

## Advancing Vulnerable Children and Families in New Mexico: A Collaborative Strategy to Improve Access to Benefits and Integrated Services

*A Working Document for Data-Driven, Cross-Sector Discussion*

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### INTRODUCTION

New Mexico's vulnerable families face high rates of poverty, poor educational outcomes, and in some cases isolation in rural communities. Add the often-ignored cultural diversity of a "majority-minority" state, and the challenge is complex and formidable. But recent examples of promising emerging solutions and partnership initiatives in New Mexico and nationally suggest a possible direction for a positive system-wide change.

This paper proposes a potential collaborative strategy for the state's philanthropic, non-profit and government leaders and communities to address New Mexico's issues of poverty and family economic insecurity. By taking a holistic approach to the needs of families, collaborating across state and national lines, and creating channels for system-wide coordination, we can move crisis-stricken families toward long term self sustenance.

Access to public benefits and supports for basic needs such as food, housing and health care need to be coordinated and connected to opportunities for advancement such as education, job training, careers (beyond minimum wage jobs), financial skills and asset building. While strong programs and improvements in all of these areas are needed, without a system-wide coordination of such efforts to address holistic needs of the families and help advance them in the long term, the impacts of individual programs are likely to be limited or short-lived with higher overall cost to the communities and the state economy.

The strategies recommended in this report are aimed at bringing about that system-wide coordination of programs with a continuum of support and opportunities to achieve collective impact toward families' long-term advancement. It is not meant to be a prescriptive plan, but instead a data-driven guide for further deliberation. It calls on philanthropic, non-profit and government leaders to come together, set aside their individual agendas, and strategize on how to collectively improve their efforts to achieve the common goal: helping New Mexico's vulnerable families advance.

### THE PROBLEM

New Mexico continues to lag behind the nation in economic security and wellbeing of its children and families. A wide range of public benefit programs exists in New Mexico to assist its vulnerable families including Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Child Care Assistance. There have also been significant non-profit and public-private partnership efforts – both statewide and in various communities – to improve the situation for certain population or issue areas such as youth, early childhood, hunger, and health care. However, many families still struggle to access the benefits and support programs they need, and when they do find them, they discover it difficult to move beyond crisis management to long-term self-sufficiency and wellbeing.

There is a mismatch between the complex needs of families that require an integrated, continuum of support services across benefits and programs and the current disconnected service delivery system of these benefits and programs.

On the one hand, public benefit programs often fail to support needy families who are eligible due to various barriers in access including inadequate outreach with little coordination across multiple programs, complex application and recertification procedures, limited agency capacity, technology issues, and budget shortages. On the other hand, many non-profit programs focus on their own issue areas with limited capacity and fail to address the holistic needs of the families and help them obtain continuous support needed for advancement beyond a single programmatic area. Promising programs often do not receive the attention and funding they need for rapid replication, and potentially synergistic programs fail to work together because they are not linked to each other or do not have the capacity to coordinate.

This fragmented support system is reinforced by equally fragmented funding streams – both in government and philanthropic sectors – and the lack of a system to drive coordinated strategy and execution across programs, issue areas, and sectors.

### *New Mexico's Vulnerable Children and Families*

New Mexico consistently ranks as one of the poorest performing states according to KIDS COUNT, a nationally recognized annual profile of child wellbeing produced by the Annie E. Casey Foundation that measures the ability for children to grow up supported, healthy, safe and educated. According to the latest indicators, 17% of New Mexico's population and 1 in 4 children live in poverty; 30% of children live in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment; 40% of the low income population and 1 in 4 low income children do not have health insurance; 1 in 10 high school students has attempted suicide; 3 to 4 out of 10 high school students do not graduate; and 16% of adults do not have basic prose literacy.

What is even more concerning is that New Mexico seems to provide the worst conditions in the country for working families to advance economically. 40% of working families in New Mexico are low-income (50<sup>th</sup> in rank!) while 37% of jobs are in occupations that pay below poverty (49<sup>th</sup> in rank), and 48% of parents in low-income working families have no health insurance (47<sup>th</sup> in rank). 35% of those in low-income working families have no high school degree or GED and 56% no postsecondary experience, limiting their chances of advancing economically with better paying jobs in the future.

