²¹

¹⁹ Bipartisan Policy Center. (2021). "Parent Child Care Preferences: Are They Changing?" Available at <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/event/parent-child-care-preferences-are-they-changing/>

²⁰ U.S. Department of Treasury. (2023, September 15). *Treasury Releases Report Showing U.S. Childcare System Overburdens Families and Causes Shortages Due to Inadequate Supply*. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0354>

²¹ First Five Years Fund. (2023). *Child Care & Development Block Grant (CCDBG)*. Retrieved October 13, 2023. <https://www.ffyf.org/issues/ccdbg/#:~:text=Prior%20to%20the%20COVID%2D19,over%20the%20last%20two%20years>

✓ In addition to fewer financial resources to pay for high-quality care or to stay home with children, low-to-moderate income parents in particular lack flexibility, control, and predictability over their work schedules. This often forces them to rely on patch-work solutions with little consistency or predictability, negatively impacting their children’s development.²²

✓ Insufficient and unstable funding for paid care leads to low wages for providers and teachers, especially among providers that serve lower-income families. This in turn leads to high worker turnover, negatively impacting children’s development.²³

Recommended Actions



C.1 Develop a holistic, cross-partisan care strategy that empowers parents and supports children’s development.

Too often, child care proposals are presented as one-size-fits-all solutions. Our Collaborative believes that our country needs a more holistic care agenda for children across the federal, state, or community level. Priorities for this holistic strategy include:



Improve access to jobs that complement caring for young children. Our Collaborative supports incentives for employers to increase access to part-time work while retaining health care and other benefits, boosting wages to create more financial flexibility, and increasing remote and flexible work options, along with increased schedule control for low-to-moderate wage workers in particular.



Make state and local benefits more parent-friendly. All in the Collaborative believe that public support for child care should be more accessible and user-friendly for parents. Some states such as South Carolina and Utah have set up one-stop-shops for early childhood services, which are a useful model for other states.²⁴



Ensure that public support is effective and directed to low-to-moderate-income families. Current public support for paid care is a patchwork of siloed programs at the federal, state, and community level – including CCDBG, Head Start, the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC), employer tax credits, and more. This makes it difficult for policymakers to track investment impact, for states and communities to implement the programs, and for parents to understand and receive available support. Eligibility requirements are not coordinated across programs, sometimes resulting in benefit cliffs. Lack of funding and the complication of accessing programs results in many low- and moderate-income children not having access to support they are eligible for.

²² Harknett, K., Schneider, D., Luhr, S. (2019, October 16). Who Cares if Parents have Unpredictable Work Schedules?: The Association between Just-in-Time Work Schedules and Child Care Arrangements. Washington Center for Equitable Growth. <https://equitablegrowth.org/working-papers/who-cares-if-parents-have-unpredictable-work-schedules-the-association-between-just-in-time-work-schedules-and-child-care-arrangements/>

²³ Grunewald, R., Nunn, R., Palmer, V. (2022). “Examining teacher turnover in early care and education.” Available at <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2022/examining-teacher-turnover-in-early-care-and-education>

²⁴ Green, M. (2023, February 17). “New online portal creates ‘one-stop shop’ for finding early childhood resources, services in SC.” Live 5 WCSC News. <https://www.live5news.com/2022/02/17/new-online-portal-creates-one-stop-shop-finding-early-childhood-resources-services-sc/>



Increase families' access to a greater range of paid care providers. Our Collaborative believes that families should be able to use public child care funding for a wide variety of child care providers, including faith-based providers, in-home providers, providers who work non-traditional hours, and parental care or resources for parenting. The Collaborative supports a review of state and local ordinances, including zoning laws and tax policies to increase the supply of in-home care providers. We support a review of state child care regulations to reduce unnecessary barriers and costs, while protecting the health and safety of young children. Additionally, care providers – and in particular smaller in-home care providers – would benefit from state policies and community structures that simplify public funding and resources into a single set of grant or contract requirements.



