

CONVERGENCE COLLABORATIVE  
ON THRIVING KIDS FOR A THRIVING ALASKA  
**Discovery & Design Report**



MARCH 2026

CONVERGENCE



# CONVERGENCE COLLABORATIVE ON THRIVING KIDS FOR A THRIVING ALASKA

*Building solutions for Alaska's children and family wellbeing and state economic success.*

In partnership with



## About Convergence

Convergence is the leading organization bridging divides to solve critical issues through collaborative problem-solving across ideological, political, and cultural lines. Since 2009, Convergence has brought together leaders, doers, and experts – many who never thought they could talk to one another– 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.

For more information, visit [convergencepolicy.org](http://convergencepolicy.org)

## Collaborative Funders

We are grateful to the following institutions who provided generous philanthropic support to make this project possible:

**MJ Murdock Charitable Trust**  
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**Rasmuson Foundation**

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**Mat-Su Health Foundation**  
**Alaska Children's Trust**

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Alaska stands at a pivotal moment. For over a decade, it has struggled with an annual budget deficit of \$1 to \$1.5 billion despite its abundance of natural resources. Uniquely, Alaska has an \$81 billion fund used to distribute an annual check (the Permanent Fund Dividend or PFD) that has ranged from \$992 (in 2020) to \$3,284 (included an energy rebate, in 2022) in the past ten years, and no broad-based tax. According to the [Alaska Children’s Budget \(ACB\)](#) for FY 2025, state funding for children and families has decreased by 15% over the past 10 years, and families continue to face enduring challenges threatening economic stability. Additionally, the state no longer sees a net inflow of people, which historically supported economic growth. During current and past legislative sessions, the conversation has been shaped by pressing challenges of funding essential government services like education and healthcare infrastructure. Lack of state revenue, coupled with uncertain federal funding, has created a sobering and urgent reality. While efforts have been made to address these issues, a unified vision bringing diverse stakeholders together has yet to be established. This project aims to fill that gap by fostering collaboration and consensus on the best path forward.

[Alaska Children’s Trust \(ACT\)](#) and [Convergence Center for Policy Resolution \(Convergence\)](#) are partnering to convene a statewide, cross-sector Collaborative to develop a shared, financially sustainable vision for supporting the wellbeing of Alaska’s families and children. ACT is a leading statewide organization ensuring all children have the knowledge, skills, supports, and resources to thrive. Convergence will use its proven methodology for bridging divides to achieve consensus on complex policy challenges facing Alaska. By combining ACT’s deep expertise and statewide credibility with Convergence’s evidence-based, consensus problem-solving approach, this partnership is uniquely positioned to make a transformative impact.

ACT and Convergence will bring together a diverse stakeholder Collaborative group representing a wide range of perspectives and life experiences in an expertly designed and facilitated collaborative problem-solving process. The Collaborative will include social, governmental, tribal and business leaders, providers of services to both urban and rural areas, thought and policy leaders, economic and workforce development professionals, and other key parties.

This initiative will establish a transformative, consensus-driven vision and action plan to support Alaskan families and children, resulting in both priority solutions and the mechanisms to resource and implement them, by identifying areas of consensus, forging enduring relationships, and building the momentum needed to collaboratively champion and implement their shared vision statewide.



Alaska no longer sees a net inflow of people, which historically supported economic growth.



Alaska state funding for children and families has decreased by 15% over the past 10 years.

[\(Alaska Children’s Budget\)](#)



Lack of state revenue, coupled with uncertain federal funding, has created a sobering and urgent reality.

## Key questions the group will collaboratively address include:



What are the **core components of a shared vision** for thriving families and children in Alaska?



What are the **key public policy and programmatic structures** that all stakeholders agree must be in place to achieve success and bring this vision to life?



How should **all sectors** – public, private, and civic – **contribute resources** to achieve this shared vision?

The Collaborative will navigate these difficult questions together in 2025–2026, resulting in a Blueprint for Action summarizing the consensus solutions in a report to be shared broadly with Alaskans, including state leaders and policymakers, as the 2027 legislative session and new governor’s term begin. This summary report will serve as a strong, consensus-driven foundation for policy and programmatic changes to foster greater wellbeing for children and families in Alaska. Beyond the Blueprint, Convergence will coordinate ongoing collaboration among participants as they work to implement and advance their solutions.



