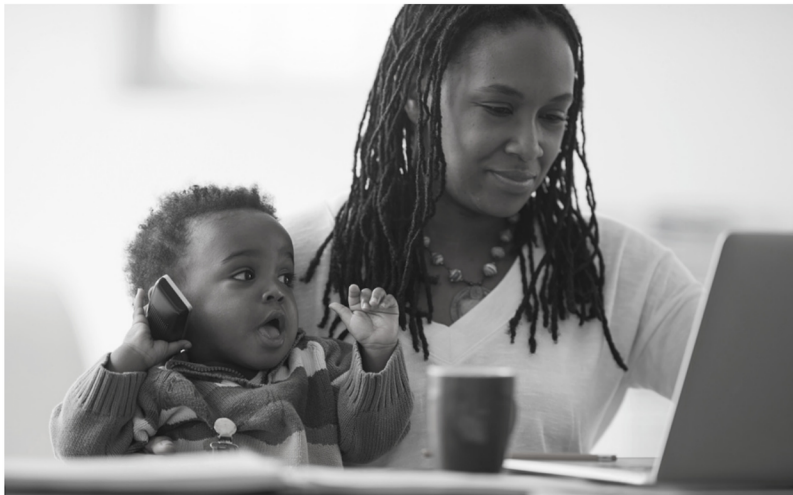
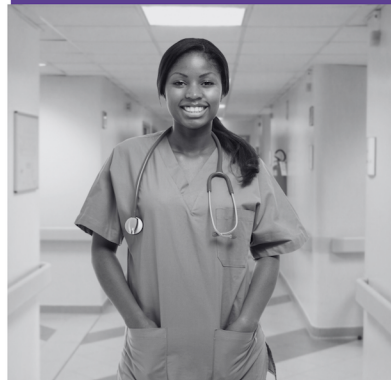


MISSISSIPPI LOW-INCOME CHILD-CARE INITIATIVE

EMPLOYMENT EQUITY

An Aligned and Integrated Workforce System
Targeting Low-Income Single Mothers

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EMPLOYMENT EQUITY:

An Aligned and Integrated Workforce System
Targeting Low-Income Single Mothers

Year Four
EVALUATION REPORT

SUBMITTED TO

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INTRODUCTION

The Mississippi Low-Income Child-Care Initiative (MLICCI), founded in 1998, is a state-wide nonprofit training, policy change and advocacy organization of childcare providers, parents, and communities working collaboratively to address shared concerns regarding childcare in Mississippi. Childcare support and advocacy are the primary strategies. The organization seeks a more just and equitable subsidy system in Mississippi through its focus on systemic change.

MLICCI has more than 20 years of continuous experience working with Mississippi's low-income childcare sector to strengthen the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) subsidy system, and specifically the Childcare Payment Program (CCPP). Addressing access, quality, affordability, and the financial stability of childcare providers are examples of MLICCI's work. The organization has sought to strengthen the Mississippi subsidized childcare infrastructure by advocating for changes in institutional policies and practices that make childcare more accessible to low-income families.

MLICCI recognizes that childcare is a means to an end, not an end within itself. It is a means to: educational, employment, and economic equity for low-income families; the American Dream for their children; and economic viability of low-income childcare providers. Further, childcare is an essential support for the economic security of low-income working single mothers.

Access to and retention of quality and affordable childcare is an essential work support for low-income mothers. It is therefore imperative that the strengthening of any workforce system targeting single mothers includes consideration of this essential work support. It is posited herein that in order for single low-income mothers to successfully pursue career pathways which lead to self-sufficiency and economic security, childcare must be a part of the equation.

In furtherance of its mission, MLICCI expanded its work to include employment equity and economic security for single mothers. The Employment Equity for Single Mothers (EESM) program was established in 2021, through support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. At its inception, the explicit purpose of EESM was established as follows:

Implementation of an evidence-based collaborative state-wide workforce system that prepares single mothers for high demand jobs that result in sustained systemic change, through targeted outreach and recruitment, training and credentialing, and job placement and retention, which is undergirded by interagency collaboration, leveraged and aligned resources, streamlined processes, timely child care assistance, and intensive case management; all designed to mitigate barriers to employment in high demand careers.

EESM has established a solid reputation for assisting single mothers in obtaining meaningful childcare, education, and training over the previous four years, all of which have greatly improved their employability.

This has occurred through the use of an equity-driven employment model for low-income single mothers. Addressing many of the institutional and structural barriers that hinder low-income single mothers from receiving job training and meaningful employment opportunities with a living wage are addressed. Moreover, alternative strategies that have proven to be effective are described.

The purpose of this program evaluation report for year four is to provide a detailed description of this equity-driven model, considering its guiding principles, personnel and leadership arrangements, and important programmatic components including advocacy. The goal is to operationalize the characteristics of an equitable employment paradigm.