Collect better data about care preferences, costs and barriers, and long-term outcomes. Many in the Collaborative were interested in improved data collection on parental care preferences and child care outcomes, including both parental and paid care. This could take place in a variety of forms at the national or state level. For example, the Census (CPS, ACS, and 10 year) could include questions about child care arrangements that, at a minimum, ask about the type and cost. Questions could also be added to the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). Additionally, the national survey of early childhood education (NSECE) could happen more frequently. Alternatively, the federal and/or state governments could create an entirely new survey. An example to draw from could be the Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care²⁵ Oregon has pioneered.²⁶ Longitudinal data to track how levels and types of care translate into medium-and long-term outcomes for parents and children would also be helpful.



C.2 Work through state block grants to increase the accessibility of high-quality child care options for low-to-moderate income families.

Many in the Collaborative recommend that CCDBG is funded so that any federally eligible low-and-moderate income family who applies for CCDBG support in their state can receive it. CCDBG has a history of broad support across the aisle in Congress. It is focused on low-to-moderate income families and offers flexible policy choices for states and provider choices for families.

Additionally, we encourage states to take steps to ensure that CCDBG funding can be more flexibly used to support a wide variety of child care providers in high need areas. We also recognize that many states place significant requirements upon the providers who accept the funds, which may make many hesitant to do so. Increased funding and more flexibility in the use of CCDBG is a step forward, but not a comprehensive solution.

Some in the Collaborative support more expansive CCDBG eligibility levels, a new or enhanced CDCTC available to more families, more flexibility in using CCDBG funding to ensure providers can cover the costs of high-quality care, public support specifically for providers to shore up supply, and wage support for child care workers. Others prefer that all child care support be converted to a cash benefit to maximize parental choice for care.

²⁵ Statistics Canada. "Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care (CSELCC)." <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/survey/household/5371>

²⁶ Pears, K.C., Bruce, J., and Scheidt, D. (2023). Oregon Preschool Development Grant Birth to Age 5 Strengths and Needs Assessment: 2022 Statewide Household Survey Results. Report submitted to the Oregon Early Learning Division and Early Learning Council, May 2023. <https://www.oregon.gov/delc/Documents/pdg-hh-survey-2022-exec-summ-eng-FINAL.pdf>



C.3 Explore community-based Family Hubs to weave together resources.

Our Collaborative calls for government and philanthropy to explore the benefits and feasibility of Family Hubs and learn more about their cost and efficacy. There could be significant value in designating a place in each community that threads together early childhood and parental resources, both public and private, as has been the case with the United Kingdom's Family Hubs.²⁷

In theory, community-based Family Hubs could:

- ➔ Provide a natural center for a strong child-centered component in every community.
- ➔ Support policymakers, faith-based leaders, employers, community-based organizations and philanthropists to work better together in support of families.
- ➔ Allow for a variety of geographic, demographic, and values-based understandings of family flourishing.
- ➔ Connect families to holistic resources that address not only economic needs but also relational, health, and wellbeing resources for children and parents alike.
- ➔ Provide a place for families to access existing public supports; for businesses to work with community navigators to develop family friendly policies; and to incubate public-private partnerships and funding solutions to support families with young children

To be sure, this is an area of early exploration for the group. We recognize that many states are experimenting with the development of community hubs. There could be case studies of community hubs, and/or private-public funding to pilot hubs for statewide use.

²⁷ Family Hubs Network. (n.d.) Retrieved 16 October 2023. <https://familyhubsnetwork.com/>



SUPPORT PARENTS WITH NEW CHILDREN

We believe that all parents should have the opportunity to bond with an infant or new child, while maintaining economic and job security.

The status quo around birth and infancy is not acceptable. The evidence is overwhelming of the benefits generated for children and parents from being together in early weeks and months of life. However, this bonding time is difficult for working parents to secure or take. Self-financing an extended time out of the labor force is costly. Employer-sponsored paid family leave is relatively uncommon across the income spectrum, and nearly non-existent for low-to-moderate income parents. Child care providers often do not take infants under 6 weeks old.