# BACKGROUND

There is broad agreement in Alaska that current conditions make it difficult for many families to thrive. Challenges such as [lack of access to childcare](#), low kindergarten readiness, high poverty rates, and [low workforce participation](#) create significant barriers for families. According to the [Alaska Early Care and Learning Dashboard](#), approximately 21,773 children—representing about 39% of children under six—cannot access childcare. This limitation has widespread consequences; for instance, in 2020–2021, 12.7% of Alaska children under age six lived in families in which someone quit, changed, or refused a job because of problems with childcare. These issues are compounded by broader economic factors, including a narrow tax base and insufficient economic opportunity, though there have been some positive developments, such as modest job growth and increased wages noted in a recent Department of Labor report.

Fortunately, these challenges have not gone unnoticed. Early childhood education advocates, business leaders, and state policymakers have recognized the importance of this issue and have taken action to help address it. Efforts like the Governor’s Child Care Task Force have produced valuable recommendations, while legislative initiatives, such as pension reform and attempts to increase the base student allocation for education, show that policymakers are engaging with these critical issues. Notably, the legislature’s override of the governor’s veto of an increase in education funding reflected a groundswell of public support for improving education. Additionally, Alaska’s Behavioral Roadmap project facilitated regional and statewide engagement in 2023 to address the youth behavioral health system. By integrating Tribal health organizations and state agencies, the process emphasized cultural awareness, data utilization, workforce development, and inter-sectoral collaboration to enhance behavioral outcomes for Alaska’s youth.

Despite these important efforts, much work remains to be done. While many stakeholders across Alaska agree on the need for and importance of comprehensive supports for children and families, significant disagreement persists regarding what those supports should entail, the investments needed, and how to prioritize competing goals. Larger conversations must also address how Alaska can balance the immediate needs of families with long-term economic and fiscal sustainability.

A menu of options is helpful, but **policymakers prefer consensus and a clear, unified vision before taking bold action**. Alaska’s working families, children, and economy need action now. This project is centered on building the necessary consensus around a shared vision that meets Alaska’s unique needs, as well as the trust and unlikely alliances required for change to ensure the state’s families, children, and economy can thrive. So far, a statewide effort like this has not been undertaken in Alaska.



of children under six cannot access childcare in Alaska

[\(Alaska Early Care and Learning Dashboard\)](#)



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# DISCOVERY & DESIGN FINDINGS

From June to October 2025, Convergence conducted interviews with 34 leaders and stakeholders from across Alaska, reflecting diverse perspectives on the current issues facing the state’s families and children. Interviewees represented multiple sectors, including health and social services, education, childcare, economic policy, the private sector, faith organizations, Alaska Native organizations, academia, philanthropy, and executive and legislative branches of state government. Many interviewees have had two or more roles relevant to the topic—for example, one interviewee, the head of an economic development council, was previously a school board chair. In addition to diverse sector representation, these leaders represented rural and urban communities, diverse political ideologies, and a wide array of backgrounds and experiences.

Following are themes heard in the interviews, grouped under, first, challenges faced by families and children, then strengths to build upon in finding solutions.

## CHALLENGES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Interviewees identified a wide range of challenges. **The most commonly described were those that most directly affect children: childcare and K-12 education.** If mental health and substance abuse are combined into one category, this category was identified as frequently as the first two.



### Kindergarten-to-12th Grade (K-12) Education

The quality of public K-12 education in Alaska is suffering. **At least one source ranks the state second to last** in the country in K-12 education performance. One interviewee described having graduated from high school in one of the state’s strongest school districts but still finding himself far behind his peers when he went to college in the lower 48. Another explained how some families with one parent working in Alaska actually live in another state, due in part to the education offerings. Such Alaska workers might commute in on a two-week-on, two-week off schedule while their children attend school elsewhere. This means the schools suffer further.