Importantly, the MLICCI EESM model does not aim to duplicate existing workforce, childcare, and other services; rather, the goal is greater effectiveness and efficiency in the use of existent subsidized services. Specifically, the goal is to **align and integrate** current services in a way that increases the availability of opportunities and resources, particularly childcare; in support of low-income mothers' unrestricted access to high-demand jobs. Further, this model is predicated on the following premises: 1) Childcare is an essential work support, 2) it is important to address structural and institutional barriers which hinder unabridged access by eligible families to needed services, and 3) a collaborative approach whereby state and local agencies work cooperatively with non-profit organizations is essential. It is anticipated that ESSM will be utilized to guide, enhance, and expand an aligned and integrated workforce and childcare infrastructure in Mississippi .

THE CONTEXT

Understanding the historical, cultural, and political background that makes an equity-based employment program necessary for underrepresented groups—specifically, single low-income moms who are disproportionately African American—is essential to comprehending the creation of the EESM. One might wonder why is the implementation of a specially designed employment support program necessary if the individual is driven, determined, and has a strong work ethic? The answer is that while these factors are necessary conditions for successful employment, they are not sufficient conditions. Apart from personal factors, employment is also impacted by systemic factors, such as crucial institutional and structural constraints. EESM was designed to address both individual and systemic factors which impact employability and economic security; and are discussed herein.

Significant inequities are reflected in the employment landscape for working women, single mothers, and more specifically African American single working mothers. Consider the data ([National Women's Law Center](#), 2021).

- ✓ Working women, on average, earn 82 cents for every \$1 earned by a man.
- ✓ Mothers, on average, earn 75 cents for every dollar earned by a father.
- ✓ Single mothers, on average, earn 54 cents for every \$1 earned by a married man.
- ✓ Single mothers are 79% less likely to be hired than a childless woman.

According to these data, the **employment landscape** is not level for single working mothers. While the gender pay gap is evident for working women in general, it is worsened for single working mothers. Moreover, this disadvantage for working mothers is further exacerbated by the maternal wall bias whereby they are less likely to be hired than their childless counterparts. Mostly importantly, balancing parenting and working is a major financial challenge for working mother. Again, it is greater for single mothers, and much more so for low-income single working mothers who lack the means to address financial work-related factors such as childcare. Black mothers are the most likely to be impacted ([National Women's Law Center](#), 2021).

Black parents struggling to find childcare are twice as likely as white parents in the same situation to leave their jobs, change their jobs or not take employment at all. In addition,

working from home with young children is often not an option for many parents of color who are disproportionately represented in jobs that do not allow flexible or remote work arrangements. Single parents and caregivers, of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, have even fewer options ([Christine Lindsay, Childcare Support: The New Essential Benefit for Working American Families](#)).

Findings from a Harvard Business School research study on low-wage jobs indicated that investing in training and career paths can help in retaining employees and improving their future prospects, while simultaneously making the businesses more competitive. A quote from this study provides a compelling description of the plight and the disparities which exist in the workforce sector for marginalized groups.

“Forty-four percent of American workers are employed in some of the least appealing or most dangerous jobs available, typically for low wages with little prospect for advancement. The positions have high turnover, so many employers view these jobs as expendable and put little resources into retaining these workers, creating a vicious cycle. Women, people of color, and those under 25 make up a disproportionate share of this group of workers trapped in low-wage jobs”. (Harvard Gazette, 2022)

Alignment of workforce services and supports can be an invaluable benefit to both industry and workforce development. This enables the maximizing of federal and state workforce resources.

Economic development is the process which determines overall living standards. Multiple metrics are used to measure these standards. The population’s general state of well-being is assessed using factors such as: life expectancy, education, literacy rates, healthcare, worker’s incomes, housing, and environmental standards. It is about creating the conditions and maximizing the opportunities for optimal quality of life. Moreover, economic development is a system which consists of two major and equally important components, namely strong industries, and skilled and productive workforces.

Workforce development is the engine which fuels economic development through specific focus on preparing workers to meet industry needs. The desired outcome is economic prosperity in the targeted geographical area. This process entails assisting workers in becoming work-ready through training, and establishing sustainable careers

that pay a living wage and lead to family economic security. Although this is the ideal, far too frequently it is not the case in reality; particularly for vulnerable groups including women, single mothers, people of color and low-income citizens. Workforce development is essential for economic growth because it not only benefits the individual but the community and national economy as well.

Robust, well-coordinated workforce development initiatives have numerous advantages. Expanded economy, higher productivity, increased job satisfaction, lower unemployment, and improved competitiveness. These programs also act as a link between the skills of the workforce and the industry demands. Most importantly a diverse and inclusive workforce builds permanency into the labor force.

EESM MODEL

Whatever the employment model used for low-income mothers, it is imperative to first build a framework undergirded by equity and social justice. As reflected in its name, **equity** is the defining framework for this project. Equity as used herein is defined as correcting, mitigating, and eliminating past and present conditions/barriers and disadvantages experienced by single mothers in attaining, training, securing, and retaining meaningful employment opportunities and benefits throughout occupations and levels. In other words, equity is present when one's group identity is not predictive of employment opportunities and outcomes.