Our Collaborative believes that improved support for parents with newborns is a critical policy area for change. Most in the group support a national paid parental leave plan of at least 12 weeks for working parents to support caring for and bonding with a new child. Some members of the Collaborative believe that paid parental leave should be part of a comprehensive paid family and medical leave program that is more akin to the FMLA's range of uses and those passed in 13 states and the District of Columbia.²⁸ There are concerns about discrimination toward women relative to men or workers of a younger age if the paid leave policy does not address other uses, such as care for an ill or disabled loved one or personal medical leave for workers' own serious health issues. Others were concerned that a policy of this size could create unintended consequences for employers and be too costly. A minority of members believe that because paid leave benefits only go to working parents, a similar benefit should go to stay-at-home parents.

Despite these differences, we agree on the following facts, principles, and actions for supporting parents with newborns.

Facts

- ✓ Most parents report wishing that they could spend more time after birth with their child than they are able to.²⁹
- ✓ There is a large body of evidence demonstrating the benefits of paid parental leave for children. Parental leave is associated with higher rates of breastfeeding; more brain activity in infants; reduced neonatal deaths; reduced postpartum depression, among others.³⁰
- ✓ Access to paid parental leave is associated with higher wages and increased labor force attachment for women as well as improved worker retention for employers.³¹

²⁸ Shabo, V. (September 2023). "Explainer: Paid and Unpaid Leave Policies in the United States." New America Better Life Lab. <https://www.newamerica.org/better-life-lab/briefs/explainer-paid-and-unpaid-leave-policies-in-the-united-states/>

²⁹ Schulte, B., Durana, A., Stout, B., Moyer, J. (2017). "Paid Family Leave: How Much Time is Enough?" <https://www.newamerica.org/better-life-lab/reports/paid-family-leave-how-much-time-enough/introduction>

³⁰ AEI-Brookings Working Group on Paid Family Leave. (2017). "Paid Family and Medical Leave: An Issue Whose Time Has Come." <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/paid-family-and-medical-leave-an-issue-whose-time-has-come/>

³¹ Schulte, B., Durana, A., Stout, B., Moyer, J. (2017). "Paid Family Leave: How Much Time is Enough?" <https://www.newamerica.org/better-life-lab/reports/paid-family-leave-how-much-time-enough/introduction>

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 The majority of parents with young children are in the workforce,³² but there are limited protections or support for periods of temporary leave from work following birth, especially among low- and moderate-income families.
 - Only 1 in 4 workers have access to formal paid family leave from their employer and this drops considerably for low-wage workers. Only 5% of workers in the bottom decile have access to paid time off for family-related needs.³³
 - Only half of full-time private sector workers have access to short-term disability insurance that covers pregnancy as well as a workers' own illnesses and injuries.³⁴
 - Only 60% of parents have job protection if they take time off after having a child; again, this protection drops considerably for low-to-moderate wage workers.³⁵
- 
 Both political parties have put forward Congressional legislation for paid parental leave, but there is no agreement yet on a paid leave package.

Shared principles

- 
 As a Collaborative, we believe that there are significant benefits for infants and parents to have the opportunity to be together and that this time must be better protected.
- 
 We desire for this choice to be culturally acceptable and established as a norm, rather than a source of discrimination or shaming.
- 
 We believe that the time after birth is a crucial and unique time of bonding, healing, and child development. It is also a time of income volatility and job insecurity. This makes it a uniquely valuable time for providing paid leave.
- 
 We understand that while some families can go months without income or afford for one parent to stay at home, this is particularly difficult for low-to-moderate income families.
- 
 We view success as an increase in the percentage of parents who are able to take time away from work following the birth or adoption of a child with job protection and income security. There is overwhelming evidence that an increase in the usage of these available benefits would produce improved outcomes for children.

Recommended Actions



D.1 Create a baseline of protection and support for infants and parents with national policy.