**Alaska fell a startling 22 places from last year’s ranking to land at second worst overall for public education.**

**(Consumer Affairs)**



### Childcare

Access to affordable and reliable childcare was described by interviewees as a foundational need. Several explained that it is not possible to run a quality childcare business that is affordable to families without some financial support beyond the fees charged to customers. The vast geography of the state creates added barriers—some rural areas lack any paid childcare options. Additionally, the state’s high proportion of military residents (including veterans) and other newcomers means that many parents lack extended family or a close-knit community that could otherwise help fill childcare needs.



## Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Throughout the interviews, many stakeholders identified substance abuse, especially alcohol and opioids, as a core driver of other social issues. Participants consistently named addiction as a root cause of violence, family breakdown, homelessness, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Despite how visible and damaging the issue is, several stakeholders noted a lack of effective action or investment in long-term solutions. The crisis was described as both normalized and neglected. Stakeholders emphasized that nearly all alcohol-related cases eventually funnel into the court system, overwhelming institutions that are not equipped to handle addiction as a public health issue.

**One stakeholder shared,** “In Alaska, almost everyone knows someone struggling with alcohol... If we don’t recognize alcohol as a major public issue, it will keep being overlooked and cause more harm.”

A partly overlapping issue is mental and behavioral health. Many interviewees revealed deep concern over mental health problems—even in small children—and the lack of access to mental health services across Alaska. Stakeholders cited long waitlists, provider shortages, and a severe lack of early intervention and ongoing support for both youth and adults. They described how the state’s isolated rural areas and long, dark winters contribute to the suicide rate, which sadly ranks as the **country’s highest**. Residential treatment programs are so few and far between that some families must send their emotionally struggling children out of town or out of the state entirely for treatment.

**One stakeholder explained,** “There are services for people in extreme crisis, but there’s nothing for what comes after. People just fall right back into old habits.”

In our interviews, the next-most frequently described category of challenges is economic and financial ones that, while not exclusively “children’s issues,” nonetheless have direct or indirect impacts on children.



## Housing Insecurity

Rising housing costs and limited availability are displacing families and creating unstable living conditions. While some families are experiencing homelessness, interviewees described others who are doubling or tripling up in overcrowded homes that are neither safe nor suitable for families.

**One stakeholder shared,** “I grew up sharing rooms with my cousins; I thought everyone did. It doesn’t need to be that way.”



**“In Alaska, almost everyone knows someone struggling with alcohol... If we don’t recognize alcohol as a major public issue, it will keep being overlooked and cause more harm.”**

**–Interview Participant**



**Alaska ranks highest in the nation for suicide rates.**

**(CDC)**



**I grew up sharing rooms with my cousins; I thought everyone did. It doesn’t need to be that way.”**

**–Interview Participant**



## Food Insecurity

Many interviewees described the precarious state of food security in the state. **One stakeholder shared** that not so long ago, she and her family relied on nothing but the fish they caught and federal nutrition assistance. She remembers calling her husband to ask if they could afford to buy jam to go with the bread and peanut butter she obtained with her food stamps. Another described technical and staffing problems in the state system to apply for SNAP, creating a chronic backlog. Most food is shipped into Alaska through only two or three ports, so if one of them were hit by a natural disaster, the consequences could be dire, **noted one stakeholder**. Another pointed to the state’s underdeveloped potential for more agriculture, particularly during the long days of spring and summer. Meanwhile, some Native communities are struggling to protect their subsistence agricultural lifestyle against other demands on their lands.



**Most food is shipped into Alaska through only two or three ports, so if one of them were hit by a natural disaster, the consequences could be dire, noted one stakeholder.**

**–Interview Participant**



## Other Strains

The following issues were also raised by many interviewees:



**Healthcare affordability and availability**—Similar challenges were described here for mental health services and childcare.



**Safety**—Violence in the home, including both intimate-partner violence and child abuse, were described as widespread. Additionally, child trafficking is too often overlooked. Some rural areas lack sufficient law enforcement or may have no police presence at all. One stakeholder shared, “In rural Alaska, say you’re a broke, abused wife with three small kids, you call 911, the trooper might show up three days later, or the village safety officer might be your husband’s best buddy,” so the abused woman and her children have nowhere to go for help. Another went so far as to say Alaska is a dangerous place to be a child.