Within its equity framework, **a holistic approach** to employment service delivery to low-income single mothers is used. This involves considering the various interconnected aspects of their lives and addressing their needs comprehensively, rather than focusing solely on job placement. This approach recognizes that individuals' employment outcomes are influenced by a range of factors, including their education, skills, health, family responsibilities, financial situation, and access to support services. When implemented within an equity framework, a holistic approach ensures that all participants have **equitable access** to the resources and supports they need to achieve their employment goals, regardless of their background or circumstances.

A holistic approach to employment services **empowers** low-income single mothers by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and resources they need to navigate the job

market, advocate for themselves, and pursue meaningful employment opportunities that align with their goals and values. This empowerment is essential for promoting self-sufficiency, autonomy, and agency among participants.

EESM seeks to expand single mothers' access to employment opportunities through **career and non-traditional jobs**. Specifically, career occupations are thought of as ways to provide stability and security through regular income, benefits like healthcare and retirement plans, and prospects for growth. They also often offer opportunities for skill development and career advancement. Career jobs through on-the-job training, and professional development programs enable individuals to acquire new skills, enhance their expertise, and progress in their careers over time. This stability is crucial for low-income single mothers who need reliable income to support themselves and their families.

Furthermore, **career jobs** offer more competitive wages which allow individuals to achieve financial independence and improve their overall economic well-being. This stability enables individuals to meet their basic needs, invest in their futures, and build assets for themselves and their families. Moreover, career jobs often provide individuals with a sense of social status, recognition, and accomplishment. This recognition can boost self-esteem, enhance social standing, and contribute to overall well-being and satisfaction with one's work.

Non-traditional jobs encompass a wide range of industries, sectors, and roles, providing individuals with diverse opportunities to explore their interests, leverage their skills, and pursue alternative career paths. This diversity of options enables individuals to find employment opportunities that align with their strengths, preferences, and values.

Both career jobs and non-traditional jobs play important roles in providing individuals, including low-income single mothers, with opportunities for economic stability, personal growth, and fulfillment in the workforce. By recognizing the value of both types of employment opportunities and supporting low-income single mothers in accessing and pursuing them, organizations and policymakers can empower individuals to achieve their full potential and contribute meaningfully to their communities and economies.

Overall, a holistic approach when linked with an equity framework, enables the addressing of diverse needs and circumstances of participants in a comprehensive and inclusive manner. Creating pathways to careers and nontraditional jobs promotes equal access to opportunities and resources and empower individuals to achieve their full potential in the workforce. By building EESM on these foundational constructs, MLICCI has mitigated systemic barriers, promoted social inclusion, and created more equitable and inclusive pathways to economic opportunity for low-income single mothers in Mississippi.

Stereotyping of single low-income mothers, particularly African Americans, has been pervasive and has had significant adverse impact on their employability. These stereotypes are often rooted in racism, negative cultural perceptions, historical biases, and systemic inequalities, contributing to discriminatory practices in hiring and employment. As discussed in prior MLICCI research and evaluative reports, these stereotypes are many, and have include Welfare Queen, lazy, government-dependent, unwilling to work, incompetent, unreliable, aggressive, and lacking in professionalism. These labels perpetuate and reinforce the beliefs that these women are unmotivated, uncommitted, and unable to satisfy job demands. Such unexamined group assumptions have led to unconscious bias, hiring and salary discrimination, and fewer job advancement opportunities.

Despite these challenges, single low-income mothers, specifically African Americans, possess numerous psychosocial assets that can contribute to their employability and success in the workforce. As established in prior reports, low-income mothers have a strong work ethic and a commitment to providing for their families. Their resilience is exceptional, evidenced by an ability to adapt to changing circumstances, find creative solutions to overcome obstacles and navigate complex systems. These are all skills that are highly desired and are transferable to the workplace.

Improving the employability of low-income single mothers, particularly African American mothers, involves addressing negative stereotypes that may hinder their access to meaningful employment opportunities. Workforce development agencies can play a

crucial role in this process by implementing targeted strategies to empower and support these individuals.

The MLICCI EESM model has demonstrated how workforce development organizations can significantly improve the employability of low-income single mothers-particularly African American mothers by actively combating negative stereotypes. This opens the door to increased family financial sufficiency, a strong workforce, and a stable economy.

STAFFING

The **employment of key personnel** was a crucial factor in the implementation of EESM. Staff members must work together as a cohesive unit with the sole goal of assisting program participants in reaching their objectives. In order to achieve economic security, people must be helped to navigate a variety of educational, psychological, racial, and financial challenges. A well-thought-out and resource-rich staffing plan that offers ongoing employment support can help achieve this.

The advancement of an equity-driven employment service delivery model requires seasoned, trustworthy, and transparent leadership that is devoted to social justice. The leader of MLICCI, who is also the EESM Director, has played a crucial role in shaping the program's culture, values, and outcomes. The leader embodies and prioritizes values that promote equity, inclusion, empowerment, and social justice. The leadership has built an organization which reflects the key values of an equity-driven employment program for single mothers. The following is a delineation of how these values have been operationalized throughout MLICCI.