Most members of the Collaborative support a stand-alone 12-week paid parental leave policy funded at the federal level with adequate wage replacement and available to each parent to protect families from economic hardship, support parental caregiving, and benefit the infant or adopted child.

³² U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). Age of Own Children Under 18 Years in Families and Subfamilies by Living Arrangements by Employment Status of Parents. *American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B23008*. Retrieved November 30, 2023, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2022.B23008?q=B23008>.

³³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2023). "Employee Benefits in the United States, March 2023." <https://www.bls.gov/ebs/publications/employee-benefits-in-the-united-states-march-2023.htm>

³⁴ Morton, W.R. (2021). "Access to Short-Term Disability Plans: In Brief." Congressional Research Service. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46948/2>

³⁵ Brown, S., Herr, J., Roy, R., Klerman, J.A. (July 2020). *Employee and Worksite Perspectives of the Family and Medical Leave Act: Results from the 2018 Surveys*. Abt Associates. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/evaluation/pdf/WHI_FMLA2018SurveyResults_FinalReport_Aug2020.pdf

This builds on existing bipartisan energy around paid parental leave at the federal level. The Collaborative supports job protection so long as it does not place undue burden on the smallest businesses.

The Collaborative understands the costs that paid parental leave puts on employers, for example, requiring coverage for employees out of work. However, most of the Collaborative agrees that these costs do not outweigh the significant benefits to children of stable family care in early months of life. Additionally, the nature of paid parental leave, relative to other types of leave, allows for months of advance planning for the employer.

Many members of the Collaborative support a significantly more comprehensive paid leave program inclusive of family and medical leave. Others wish that the provision of paid parental leave was left to employer policies and personal savings. Still others were wary of a benefit that only accrued to working parents or the difficulty of administering this benefit. Others believe that a shorter duration of paid parental leave would be more politically feasible.



D.2 Support continued innovation for supporting parents and newborns at the state and community level.

The Collaborative believes that states and communities should continue to innovate to support low- and moderate-income parents and children in the months after birth. There has been significant state innovation on paid leave, such as providing paid leave to state government workers and the passage and enactment of paid family and medical leave programs in more than a dozen states over twenty years.³⁶

This innovation could take the form of other policies as well. As mentioned previously, the pilot RX Kids is providing \$1,500 cash to all pregnant mothers in Flint, Michigan, in addition to providing monthly cash benefits for the baby's first year. Benefits like these could help to partially offset the costs of time out of the workforce, as well as demonstrate the value of opening new avenues of philanthropic giving. Other pilot public-private programs are exploring guaranteed income to new mothers.³⁷



D.3 Encourage continued employer innovation for offering paid leave benefits to low-to-moderate wage employees.

In addition to state-based programs, the primary source of paid family leave in America is employers. The Collaborative believes that more transparency in employer practices around paid leave and the creation of an employer scorecard for family policy could further incentivize employers to offer or expand paid leave. The Collaborative supports better visibility of, research into, and access to existing federal tax credits for businesses designed to encourage paid leave offerings to low- and moderate-wage workers.

Further, larger employers and those experienced at providing such policies could form a community of practice with others – including medium-sized employers who want to do more but lack the HR capacity or expertise regarding administration – in order to expand and normalize these policies, reducing the burden on employers taking them up for the first time.

³⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures. (September 2022). "State Family and Medical Leave Laws." Brief. <https://www.ncsl.org/labor-and-employment/state-family-and-medical-leave-laws>

³⁷ Alfonseca, K. (December 2023). "Guaranteed income programs for expectant mothers spreading across US." ABC News. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/guaranteed-income-programs-expectant-mothers-spreading-us/story?id=105577946>



D.4 Invest in more holistic prenatal and postpartum supports for parents and newborns.

With rising rates of both maternal mortality³⁸ and infant mortality,³⁹ especially among families of color, we urgently need to address the wider structures that shape childbearing in America today.