**Cost of living and economic opportunity**—Although there are worker shortages in many industries, it is difficult to find jobs that keep up with the high cost of living.



**The working poor**—Several interviewees pointed out that as families climb out of poverty, such as by finding employment, they lose their access to many benefits. Yet they are still too poor to afford many necessities, such as childcare. This gap between the outright poor and the middle class has not been sufficiently addressed.



**Geography**—Most Americans in the lower 48 states are used to seeing a map of the U.S. in which Alaska is shown just to the left of California and appears to be about the same size as, say, Colorado. In reality, Alaska is more than six times the area of Colorado. This vast size makes transportation and access to anything difficult and expensive. The harsh weather and dark days of fall and winter also make life harder.



**Overuse of electronic devices**—A few interviewees pointed out that smart phones and social media exacerbate many problems, from social isolation to sexual exploitation of minors.



**The foster care system**—Some stakeholders discussed the poor state of the foster care system. They also lamented the trauma of separating children from their families, emphasizing the importance of supporting families to stay together by preventing and addressing the problems that lead to foster placement.

# STRENGTHS TO BUILD UPON

Despite this gloomy picture, several strengths in Alaska's culture, workforce, and family support systems also emerged in interviews. This collaborative initiative can build and expand upon these bright spots.

- **Stakeholders shared a strong sense of commitment and a willingness to collaborate across sectors.** Many expressed openness to new ideas and partnerships. The initiative's focus on children's wellbeing was met with enthusiasm, especially its emphasis on action and implementation rather than just discussion and recommendation.
- **Alaska is home to several active coalitions and cross-sector initiatives,** such as the Alaska Early Childhood Network and local efforts addressing issues like childcare, housing, and behavioral health.
- **Tribal organizations play central roles in Alaska's workforce and family support systems.** Organizations like the Maniilaq Association, Bristol Bay Native Association, and Cook Inlet Tribal Council provide wraparound supports, such as childcare, housing assistance, and transportation, all of which are essential to job access and stability. These organizations are often deeply rooted in their communities and bring cultural knowledge and trust.
- **Philanthropic partners have been showing interest in long-term investment.** For example, foundations like Rasmuson, Mat-Su Health Foundation, and others are aligning with public partners to support early childhood and family resilience.
- **High-speed internet is becoming increasingly available and affordable** in rural areas. This could mean some online services (at least for adolescents and parents) could become more accessible.
- **With Alaska's harsh physical environment** and its relatively small population, there is a **strong culture of helping each other** in times of need.



# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A number of themes emerged from the interviews concerning the broad approaches needed to help children and families thrive. These range from ways to increase the funding available for programs and services to the need for collaboration (across organizations and across sectors such as government, business, nonprofits, education, healthcare, etc.) and local engagement.



## Addressing Funding and the Fiscal Picture

Stakeholders across the political spectrum made it clear that the issues facing Alaska’s children and families cannot be addressed without sustainable financial investment. Interviewees consistently highlighted a profound disconnect between the state’s values and the funding required to effect lasting change.

Currently, Alaska has no statewide income tax or sales tax. Instead, the **state budget is largely fed by corporate taxes as well as federal grants and programs**. Interviewees were in broad agreement that the state budget depends too heavily on unpredictable fluctuations in oil prices (which in turn affect corporate profits and the tax base). **Recent cuts and continuing uncertainty around federal funding compound the sense of vulnerability**. Many emphasized the importance of diversifying revenue sources.

There is, of course, substantial disagreement among interviewees about what to do about this. Different interviewees favored different mechanisms to increase public funds:

- ➔ **Instituting a state income tax** (one complained that Alaskans have a “sense of entitlement” after years of “being paid to live here” and not paying income tax)
- ➔ **Instituting a state sales tax**, perhaps in the form of “sin” or “luxury” taxes (Anchorage has instituted a local marijuana tax that is dedicated to childcare)
- ➔ **Reducing the Permanent Fund Dividend payments** to individuals, or varying it based on need, and diverting more to the state budget (also note that several emphasized the need to protect the Permanent Fund itself)
- ➔ **Growing the tax base**—i.e. facilitating business growth rather than raising new taxes
- ➔ **Finding ways to tax the tourism industry**
- ➔ **Closing corporate tax loopholes** (Consumer Affairs)
- ➔ **Taking better advantage of federal grants**
- ➔ **Relying on charities, foundations, churches, tribes, and other sources** of funds rather than raising taxes