- ✓ **Social Justice** – The leadership has practiced the pursuit of social justice by advocating for policies and practices that promote fairness, equality, and human rights for all individuals, especially marginalized and vulnerable populations. Importantly, this includes addressing structural inequalities, advocating for policy changes, and working towards systemic transformation that advances equity and social justice for vulnerable groups and communities.
- ✓ **Equity** – The organization prioritizes equity by ensuring that all participants have equal access to opportunities, resources, and support services, regardless of their background or circumstances. This includes addressing systemic barriers and biases

that disproportionately affect low-income single mothers, such as discrimination in hiring and access to education and training.

- ✓ **Inclusion** – The staff fosters a culture of inclusion where all participants feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute their unique perspectives and talents. This includes creating a safe and supportive environment that embraces diversity, celebrates differences, and promotes collaboration among participants from diverse backgrounds.
- ✓ **Empowerment** – The EESM team prioritize empowerment by helping participants build self-confidence, develop skills, and access resources that enable them to take control of their own lives and pursue their goals with agency and autonomy. This includes providing opportunities for leadership development, mentorship, and peer support that empower low-income single mothers to advocate for themselves and others.
- ✓ **Compassion and Empathy** – EESM demonstrates compassion and empathy towards participants by recognizing and validating their experiences, challenges, and aspirations. This includes listening actively, showing empathy for participants' struggles, and providing emotional support and encouragement as they navigate their employment journey.
- ✓ **Cultural Competence and Humility** – MLICCI leadership and staff demonstrate cultural competence and humility by recognizing their own biases, privilege, and limitations, and actively seeking to learn from the experiences and perspectives of others. This includes valuing cultural diversity, challenging stereotypes, and creating opportunities for cross-cultural exchange and learning within the program.
- ✓ **Collaboration and Partnership** – The leader prioritizes collaboration and partnership by working closely with stakeholders from diverse sectors, including government agencies, community organizations, employers, and educational institutions. This includes building strategic alliances, leveraging resources, and coordinating efforts to maximize the impact of the program and address systemic barriers to employment.
- ✓ **Accountability and Transparency** – MLICCI upholds high standards of accountability and transparency by setting clear goals, measuring outcomes, and reporting on progress towards achieving equity-driven objectives. This includes regularly communicating with stakeholders, conducting research and external evaluations, soliciting feedback from participants, and making data-driven decisions that promote accountability and continuous improvement.

By embodying and promoting these essential values, the MLICCI leadership has created a supportive and empowering environment that enables EESM participants to overcome barriers, achieve economic independence, and build brighter futures for themselves and their families. Incorporation of **these values** into the staff of workforce agencies and programs through training and professional development can do likewise.

Relative to the **staffing structure**, it is vitally necessary to have well-chosen and trained individuals with a single goal in mind—assisting the program participant in reaching their goals. This is crucial because, for low-income moms, enrolling in employment training can be a novel and frequently frightening experience. The success of participants is frequently dependent on having committed support from people who are invested in their success and who are aware of the vulnerabilities resulting from their lived experiences.

The MLICCI EESM **staff team** consists of a mid-level arbitrator, regional case managers, a data manager, and support personnel, led by the MLICCI Director. The **arbiter** is referred to by many different names (intermediary, advisor, problem-solver, mediator, etc.); this position entails assuring the goals of the program are attained and advising the case managers, while simultaneously understanding the lived experiences and needs of the program participants. This individual is a dedicated, resourceful, and nurturing natural helper carefully selected and trained to assist and advise the case managers as they help participants traverse the myriad of educational, psychosocial, racial, and financial issues common to low-income families. It is important that this individual be grounded in understanding issues related to racial and gender equity, structural racism, poverty-related trauma, informed trauma care, and social networking, at a minimum.

The centerpiece of EESM, as detailed later, is Case Management; and is provided by a group of **professional case managers** (CM). CM recognizes and appreciates the uniqueness and individuality of program participants. A primary goal is creating an inclusive learning environment where everyone feels valued. This is evidenced by a sense of belonging, willingness to discuss divergent but relevant issues, thinking outside the box and taking risks. **The roles** of the case manager in high-touch case management typically involves assessment, individualized career planning, coordination of needed services, education, and record-keeping. EESM high-touch case

management is highly relational and interactive. Abilities include interpersonal skills in developing rapport, trust, and effective communication with single moms, childcare providers, and other related services. Additionally, advocacy, teamwork, and problem-solving on behalf of program participants are essential responsibilities.

MLICCI uses a customized database system, Apricot Essentials Case Management and Reporting (AECMR) for EESM which requires skilled and dedicated staff expertise with specific roles and competencies. The MLICCI Director of Research is the Data Manager and provides oversight for the system's implementation process. Competencies include familiarity with the database system, and understanding data accuracy, integrity, and security, as well as expertise in data analysis and interpretation. Effective communication and problem-solving skills, as well as technical expertise in coordinating the implementation process, are essential.