### *Priority Counties for Pilot Initiatives and the Need for a Community-based Strategy*

This report has selected five potential priority counties – Bernalillo, Dona Ana, McKinley, Lea and Mora – for targeted studies to analyze the current situation and potential short-term pilot initiatives. Collectively, the five counties represent a significant share of the vulnerable population in New Mexico. Over half of their adults and children are low-income and uninsured, and are public benefit (SNAP, Medicaid) recipients. They also represent a diverse mix of urban and rural county types, geographic regions, as well as demographic characteristics including Hispanic, Native American, and immigrant communities. More importantly, each county showcases a unique set of issues affecting vulnerable children and families. Tailored solutions developed for and piloted in these priority counties could provide effective tools and lessons for broader statewide strategy replication in other communities.

The 33 counties in New Mexico have varying economic, social and demographic characteristics. Detailed analysis of county-level data shows that problems facing the communities are multi-faceted and complex with many communities facing critical conditions across multiple issue areas (economic support, health, safety, and education). Strategies to improve conditions for the vulnerable population

should be tailored to fit the unique local characteristics, assets, and challenges of the community. For example, strategies that work for highly populated Dona Ana County in the southwest with its majority urban, Hispanic population are likely to be quite different from strategies for McKinley County in the northwest with over 70% of its population Native American, or for Mora, a small, scarcely populated rural county in the northeast.

### *Significant Holes in Public Benefit Programs and Systematic Challenges to Improving Access*

While New Mexico has made several steps to improve access to benefit programs for families in recent years, there are still significant holes in the safety net. In addition, federal dollars are lost and economic impact opportunity is forfeited because many families do not participate in the benefits for which they are eligible.

A number of researchers suggest that entitlement programs with high federal funding contribution, such as SNAP and Medicaid, can be significant sources of economic stimuli for New Mexico. For example, while exact numbers are not available, rough analysis based on available data from various sources suggests that increasing statewide SNAP participation from the current estimate of 68% (as of June 2009) to 80% could bring approximately \$50~80M in federal dollars into New Mexico and \$90~150M in economic activity. According to an analysis by New Mexico Voices for Children, each \$1 in state spending for Medicaid will generate \$2.3 in federal funding and \$0.9 in additional economic activities in FY2012 even with the reduced federal funding contribution rate of 70%.

Once health care reform takes effect in 2014 with expanded coverage and federal funding contribution, New Mexico could benefit from over \$4.5B in federal dollars between 2014-2019 and at least \$988M in annual federal Medicaid spending, according to a recent Medicaid Coalition's report for New Mexico's Healthcare Reform Working Group presented by the New Mexico Center on Law and Poverty. In addition, \$1.65B in new economic activity and more than 20,000 new jobs will be created after 2019, the report said.

Unfortunately, the recent state budget shortfall has placed significant added strain on families' access to benefits they desperately need in the harsh economic environment. For example, the state government recently reduced income eligibility for Child Care Assistance from 200% to 100% of the Federal Poverty Level (affecting 7,000 low income families), cut TANF cash assistance by 13-25%, froze new enrollment of State Coverage Insurance, and decreased SNAP State Supplement for the Elderly and Disabled among other measures for cost containment.

Moreover, New Mexico faces several other systemic challenges to improving access to benefits for families including the state's 22 plus-year-old income support eligibility system slowing implementation of the new combined online application processing for multiple programs (so called Yes-NM project), staff shortages and overwhelming caseloads as well as other policy and procedural issues that are reinforcing inefficiencies in the system and preventing more families from participating in benefit programs.