Beyond funding, some interviewees—even on the left—reminded us that “It isn’t all about money.” Among the things that help children and families thrive are engaging in public life, participating in a faith community, interacting with the schools, enjoying recreation, socializing (in person) with friends, volunteering, getting to know one’s neighbors, and providing neighborly support in times of need.

Still, there was a sense among the majority of interviewees that something in the tax structure has to change: the problems affecting the state’s children and families have reached crisis proportions, and society must invest in children. Everyone knows what needs to be done, the sense was, but the available funds don’t match the needs. Many also said that the scarcity of public funds does not reflect the state’s wealth and resources.



## Prevention and Early Intervention

Several interviewees pointed out the importance of preventing problems such as child abuse, substance abuse, violence, and mental illness rather than intervening when problems have become acute—and solutions more costly. Some urged a concentration of effort on the prenatal-to-five age group, when nurturing and protecting the child reaps maximum benefits whereas traumas have severe and lasting consequences later in life.



## Early Support for Parents

Along similar preventive lines, some stakeholders emphasized that supporting parents is essential for helping children thrive. **Many interviewees shared concerns about the lack of preparation and support available to parents**, often leaving them unequipped to raise and educate their children—especially if they came from troubled backgrounds themselves. One interviewee longingly described a universal home-visit program she had encountered in another country, noting how much good that could do in Alaska. Several also emphasized the importance of helping families stay together, both by preventing the abuse or neglect that leads to foster care placements and by encouraging extended-family placement when possible.



## Customization to Local Needs

Alaska has tremendous diversity—rural and urban, geographies and climates, indigenous and more recently arrived, military and civilian, and a surprising level of ethnic and linguistic diversity. **One stakeholder noted**, “Local needs vary significantly—what works in Anchorage might not fit other communities, so there isn’t much alignment across locations.” Several stakeholders noted that statewide programs often ignore these distinctions. A lasting impact depends on developing approaches that are culturally rooted, community-driven, and responsive to the unique challenges of each place. This, in turn, requires engagement by leaders and service providers with the local community, asking them about their needs and truly listening, not applying cookie-cutter approaches.



**“Local needs vary significantly—what works in Anchorage might not fit other communities, so there isn’t much alignment across locations.”**

**—Interview Participant**



## Connecting to Existing Resources

Several interviewees mentioned the need to help families find and contact existing programs or assistance they might not be aware of. There are already programs, such as the Help Me Grow Alaska referral and navigation system, that provide such connections. Still, if interviewees are correct that more such help is needed, this is relatively low-hanging fruit that could bring immediate benefits.



## Collaboration

Many interviewees lamented the competition and turf-protecting mindset that pervades the social service sector. This, in turn, stems from the widespread resignation to the reality that “there’s no money.” Some ruefully describe promoting or proposing a new initiative and being asked what should be cut to make the necessary funds available.



## Connections Between Issues

At the same time, many interviewees noted the interconnectedness of the various issues impacting children and families: violence in the home contributes to substance abuse. The high cost of living contributes to stress and mental illness. The inadequacy of childcare or preschool leaves young children ill-prepared for school. Poor education outcomes discourage families from moving to the state. A shrinking or ill-prepared workforce drags down business growth, which decreases the tax base. A shrinking tax base contributes to all the other problems.

All of this suggests a need for collaboration across organizations, disciplines and sectors to identify opportunities for investments and plans that will not only help children and families directly but also prevent greater expenditures downstream and even stimulate the economy.



# PROCESS DESIGN

Convergence has utilized the input from the Discovery process to inform the design—the scope and framing of the project’s purpose, the range of needed participants, as well as the plan for the Collaborative.