Summarily, the core of any successful equity-driven employment program is the careful selection and training of staff members, who are committed to helping participants overcome obstacles and secure meaningful employment with a living wage. In order to provide low-income single moms with job help, MLICCI believes that the state workforce infrastructure may be greatly strengthened by integrating an equity-driven staffing pattern into the state and local workforce and human services childcare offices.

PARTNER COLLABORATION

EESM transcends the state with field operations located in the Workforce districts. EESM was designed as a collaborative model whereby partners with a common vision work together to build and function as an **aligned** pathway for single mothers to achieve higher economic sufficiency. These partners agreed to work collaboratively in employment training, placement, and retention at several levels. The EESM collaborative infrastructure commenced with the establishment of the EESM advisory group composed of representatives from the four regional Local Workforce Development Areas, the Mississippi Department of Employment Security (MDES) and the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS). Targeted Outreach and Recruitment collaboration has occurred with local offices of the MDHS, Workforce Innovations and Opportunities Act (WIOA) agencies, and the WIN Job Centers. Childcare providers are also invaluable EESM partners.

For single working mothers stable, dependable, and affordable childcare is essential to sustained employment and making a living wage. Center-based, quality, and affordable childcare is provided by a cadre of licensed providers located throughout the state. These centers have a long-term collaborative relationship with MLICCI; and have proven to be an invaluable resource for low-income working mothers.

KEY PROGRAMMATIC COMPONENTS

HIGH TOUCH CASE MANAGEMENT

One of the main EESM strategies is case management. A collaborative process plans, organizes, executes, coordinates, monitors, and reviews the options and services needed to satisfy the client's human service needs. It is distinguished by resource management, communication, and advocacy aimed at achieving the intended program results. (2021, Commissioner for Case Manager Certification).

EESM uses a **high-touch case management approach** which has several additional features. Different from the more traditional approach, high-touch case management is personal and highly relational. Rapport, trust, and partnership are essential features which undergird this process. The EESM case managers work in partnership with the mothers to help develop strategies that will best suit their family. This includes setting goals, making decisions, navigating fragmented services, and garnering resources. A written Client Action Plan (CAP) becomes the blueprint for achieving desired goals.

The role of case manager also includes interactions with the child care providers, workforce partners and other relevant service providers. As defined by the project at its inception, case managers are itinerant workers, not office-bound, who utilize various service entities to meet and confer with program participants. The entities include WIN Job Centers, Department of Human Service offices, community colleges, childcare providers, and community-based organizations.

Case managers' geographical area aligns with the four workforce regions. Several communication methods-phone calls, emails, and postal letters- are used to make initial contact, then maintain contact with potential and enrolled program participants. Single mothers with children 12 years and younger who agree to participate in EESM activities focused on self-sufficiency are eligible.

Standard protocols related to assessment, referral, confidentiality, and documentation are used. The EESM Handbook provides detailed information on the operational procedures of the program. Mothers are able to access EESM through the online portal or referral by a workforce partner or childcare center. A mother seeking services through the portal is referred based on county of residency.

Rapport, empathy, and trust are considered central determinants of successful engagement with potential and enrolled program participants. These rapport building attributes require patience and persistence, are built over time, and are often cemented by small accomplishments.

Once contact was made and eligibility established, the focus was on determining the needs of the client and available options. The primary presenting issue for participants was employment and childcare. The Client Action Plan (CAP) is used to delineate steps to be taken and to affirm the client's understanding of and commitment to the action plan. Once CAP is in place the focus shifts to its implementation.

Overall, high-touch case management requires a holistic and client-centered approach, where case managers serve as advocates, facilitators, and guides to help participants navigate complex human service systems.

CLIENT ACTION PLAN

A comprehensive Client Action Plan (CAP) is a significant part of the EESM model for low-income mothers. CAP components aim to equip the mothers with the necessary skills, resources, and supports to secure stable employment opportunities with benefits and a living wage. Typically, the CAP includes:

Assessment and Goal Setting

- ✓ Conducting individual assessments to identify the skills, interests, strengths, and areas for development of each participant.
- ✓ Setting clear and achievable career goals based on the aspirations and circumstances of single mothers.

Education and Skill Development

- ✓ Providing access to education and training programs tailored to the needs of the participants, including post-secondary education, vocational training, and skill-building workshops.

- ✓ Seeking certifications in high-demand industries or sectors that offer opportunities for career advancement and financial stability.

Job Search and Placement Assistance

- ✓ Offering assistance with job search strategies, resume writing, and interview preparation to help participants secure employment.
- ✓ Providing access to job placement services, job fairs, and networking events to connect participants with potential employers.

Financial Literacy and Support Services

- ✓ Offering financial literacy information and coaching to help participants manage their finances, budget effectively, and plan for their future.
- ✓ Providing assistance in accessing support services such as childcare assistance, transportation assistance, to address immediate needs and barriers to employment.

Coaching and Peer Support

- ✓ Pairing participants with Case Managers who provide guidance, support, and encouragement throughout their career development journey.
- ✓ Offering information on peer support groups where participants can connect with and learn from other single mothers who have successfully navigated similar challenges.