### *Missed Opportunities With Statewide Non-Profit Initiatives Operating In "Silos"*

Several statewide non-profit and public-private partnership initiatives exist that advocate and address the needs of vulnerable children and families in New Mexico. Some focus on specific issue areas such as hunger (e.g., NM Collaboration to End Hunger), economic security (e.g., Assets Consortium by Prosperity Works), health care (e.g., School Based Health Clinic), behavioral health (e.g., Behavioral Health Collaborative), or workforce training (e.g., NM Workforce Connection). Others specialize by function (e.g., advocacy and outreach for NM Center on Law and Poverty and New Mexico Voices for Children) or provide more integrated services for a narrow target population (e.g., Early Childhood Action Network,

Community Action Agencies, Center for Working Families). Strong partnerships and innovative strategies have made some of these initiatives successful in targeted issue areas. For example, the NM Collaboration to End Hunger has improved food security through broad collaboration of cross-sector partners, and the Center for Working Families has improved economic and educational outcomes for low-income, community college students through innovative bundled services. These successful programs should be reviewed and their lessons shared broadly as best practices for further replication and expansion.

However, there are still missed opportunities and there is significant room for improvement. Improvements could include better coordination and fewer duplicated efforts across initiatives, and sufficient investment in adult education and job training programs, which are required for the long-term advancement of families. Limited awareness of other initiatives and projects, lack of data, and limited funder collaboration, with a preference for an independent program-driven funding approach, reinforce “silo” effects.

### **IMPROVING BENEFIT ACCESS AND INTEGRATED SERVICES: NATIONAL BEST PRACTICE TRENDS AND EARLY EVIDENCE OF IMPACT**

Best practice programs combine improved outreach, enhancement in benefits delivery systems, and integrated services to move families toward independence and overall wellbeing beyond immediate crisis intervention.

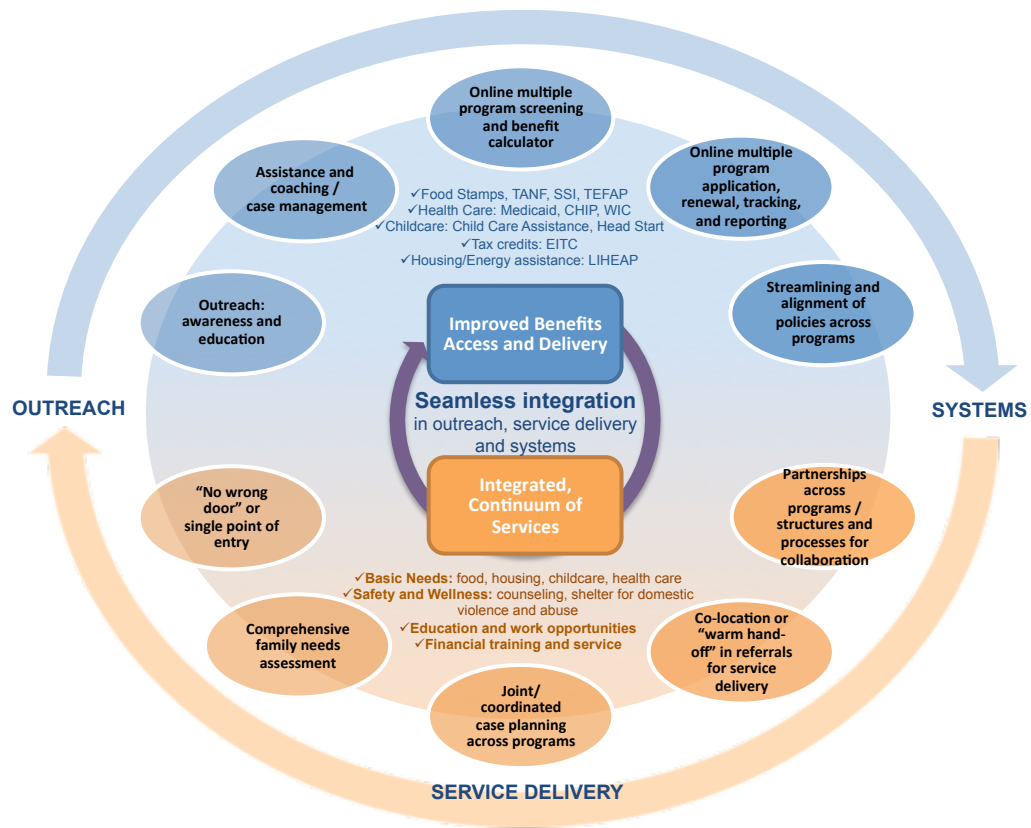
Nationally, there have been increasing efforts by state and local governments, funders and nonprofit organizations to improve access to benefits and provide comprehensive, integrated services to support vulnerable (particularly low-income) families. This trend is driven by an increasing recognition that 1) there are several systematic barriers preventing families from accessing available public benefits and that 2) addressing the complex needs of families and truly advancing them will require coordination of outreach and service delivery across programs. Integrated programs must connect families to a long term, broad continuum of supports and opportunities to move them toward self-sufficiency.