The Collaborative calls on federal, state, and local government, nonprofits, and philanthropy to explore programming and medical intervention services for prenatal and postpartum care. For example, bipartisan legislation in Congress – the Connected Maternal Online Monitoring Services (MOM) Act – seeks to expand telehealth options for pregnant and postpartum mothers on Medicaid.⁴⁰ This is one of many steps forward that can be taken, such as expanding home visiting, to support parents and children in the early months after birth.

³⁸ Hoyert DL. Maternal mortality rates in the United States, 2021. NCHS Health E-Stats. 2023. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:124678>.

³⁹ Ely DM, Driscoll AK. Infant mortality in the United States: Provisional data from the 2022 period linked birth/infant death file. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Statistics Rapid Release; no 33. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2023. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15620/cdc:133699>

⁴⁰ Text - H.R.9707 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): MOM Act. (2023, January 3). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/9707/text>

CONCLUSION

After a year of meeting and reams of notes, we often felt like we barely scratched the surface. We wished that many other people could have been in the room for our conversations. We wished that the lived experience of low-to-moderate income parents could have been incorporated directly into our project. And we know there are other perspectives that we did not represent or include, out of necessity to keep the group's size manageable or our inability to bring a representative of a particular perspective to the table.

Nonetheless, we have uncovered critical areas of agreement on narrative, shared principles, and concrete actions for policymakers, employers, communities, and philanthropy. We formed new relationships across organizations and party lines that will bear fruit for years to come. And in a season of political discord, we felt a renewed hope about what can be accomplished with a sustained and diverse effort to support children, parents, and families.

Our partisan politics in America masks an underlying truth about children and families. We are in this together. It's true for politics. It's true for generations. How we nurture, care, and invest in our children today will shape our society tomorrow. The sooner we realize we are *in this together*, the better.



CALL TO ACTION



Philanthropic and community partners

- Launch a cross-partisan public communications campaign to reframe narratives around childrearing and focus great attention on children's well-being
- Establish a cross-partisan, cross-organizational fact base for family well-being
- Explore the creation of community-based Family Hubs at the local level oriented around four components of flourishing
- Explore the creation of new avenues for charitable giving to programs supporting children and parents



Federal government

- Create an organizing mechanism for supporting children and families in Congress and/or the Executive Branch
- Direct more federal resources to low-and-moderate income families with young children to support more care choices and increase economic stability
- Design a holistic care agenda for young children that reflects differing parental preferences and meets children's needs
- Create a baseline of federal protection and support for parents with newborns and adopted children
- Collect better data on parental care preferences, access to and cost of child care, and the medium-and-long term effects of public investment
- Increase generational equity in the budget



Employers

- Make workplaces more supportive of parents wherever possible
- Increase data-sharing about family benefit offerings for low-and-moderate wage workers so parents can better compare employers
- Through employer trades and organizations, create better visibility of, and access to, existing tax credits that support companies providing paid leave and child care benefits



State and Local Government

- Create coordinated structures that move children to the forefront of state-level and community-level initiatives
- Make existing child-related benefits more user-friendly for parents
- Create more flexibility within existing programs
- Encourage continued experimentation of state and community benefits for parents and children

CALLS TO ACTION

ABOUT CONVERGENCE

Convergence is the leading organization bridging divides to solve critical challenges through collaborative problem-solving across ideological, political, and cultural lines. For more than a decade, Convergence has brought together leaders, doers, and experts to build trusting relationships, identify breakthrough solutions, and form unlikely alliances for constructive change on seemingly intractable issues.

Convergence's **evidence-based approach to collaborative problem-solving** is informed by many years of practice and continued advances in contact theory, neuroscience, and psychology, as well as significant adaptation of best practices from the disciplines of facilitation, mediation, deliberative democracy, bridgebuilding, and international peacebuilding. This approach has allowed Convergence to **regularly succeed** in forging trust among even the most improbable collaborators. Our process is improving the lives of Americans and strengthening democracy for a more resilient and collaborative future.

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CONVERGENCE