Accessing Benefits and Resources

- ✓ Educating participants about the importance of benefits, such as healthcare, paid leave, and retirement savings, and assisting them in accessing these benefits.
- ✓ Providing information and referrals to community resources and support services that can assist participants with housing, food security, healthcare, and other basic needs.

Continuous Support and Follow-Up

- ✓ Implementing a system for ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and follow-up to track participants' progress, address any barriers or challenges they may encounter, and provide additional support as needed.
- ✓ Creating a supportive and inclusive environment where participants feel valued, respected, and empowered to pursue their career goals.

By incorporating these elements into a client action plan, MLICCI has built an employment support infrastructure to effectively support low-income single mothers in securing stable employment opportunities with benefits and a living wage, thereby promoting economic empowerment, social mobility, and overall well-being for these individuals and their families.

CHILDCARE BRIDGE

MLICCI and childcare advocacy are in many ways synonymous in Mississippi. Childcare is the core of its mission. In addition to advocating for equitable, accessible, quality, and affordable childcare, MILLIC understands that it is an essential work support. This means it is an education and economic equity issue. Recognizing this, MLICCI has sought to “bridge the gap” between access to childcare and economic equity for single mothers of preschoolers and early learners. Thus, the Childcare Bridge.

Preceding on the premise that eligibility for childcare does not always equate to timely access to childcare, the Childcare Bridge was built into the EESM project design. It is not an entitlement. Metaphorically, it is “a temporary detour around a structural barrier” which is often an elongated process with disruptions that slow down and sometimes derail one’s pathway to employment, and thus their destination of economic security.

This short-term intervention allows single mothers to receive a time-limited childcare voucher to assist with childcare costs for children birth through age 12, and for youth with exceptional needs up to age 21 after enrollment in an EESM activity. Approval for payment of childcare services may be provided by EESM for up to three months or until the child is successfully enrolled into long-term, subsidized childcare, CCPP. Eligibility may be extended for a maximum of six months, if the family is unable to secure long-term, subsidized childcare during the initial period. During this timeframe, the case manager has the critical role of assisting the mother in navigating the pursuit of state subsidized childcare through the CCPP.

Childcare Bridge has proven to not only be an innovative feature of EESM, but also an invaluable one. This innovative strategy has enabled EESM participants to proceed with training or employment while simultaneously pursuing CCPP. Without Bridge such employment opportunities would not have been accessible due to the lack of consistent, safe, and dependable childcare.

DATABASE SYSTEM

EESM is a data driven project, which uses a customized database system, *Apricot Case and Data Management Software for Charities*, that offers case management, client tracking and outcomes documentation. Furthermore, this centralized system allows the program to have access to a real time plethora of client and program data. Apricot is customized through use of the EESM intake process, and other forms used by EESM. Data domains include Intake, Assessments, Eligibility, Services, Achievements, Program Completion, Outcome, and Follow-Up data. It has the functionality of enabling staff to track participants progress toward the achievement of program goals, as well as generate outcome analytics. Specific to EESM, the system tracks case management services, activities, and outcomes, as well as TANF participation.

The customized database provides significant value and utility for the EESM program. It allows for the centralized of storage, management, and retrieval of data on program participants. Customizable data fields enable the capture of information specific to the needs and objectives of the program and participants. This enables program administrators to capture relevant demographic, employment-related, and outcome data specific to low-income single mothers. This real-time reporting capability allows for timely decision-making, resource allocation, and program adjustments based on challenges encountered by low-income single mothers.

The data system interphases with the case management system by providing real-time tools for tracking client progress, documenting services provided, and monitoring outcomes over time. Program staff can use the system to record client assessments, develop individualized client action plans, and track service delivery ensuring that low-income single mothers receive personalized support tailored to their needs. It also enables real-time reporting on program activities, outputs, and outcomes, thereby providing program administrators with up-to-date insights into program performance and impact.

In summary, a customized database system like Apricot Essentials Case Management and Reporting (AECMR) offers valuable features and functionalities that support efficient case management, data-driven decision-making, compliance, and collaboration in an employment system focused on low-income single mothers. By leveraging the

capabilities of AECMR, program administrators can optimize service delivery, maximize impact, and empower participants in pursuit of sustainable employment.

ADVOCACY FOR POLICY CHANGE

Since its inception MLICCI has been unrelenting in using advocacy as an effective strategy in addressing structural and institutional barriers in the childcare subsidy system. The outcomes have significantly improved the Mississippi childcare subsidy system. For example, through research, opinion pieces, and discussions with state leaders, the organization pushed for the removal of the state-mandated child support cooperation requirement for a number of years. This advocacy was successful in 2022, and this eligibility requirement was discontinued.

In order to be eligible for a child care certificate and other public aid, the custodial parent—typically a single mother—had to cooperate with the child support enforcement unit. This was mandated by the state childcare eligibility regulation as a condition of eligibility determination for childcare assistance. To put it simply, the mother had to identify the father and give detailed information about him.

Given Mississippi's history of racism, and the emasculation and degradation of African American men, the child support cooperation requirement was viewed by many as antithetical and counterproductive for families. Often, amenable family relations including co-parenting, father-child relationships, and voluntary financial support, were adversely affected by this mandate.