Such efforts are made possible by bringing together non-profit, community, and educational organizations, government agencies, and businesses in partnership to effectively address the holistic needs of families. Many programs utilize online systems for combined applications of multiple benefit programs and provide hands-on assistance to applicants to maximize benefit access. Effective partnerships also enable expanded outreach to families where they are and allow bundling of multiple services to better meet the needs of the families and provide further opportunities for advancement beyond what individual programs can provide alone.

Many state governments have also led the charge with innovative strategies in outreach and efforts to streamline and enhance benefit policies and procedures. They include:

- A consolidated information source of the state’s support resources across departments with all-in-one handbooks, call centers, and websites. Some include direct links to referral services, application assistance and online benefit application tools (e.g. Pennsylvania, Arizona, Minnesota);
- Expanded benefit access points through community partnerships, including out-stationed eligibility workers at community-based organizations or CBOs, workforce development training programs, and faith-based organizations (e.g., Ohio Benefit Bank);
- “No wrong door” approach in benefit access through cross department coordination, policy alignment, and technology enhancement (e.g., Louisiana);
- Aligned and simplified benefit policies and processes including eligibility requirements, application and recertification processes.

**Exhibit 1: Framework for Integrated Strategies to Advance Vulnerable Families**



Early evidence from such efforts shows positive impact in both short-term results and long-term outcomes for families as well as local economies. Studies suggest that families with access to multiple benefits and programs are less likely to return to the welfare system, have more stable lives for their children with improved schooling and behavioral outcomes, and are more likely to achieve major positive economic outcomes such as earning post-secondary degrees and staying at jobs. Many states investing in benefit systems and processes have been able to save administrative costs and significantly increase families' benefits participation. As mentioned earlier, increased benefit participation may also provide significant economic stimuli for the state, especially at a time of economic downturn, through injection of federal funding and the multiplier impact of increased economic activities.

## PROPOSAL FOR A COLLABORATIVE STRATEGY AND SYSTEM-BUILDING PROCESS

The crisis facing vulnerable children and families in New Mexico is too extensive and multi-faceted for any one initiative, organization, foundation, or government entity to address alone or for all of them to solve by operating in disconnected silos. What New Mexico needs is a coordinated strategy that efficiently and effectively connects families to not just individual programs but a continuum of benefits, services and opportunities that advance them from public assistance and crisis management to independence and well-being. Improvements are needed in all three areas -- outreach, service delivery, and system-building -- to ensure broad and long-term impact.

The six strategies outlined below are provided as a guide to engaging non-profit organizations, government agencies, policymakers, and funders in collective efforts across outreach, service delivery, and system-building to improve benefit access and create a continuum of integrated services for families.

**Overall Strategic Objective: To advance New Mexico's vulnerable children and families from crisis to economic security through improved benefit access and a continuum of integrated support services.**

### *Effective, Coordinated OUTREACH*

#### ❖ **STRATEGY 1 – FAMILIES:**

##### **Enhance and connect outreach across programs and benefits.**

Outreach efforts need to be expanded and coordinated across programs to meet families where they are so that families can learn about and access multiple programs easily from initial point of contact. Potential solutions for short-term improvements include common outreach materials, cross training of staff across programs and increased front-line hands-on support to families in testing eligibility and applying for benefit programs. Existing programs with broad partnership reach to families (e.g., Collaboration to End Hunger, Assets Consortium, School-based Health Clinics, WIC clinics) and available federal funding streams for outreach can be leveraged in implementing the strategy.