## PROJECT SCOPE AND FRAMING

The Discovery findings do not point to a sole priority issue; there were myriad challenges raised that children and families face, and no single issue clearly stood out above others. However, our findings do suggest a way to approach the myriad issues. As noted above, there have been numerous efforts in Alaska to identify solutions to these profound and urgent problems, but these efforts have generally not identified the specific plans and investments needed for implementation. The state’s budgetary strains have created a scarcity mentality. Yet many programs or efforts to help children can deliver economic benefits to the state, such as easing labor shortages, and effective prevention and early intervention efforts can reduce the costs of crisis intervention downstream.

By considering a broad range of topics such as childcare, preK-12 education, mental health, substance abuse, and economic challenges, the Collaborative can consider the interplay between different issues that are often handled in silos. The opportunities for return on investment might lie in these hidden interactions.

This Collaborative will not only identify what solutions for children will deliver the biggest economic benefits or downstream savings, but it will take the next step of determining the plans and resources needed and how to secure them. These resources can be financial or non-financial (such as better leveraging volunteerism or familial support) and can come from both the private and public sectors. Participants in the Collaborative will include leaders and doers from across the political spectrum, from different sectors, and with a wide variety of issue expertise, enabling novel partnerships, cross-fertilization, and synergies. The product of the Collaborative will be agreement on a short list of evidence-based actions to improve children’s wellbeing in ways that strengthen both families and the economy with clear pathways to implementation and the funding and other resources to make those improvements a reality. To reflect this focus, the project has been named [Convergence Collaborative on Thriving Kids for a Thriving Alaska](#).

## MEETING SCHEDULE AND TIMELINE

For the consensus-building phase, Convergence plans to convene a series of about four in-person sessions of one to one-and-a-half days in length each, most likely in Anchorage, over the course of about a year (from December 2025 to late fall 2026). In between will be virtual meetings of the full group as well as smaller working groups. The first meeting took place December 9–10, 2025. Future meeting dates are being set in collaboration with participants. Consultation with participants will also drive how we ensure that voices are heard from the various regions of the state, such as perhaps through (most likely virtual) regional listening sessions, which would occur before solutions are finalized.

Convergence’s process also includes an implementation phase. This will be designed in consultation with participants.

## STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWEES

The following individuals participated in interviews with Convergence from June to October 2025.

**Nils Andreassen**

Alaska Municipal League

**Tamar Ben-Yosef**

All Alaska Pediatric Partnership

**Leigh Bolin**

Resource Center for Parents and Children

**Rep. Julie Coulombe**

Alaska State Representative

**Sarah Erkmann Ward**

Blueprint Consulting

**Jennifer Green**

Richard L. and Diane M. Block Foundation

**Joelle Hall**

AFL-CIO (Union)

**Brian Holst**

Juneau Economic Development Council

**Sen. Shelly Hughes**

Alaska State Senator

**Jared Kosin**

Alaska Hospital & Healthcare Association

**Ian Laing**

Institute of the North

**Benjamin Mallott**

Alaska Federation of Natives

**Monique Martin (ANTHC)**

Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium

**Rachel Olson**

Reach 907 Behavioral Health

**Esther Pitts**

Mat-Su Health Foundation

**Trang Tran**

Institute of Social and Economic Research at University of Alaska-Anchorage

**Rep. Sarah Vance**

Alaska State Representative

**Andy Bartel**

St. John United Methodist Church

**Eric Billingsley**

United Way of Anchorage

**Bryan Butcher**

Alaska Housing Finance Corporation

**Michelle Egan**

Alyeska Pipeline

**Sen. Cathy Giessel**

Alaska State Senator

**Gretchen Guess**

Rasmuson Foundation

**Heidi Hedberg**

National Executive Director, Abriendo Puertas

**Meg Horvath**

Providence Alaska Children's Hospital & Women's Services

**Diane Kaplan**

Independent

**Mark Lackey**

CCS Early Learning

**Julia Luey**

Volunteers of America - Alaska

**Jordan Marshall**

Consultant-Lobbyist

**Kathleen McArdle**

Anchorage Chamber of Commerce

**Larry Persily**

Alaska News Coalition

**Ivy Spohnholz**

Individual

**Leah Van Kirk**

Alaska Department of Health

**David Wilson**

Mat-Su Health Foundation

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