Following intense advocacy by MLICCI, in March 2022, local and statewide print and television media announced that the governor's State Early Childhood Advisory Council (SECAC) had unanimously recommended to the governor, with DHS concurrence, that the child support cooperation requirement be eliminated in the state of Mississippi. That was a significant accomplishment toward increasing access to childcare for eligible children and their families. Subsequently, the SECAC Chair and Director of the MDHS Child Care Payment Program (CCPP) division, announced:

"We did finally receive permission from the Governor's office to move forward with removing the child support cooperation requirement as a requirement to participate in the Child Care Payment Program. I'll just take this moment to publicly thank SECAC; but then especially Carol, I want to

thank you and MLICCI for the work that you all have done, the information that you all have provided, you all have been very instrumental in helping us get that change, so thank you so much.” <https://mssecac.org/meetings/>

MDHS validated this historic shift in the childcare eligibility procedure by later submitting a revision to eliminate the child support cooperation requirement from their policy manual. What has been the impact of this change? In a five-month period, 3,500 mothers, who would not have been eligible before the change in May 2023, had been approved for childcare as of September 2023. Moreover, the result is cumulative; these previously unserved children can now obtain childcare, and their mothers' employability increases. This is an example of the significance of effective and persistent advocacy for policy change. Furthermore, it demonstrates what unrestricted access to daycare looks like when structural barriers are removed. Most importantly, this outcome affirms the efficacy of an equity-driven program which is propelled by a commitment to social justice.

Advocacy for policy change continues to be an indispensable tool for EESM in efforts to dismantle institutional workforce barriers. In fact it is an integral part of the advocacy work of EESM. It is the organization's position that a sustainable, productive, and competitive economic development system composed of industry and workforce can be enhanced by strengthening its infrastructure.

It is imperative to note the importance of continuing the current Accelerate MS initiatives which align WIOA partners and vital support networks for the MS workforce, particularly for single moms, who frequently experience underemployment and unemployment. Support for the WIOA policy of identifying "opportunity occupations" is one aspect of this.¹

EESM has identified several critical areas that can contribute to the strengthening of the workforce system for low-income single mothers in Mississippi. Maximizing access to the current CCPP for single working mother, addressing gender bias, and utilization of best practices and tools in determining a fair and reasonable living wage for low-paid

¹ Opportunity employment is an estimate of the number and share of jobs accessible to workers without a bachelor's degree that pay more than the national median wage (\$45,760 in 2021).

workers are three ways that the workforce system can be strengthened, as recommended herewith.

1. **CCPP vs TANF**

The Mississippi Workforce Plan recognizes two important facts. 1)The largest number of individuals with barriers to employment are single mother household. 2)The major employment barrier for single mothers is lack of access to child care. It is also a fact that the Department of Human Services (MDHS) Child Care Payment Program (CCPP) serves significantly more working parents than its TANF program. Consequently, the Mississippi workforce system can significantly increase the number of eligible workers it reaches by designating the MDHS CCPP as its primary WIOA partner, with TANF serving as a secondary partner. This reconfiguration could create a more robust and unified system of child care for Mississippi's workforce and job training participants. Moreover, WIOA partnerships with local community-based organizations serving single Moms, including EESM, would further strengthen the childcare and workforce infrastructure. Lastly, this alignment can be further strengthened through a standard practice of referring all WIOA single mother applicants, including MS Works Smart Start Career Pathway participants, to receive information on CCPP.

2. **Gender Bias**

The propensity to favor one gender over another based on preconceived notions about a person or group of people is known as gender bias. It manifests itself in the workplace as discriminatory policies that favor men and penalize women. Ones' job type, level of compensation, performance assessments, work supports and incentives are all examples of these biases. Further, this bias is typically reflected in the underrepresentation of women and specifically mothers (maternal bias), in higher paying jobs and opportunity occupations. To overcome this persistent structural barrier, it is imperative that WIOA staff and its partners receive required training on gender bias.

3. **Living Wage**

The working poor are frequently among the marginalized populations. Women, particularly women of color and single mothers, are disproportionately underemployed. They work, but they do not make a living wage. In short, a livable wage gives people enough money to sustain their families without putting them in danger of going below the federal poverty level. It is crucial that WIOA employees and partners receive training on using such best practice tools. For instance, the **MIT Living Wage Calculator (LWC)** is a priceless county-specific resource that helps clients in the workforce determine the kind of employment and income required to meet their family's basic needs in their neighborhood. A livable wage's main objective is to guarantee that workers receive enough money to maintain a

sufficient level of life that prevents them from falling into poverty. The use of such a tool has tremendous potential and is therefore recommended.

CELEBRATION AS GROUP AFFIRMATION

Oprah Winfrey has been quoted as saying, “The more you praise and celebrate your life, the more there is to celebrate.” Celebratory rituals are an integral part of all cultures. Whether it is a new birth, birthday, bar mitzvah, graduation, baptismal, marriage, or job promotion, it is a cause for celebration.