### *Efficiency, Capacity Building, and Integration in SERVICE DELIVERY*

#### ❖ **STRATEGY 2 – GOVERNMENT AGENCIES:**

##### **Increase efficiency and capacity for benefit administration in government agencies.**

Inefficiencies and limited capacity in government agencies, exacerbated by vacancies and outdated IT infrastructure, continue to pose a barrier to improving benefit access. As mentioned earlier in STRATEGY 1, community partnerships and federal funding streams can be leveraged to expand front-line staff capacity for benefit outreach and administration. Also, it is absolutely critical to ensure timely and effective full implementation of the new online combined benefit screening and application system (or Yes-NM project including planned replacement of the Integrated Service Delivery System or ISD2, the state's 22 plus-year-old income support eligibility system) by January 2014. Meanwhile, non-profit organizations and funders should work with state agencies to explore other short term IT system improvement options to enable a simplified, online application process prior to 2014.

#### ❖ **STRATEGY 3 – NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS:**

##### **Enable family's easy access to a continuum of services through integrated, collaborative service delivery.**

One way to achieve integrated service delivery is by replicating and scaling existing bundled service programs with proven outcomes in the state such as the Center for Working Families and Elev8. Programs can be launched at new sites or added to other existing programs serving the target

population for increased impact. At the same time, broader coordination will be needed to achieve “no wrong door” and “warm hand-off of referrals” practices in the short term, and eventually develop wide, formal collaborative structure and processes that link together continuum of services across programs and issue areas in the long term. This will require investment in increased capacity within non-profit organizations so that they can allocate resources to collaborative efforts beyond executing their own programs. Many also point out that adult education and job training components in both public benefit and non-profit programs are particularly underprovided and need strengthening to ensure opportunities for advancement at the right end of the continuum. Effective partnerships with higher educational institutions and businesses will be needed to achieve meaningful progress in these areas.

### *SYSTEM BUILDING for Sustained Impact*

#### ❖ **STRATEGY 4 – POLICIES:**

##### **Streamline and align state policies and processes across benefit programs.**

Improvement in benefit access will be limited in both the short-term and the long-term without strong leadership support and engagement from the state government and department agencies. In addition to further streamlining enrollment and recertification procedures across programs, inter-department coordination and collaboration in outreach, delivery, and policy development of multiple benefit programs are critically needed. It is also important that such efforts take place prior to implementation of the new online combined benefit screening and application system (or YES-NM) scheduled for January 2014. Non-profit organizations and funders should invest in and advocate for on-going community consultation in policy and process changes and public education on issues affecting benefit access and delivery.

#### ❖ **STRATEGY 5 – ECOSYSTEM:**

##### **Develop a statewide system for collaboration across issues, sectors, and programs while enabling flexible community-level strategy.**

In order to coordinate efforts across issue areas, sectors and programs, a system for collaboration will be needed at both statewide and community-levels. The system should be designed to build on the networks, infrastructure and expertise of existing collaborations by focusing on synergistic initiatives, essentially resulting in “collaboration of collaborations” rather than duplicating efforts. Regular forums for discussion with a clear agenda and shared goals can enable stakeholders to convene, share information, strategize, and coordinate activities. An online database and communication channel can provide consolidated information and update on new and existing initiatives and programs, funding opportunities, best practices and areas of needs that everyone can benefit from and improve overall efficiency in the system. At a state level, a lean, central intermediary (potentially housed in one of the existing organizations) may be needed to plan, coordinate, support and evaluate progress and outcome of the collaborative efforts. The statewide macro-strategic direction and system need to be linked to community-level organizing and strategy to ensure flexible, tailored approaches to address the unique needs of diverse communities.

