



Stimulus Learning Session: Using ARPA Funds to Transform Early Childhood and Family Supports

This Learning Series Recap summarizes lessons from state and local government leaders on how the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) can be used to build more responsive, holistic, and equitable supports for children and families. The insights come from a learning session on [‘Early Childhood and Families’](#), which makes up part of the GPL’s broader [Stimulus Learning Series](#).

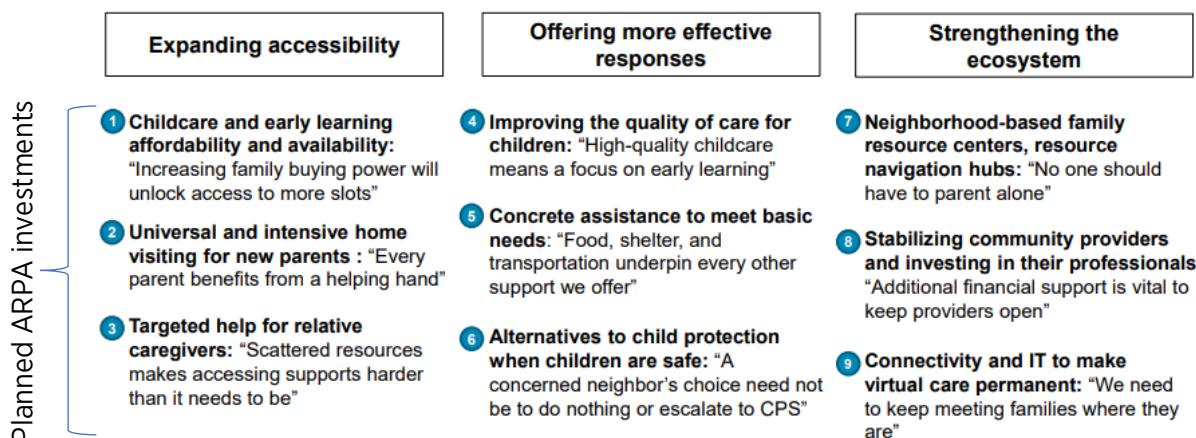
Rethinking children and family supports using ARPA funds

For years, state and local government leaders across the country have been building a movement to rethink supports for vulnerable children and families, seeking to create a more holistic, accessible, and responsive system. These leaders see the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) as an unprecedented opportunity to transform the child support system, increasing accessibility to early childhood programs, reimagining punitive child welfare interventions, and expanding parental supports. In particular, government partners told the GPL that ARPA funds provide a rare opportunity to tackle major challenges facing existing early childhood and family services, including:

- *Inaccessible supports:* Demand for supports like childcare and early learning programs outpace supply, particularly in marginalized communities, leading to long waitlists; complex systems make it difficult for caregivers to get help.
- *Narrow, reactive help:* Support often comes too late (after a crisis had occurred), punitive and/or limited services sometimes do not reflect what we know about child development, and it is difficult to comprehensively offer families support to meet basic needs.
- *Stretched infrastructure:* Providers often struggle to hire and retain qualified staff, and do not have the capacity to modernize IT systems to offer responsive virtual support. Residents are often shut out from shaping the resources that best meet their needs.

To tackle these challenges, leaders from state and local government agencies shared ways they are planning to use ARPA funds to redesign early childhood and family supports.

You told us about planned investments in early childhood that are...



As shown in the figure above, planned ARPA investments fall into three main buckets – expanding accessibility, offering more effective responses, and strengthening the early childhood ecosystem – and include: increasing slots and affordability of childcare, expanding home visiting programs, building out new family resource centers, creating alternatives to punitive child welfare investigations when children are safe, and investing in provider capacity to offer flexible, hybrid (virtual and in-person), and community-based services.

Examples from the field

Expanding home visiting services for families in Connecticut

Connecticut’s Office of Early Childhood is planning a number of ARPA investments to provide more equitable and upstream family supports, including increasing subsidy rates for high-quality childcare programs, providing childcare for individuals in workforce training, and rolling out universal home visiting services. Home visiting is widely seen as an impactful program to invest in; Connecticut staff conducted research that showed their home visiting program was expected to yield \$3 in savings for every \$1 invested, with a 50 percent reduction in emergency room care and a 40 percent reduction in referrals to child welfare during the first year after birth. The state is planning to allocate \$13 million over five years to roll out universal home visiting services region by region, working in tandem with local health departments, community economic development branches, cities, and towns. Community health workers who visit the family can provide critical support to new moms (such as education on infant care), and also serve as navigators to help connect families to a wider array of supports as needed.

“One of the most important things was being in a listening position and being open to change in how we did things, and we heard loud and clear from our families that we need to go further upstream... Having universal home visiting was the next logical step in being known as a family friendly state: good schools, high quality childcare, and showing families right from the start we’re there with you.”

- Beth Bye, Commissioner, Connecticut’s Office of Early Childhood

Creating a network of family resource centers in Texas

To pinpoint the most effective use of ARPA dollars, Texas’ Department of Family and Protective Services set out on a town hall tour, engaging with stakeholders, families involved in the child welfare system, a family and youth advisory council, and providers to identify prevalent gaps in the current child support system. Together they identified family resource centers as a key area of focus; the state currently doesn’t have a formal network of family resource centers and recognized that this could be critical to expanding connections to resources and addressing families’ basic needs. Texas is planning to begin by building out a formal network of family resource centers in five communities, which will help to connect families to resources earlier (before a moment of crisis) and provide an alternative to referring families for a child welfare investigation when appropriate.

“We hear from our main referral sources that often they’re not clear that a family needs a Child Protective Services hotline call, but they don’t know what else to do; they don’t feel like they have other tools in their toolbox. And so one of the things that we’re hoping to test is the ability to provide an outlet for caregivers, teachers, law enforcement officers, faith-based community members, and others who are concerned and don’t know how to provide support to make some connections for families to supportive services earlier on.”

- Sarah Abrahams, Deputy Associate Commissioner,
Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

Simultaneously, the state is planning to expand their existing youth helpline, increasing the focus on connecting parents and caregivers to preventative, supportive services offered throughout the state.

Building sustainable systems

Government agencies using ARPA, a one-time infusion of federal dollars, to fund major systemic change face challenging questions around sustainability. In particular, agencies are trying to figure out how to use ARPA in a way that creates lasting impact. So far, we have seen state and local government leaders plan ARPA investments to enable sustainable systems change in three ways:

- 1) ***Investing in physical and human capital:*** Agencies are planning on creating new technology platforms and investing in data analytics to permanently replace outdated systems, building new infrastructure that can be maintained over time, and upskilling staff to build internal capacity that lasts beyond COVID-19 recovery efforts.
- 2) ***Demonstrating the case for future funding:*** Agencies are aiming to prove out new programming to build political will and make the case for sustained local or federal funding, including through rigorous evaluation designs that demonstrate program results.
- 3) ***Filling the temporary funding gap needed to build preventative systems:*** Agencies are planning to use ARPA funds to build out preventative programming with community-focused care delivery, while still being able to maintain expensive, reactive programs they currently provide (and still need). Finding dollars to fund new up-stream prevention services at the same time as keeping current programs running has historically been challenging. ARPA's cash infusion can help bridge toward the future system, where hopefully agencies can start winding down expensive down-stream services, as up-stream preventative programs begin to work.

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