For many low-income families, and specifically single mothers, such joyful moments of public recognition of their achievements are few. Such events can be ever so simple, yet a tremendous source of encouragement, inspiration, and motivation, not only for the honoree, but their children, family, friends, and community. EESM has purposefully included a final celebration for program participants because low-income moms often miss out on many of the customary celebratory moments.

EXTERNAL EVALUATION

Building and Expanding Sustainable Career Pathways to Economic Security for Low-Income Mothers Through Comprehensive Employment Training and Placement is the research project that MLICCI used to inform the planning of EESM in 2020. Secondly, both quantitative and qualitative techniques have been used in a systematic manner to collect and analyze the yearly process and outcome data.

The evaluation has been conducted with an equity lens which has numerous benefits and advantages. An equity-driven evaluation

- A. **Identifying Disparities** – It reveals disparities in program access, participation, and outcomes among different demographic groups, such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. This information is crucial for understanding where inequities exist and how they can be addressed.
- B. **Assuring Inclusive Practices** – It enables examination of the program's policies, procedures, and practices through an equity lens; evaluators can identify any barrier, or biases that may prevent certain groups, such as low-income single mothers, from fully benefiting from the program.
- C. **Tailoring program strategies** – Equity evaluations help program developers and partners understand the unique needs and challenges faced by low-income single mothers, allowing them to tailor and align services to better meet those needs.

- D. **Enhancing Cultural Competence and Humility** – It fosters cultural competence and humility among program staff and stakeholders by promoting awareness of the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of participants. This awareness can lead to more culturally responsive services and interactions, ultimately improving participant engagement and outcomes.
- E. **Empowering Marginalized Communities** – It empowers marginalized communities, such as low-income single mothers, by centering their voices and experiences in the evaluation process. By actively involving participants in data collection, analysis, and decision-making, the evaluation validates their expertise and insights, fostering a sense of ownership and agency within the program.
- F. **Driving Systemic Change** – It highlights structural inequities and systemic barriers that perpetuate disparities in employment opportunities for low-income single mothers. This may involve advocating for policy reforms, resource allocation, and institutional practices that promote economic justice and social equity for marginalized populations.
- G. **Improving Accountability and Transparency** – It promotes transparency and accountability in program implementation and outcomes. By openly acknowledging and addressing inequities, state agencies and program administrators can demonstrate their commitment to fairness, social justice, and responsible stewardship of resources.
- H. **Improving Program Impact** – Documents the value of alignment and integration through the capturing data on effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability in the long term.

Conducting an evaluation with an equity lens for an employment program targeting low-income single mothers not only helps identify and address disparities but also promotes inclusivity, empowerment, and systemic change, ultimately advancing social justice and economic opportunity for marginalized groups .

SUMMARY

MLICCI's work has broadened to address a variety of interconnected challenges relating to childcare and the needs of low-income families, all the while upholding its basic objective. The main goal of EESM is employment equity because it provides low-income single moms with a means of achieving financial security. Second, for low-income moms, having access to quality and affordable childcare is a crucial work support. Therefore, it is essential that this type of workforce aid be taken into account while improving any workforce system aimed at single mothers. Stated succinctly, in order for single low-income mothers to successfully pursue career pathways which lead to economic security, childcare must be included. To this end, EESM can serve as a model of how the state workforce infrastructure can be aligned and integrated with childcare and other work supports.

There are major disparities in the work environment for single mothers. These disparities need to be addressed in order to level the playing field for this segment of the workforce. This entails fostering an environment in the workplace that values underrepresented groups and endorsing policies and practices that provide needed access to childcare for low-income mothers enrolled in educational programs, undergoing job training, and employed.

MLICCI encourages the use of the EESM model to strengthen the state workforce infrastructure by further aligning and integrating existent services in a way that maximizes the employability and career progression of single mothers. The following dimensions of an equity-driven employment program for low-income single mothers are recommended for consideration in creating an equitable Mississippi workforce environment wherein:

- a) Historical stereotypes of low-income single mothers are refuted, and psychosocial assets that can enhance employability and contribute to their success in the workforce as well as the local economy are supported.
- b) The workforce infrastructure is woven with values, norms, practices, and policies that promote equity.
- c) Economic development and workforce systems are aligned and integrated with human services and childcare programs to maximize employability.

- d) Workforce-childcare alignment is achieved through the use of the CCPP, as opposed to TANF, as the main childcare gateway because of its greater accessibility to low-income eligible families and children.
- e) The neighborhood workforce centers use the high-touch case management process and techniques.
- f) Fair and reasonable living wages for low-paid workers can be determined by using tools like the Living Wage Calculator.
- g) Pre-employment training, which enables low-paid employees to acquire the know-how required to reach their career objectives, which include benefits and a livable wage.
- h) A data system that supports case management, program improvement, decision-making, and compliance is put into place along with evaluation. A system like this can make it possible for workforce administrators and partners to provide effective and efficient service delivery through a statewide integrated and aligned workforce support infrastructure.
- i) Affirmation of participants and acknowledgement of their accomplishments are part of the workforce culture.

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