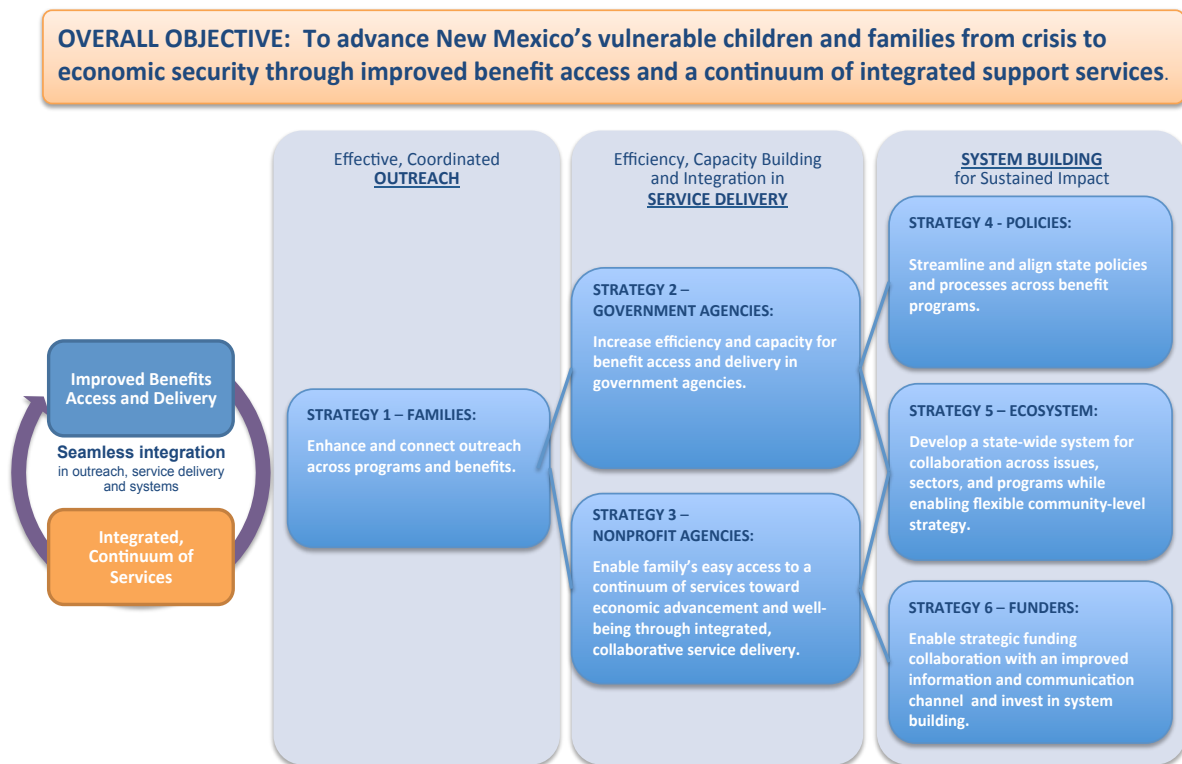
#### ❖ **STRATEGY 6 – FUNDERS:**

##### **Enable strategic funding collaboration with an improved information and communication channel among funders and invest in system building.**

Bringing about system-wide change requires the willingness of funders to collaborate among themselves and invest in long-term system building efforts beyond individual program grants. This includes funding for collaborative process and system such as meetings, central support staff, and a common online database and communication channel; identifying and supporting synergistic initiatives; and investing in capacity building of grantees so that they can allocate resources to collaborative efforts. Effective strategic funding collaboration will require an on-going information and communication channel allowing funders to share information on projects and grants, prioritize

collaborative initiatives, and coordinate grant activities where needed. Foundations can also play important roles in engaging state and local governments, businesses, and educational institutions as well as promoting collaborations among their grantees by leveraging their positions as funders. Given limited philanthropic resources in the state, it is also important to bring national foundations to the table. This seems feasible given existing and increasing interest by a number of national foundations to invest in New Mexico including some with specific interests in collaborative efforts and improving benefit access and integrated services for vulnerable families. However, a stronger case for support can be made if several key New Mexico foundations and non-profit leaders in the state can demonstrate a common agenda and take the lead through ownership and then invite national foundations to partner.

**Exhibit 2: Six Collaborative Strategies Across Outreach, Service Delivery, and System Building**



**CONCLUSION:**

The current economic crisis has put a strain not only on the vulnerable families but also on the nonprofits, governments, and the philanthropic funders thereby limiting their ability to provide the safety net needed by families. With limited funding and capacity, it is now imperative that organizations, funders and government work together to ensure that resources are utilized efficiently and that investments lead to advancements of families that break the cycle of poverty. While long-term system-wide change may take time to realize, the process can be accelerated if the state’s leaders from non-profit, philanthropic, and government sectors are willing to agree on the common goal and convene to define the path together. Momentum can be built with community-based strategies in pilot counties, by achieving short-term milestones and “quick win” solutions while working toward long-term system building and statewide outcome goals.



**Table 1: Summary of Strategies and Example Initiatives Across Outreach, Service Delivery and System-Building**

Area	Strategies	Potential Tactical Initiatives
<i>Effective, Coordinated</i> <b><u>OUTREACH</u></b>	<b>STRATEGY 1 – FAMILIES: Enhance and connect outreach across programs and benefits.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1. Develop consolidated outreach and training materials</li> <li>1.2. Implement a “no wrong door” approach to benefits and services through collaboration and cross-training</li> <li>1.3. Meet families where they are through expanded outreach channels</li> <li>1.4. Build staff and volunteer capacity in front-line community organizations to provide benefit screening and application assistance</li> <li>1.5. “Piggyback” new outreach efforts on existing programs</li> <li>1.6. Leverage federal funding opportunities for outreach</li> </ol>
<i>Efficiency, Capacity Building and Integration in</i> <b><u>SERVICE DELIVERY</u></b>	<b>STRATEGY 2 – GOVERNMENT AGENCIES: Increase efficiency and capacity for benefit administration in government agencies.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1. Leverage community partnerships and federal funding streams to expand front-line staff capacity for benefit outreach and delivery</li> <li>2.2. Enhance IT system for benefit programs by ensuring timely and effective implementation of YES-NM Project including ISD2 replacement and integration by January 2014</li> <li>2.3. Explore other short term client-facing IT system improvement options to enable a simplified, online application process prior to January 2014</li> <li>2.4. Improve skill levels and attitudes of caseworkers across benefit agencies through improved trainings</li> </ol>
	<b>STRATEGY 3 – NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS: Enable family’s easy access to a continuum of services through integrated, collaborative service delivery.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1. Replicate / scale existing bundled service programs with proven outcomes</li> <li>3.2. Strengthen adult education and job training components of benefit and social programs including through partnerships with higher educational institutions and businesses</li> <li>3.3. <i>In the short term</i>, ensure “no wrong door” and “warm hand-off of referrals” practices in services</li> <li>3.4. <i>In the long term</i>, develop broad, formal collaborative system that link together continuum of services across issue areas</li> </ol>
<b><u>SYSTEM BUILDING</u></b> <i>for Sustained Impact</i>	<b>STRATEGY 4 – POLICIES: Streamline and align state policies &amp; processes across benefit programs.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.1. Streamline enrollment and recertification procedures across public benefit programs prior to ISD2 replacement and new YES-NM combined, online benefit application system</li> <li>4.2. Strengthen inter-department coordination for outreach, delivery, policy and system development of benefit programs</li> <li>4.3. Establish on-going channels and process to ensure meaningful community consultation and participation</li> <li>4.4. Strengthen advocacy and public education on issues affecting benefit access and delivery</li> </ol>
	<b>STRATEGY 5 – ECOSYSTEM: Develop a statewide system for collaboration across issues, sectors, and programs while enabling flexible community-level strategy.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5.1. Develop a system and process for collaboration across issues and programs that build on existing collaborative networks (“collaboration of collaborations”) which may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Forums for collaborative discussions</li> <li>▪ Lean, central support staff / working group / intermediary</li> <li>▪ A common online database and communication channel</li> <li>▪ A tracking and evaluation system</li> </ul> </li> <li>5.2. Link statewide macro-strategic direction and system with community-level organizing and strategy, initially through community-based pilot efforts</li> </ol>
	<b>STRATEGY 6 – FUNDERS: Enable strategic funding collaboration with an improved information and communication channel among funders and invest in system building.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6.1. Invest in a collaborative process and system including an on-going information and communication channel for funder collaboration (e.g., share information on grants and projects)</li> <li>6.2. Identify and support synergistic initiatives</li> <li>6.3. Invest in capacity building of grantees for collaborative efforts</li> <li>6.4. Leverage their position as funders to engage state and local governments, educational institutions, and businesses and promote collaboration among their grantees</li> <li>6.5. Engage national foundations as partners</li> </ol>