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IMPACT REPORT



**Investment
In Families**

SF Steelcase Foundation

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OVERVIEW & PURPOSE

In 2024, the Steelcase Foundation launched the Investment in Families Initiative (IIF) — a ten-year, \$10 million participatory research partnership with 30 Family Leaders in Kent County, Michigan. The Initiative pairs wraparound supports and monthly direct cash transfers with a deeper, longer-term goal: shifting how systems behave so they work for families rather than around or against them.

What makes IIF distinct is not the cash transfer itself, but the model surrounding it — a nuance often missed by most policies. Most family policy is built from the outside in: experts and agencies designing solutions based on assumptions about what families need. IIF flips that model. It is built inside-out: Family Leaders, mothers who are already the foremost experts on their own households, bring their lived experience directly into research design, program development, and the shaping of public narrative. Their insights, not externally imposed benchmarks, are what drive the Initiative's direction.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF RESEARCH PROJECT

IIF's seven guiding frameworks — including the Two-Generation Approach, Harm Reduction, the Productive Tension Model, Scarcity Mindset research, Narrative Change, Black Feminist Thought, and the Bridge to Self-Sufficiency Model — all point toward the same design principle: families are trustworthy narrators of their own lives, and lasting change has to be felt before it can be measured.

This is why IIF centers Felt Difference over pre-set outcomes. Rather than asking "did we hit the target we set for families?" the Initiative asks "what are families experiencing, feeling, and needing — and how do we change the structures around them to meet those needs?"

Success is not a fixed metric decided in advance; it is Breathing Room, Whole Family well-being, and economic stability that families themselves can feel in their day-to-day lives. Direct cash transfers function as a short-term harm-reduction strategy that creates the conditions for families to participate fully in shaping the longer-term systems change efforts. In our view, cash support is one tool among many that contributes to increased stability for families.



FROM YEAR ONE TO YEAR TWO: WHAT'S EVOLVED

Year One established the foundation: 30 Family Leaders joined the cohort, received consistent material and relational supports, and began surfacing what stability actually requires. That year's key findings centered on financial stability, mental health, and belonging, and produced four early policy considerations focused on centering family voices, building flexible systems, investing in relational infrastructure, and reducing harm.

Year Two has moved the Initiative from listening to organizing. Two shifts define this year's evolution:

- Findings sharpened into policy levers — Year One's broad considerations have been translated into three specific, time-bound policy levers the Collaboration Council will pursue over the next 18 months: Advance Fair Tax Policy; Protect; Expand & Simplify Public Assistance Programs; and Improve & Expand Housing Supports.
- The Initiative connected outward — IIF's work is now explicitly linked to the statewide Families First Policy Framework, developed through the Michigan Children & Families Summit convenings hosted by the Steelcase Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, positioning Kent County's Family Leaders as part of a broader coalition of Michigan voices asking systems to put families first.

At the same time, Year Two data has revealed that progress is not linear. Family leaders report real gains in financial stability, hope, and connection — alongside continued and, in some measures, worsening challenges around debt stress, full-time employment, evictions, and mental health. The sections that follow present both, in keeping with the Initiative's commitment to prioritizing felt difference over a simplified success metric narrative.

WHERE TO GO DEEPER

This report builds on and references several companion resources: the Year One Impact Report, the Steelcase Foundation website, the Year Two Research & Evaluation Summary (Appendix A), the Investment in Families Messaging Guide (Appendix B), the Families First Policy Framework (Appendix C), and the Resources Used by Family Leaders in Year 2 (Appendix D).

THE BROADER LANDSCAPE

IIF does not operate in a vacuum. Its second year has unfolded against a national and state landscape in which families, and particularly families navigating low or moderate incomes, are absorbing some of the sharpest policy and economic pressures in our country's history.

FAMILIES ARE ABSORBING THE COST OF POLICY CHANGE

Federal legislative changes (including H.R. 1) have reshaped eligibility rules and funding levels for major safety-net programs, layering new documentation and work-reporting requirements on top of systems that Family Leaders already describe as difficult to navigate. Combined with continued cuts and restructuring across the broader social safety net, the high cost of living, and wages that have not kept pace with inflation, many families are facing greater precarity with fewer supports than they had a year ago.

This is compounded by a public narrative environment that frequently frames public assistance through a lens of fraud and waste, rather than need and dignity — a framing Family Leaders have directly and repeatedly pushed back against (see the Investment in Families Messaging Guide, Appendix B). For some families in Kent County and across Michigan, immigration enforcement activity, including family separation connected to immigration actions, has added another layer of fear and instability that shapes daily decision-making, even for families not directly affected.

AN INITIATIVE BRIDGING TWO ELECTION CYCLES

IIF launched during the 2024 general election cycle and is now moving through its second year alongside the 2026 midterms — a period in which family and economic policy remain central and contested topics across the political spectrum. This context matters for how the Initiative's findings are shared: the goal is not to align with any single political position, but to ensure that Family Leaders' lived experience — which cuts across partisan lines — informs how policymakers of every party understand what families need to succeed.



DIRECT CASH POLICY IS EVOLVING, AND SO IS IIF'S FRAMING

Direct cash transfer and guaranteed income pilots have proliferated nationally over the past several years, and public and philanthropic conversation about the evidence base continues to evolve, with wins to point to and open questions that remain. IIF has been intentional from the outset in making its cash component a harm-reduction strategy, not the Initiative's defining feature or a guaranteed basic income program. As Year Two data shows, families continue to use cash to meet basic needs and are beginning to use it for savings and future planning. This is real progress and data that coexists with ongoing debt stress and financial vulnerability. Discussions and reporting on IIF should hold both: the wins direct cash is contributing to, and the areas that cash alone cannot fix, such as wages, housing, healthcare access, mental and emotional health, public assistance program design, and policy changes.

FAMILIES ARE DEMANDING SYSTEMS CHANGE

Across these pressures, a consistent throughline has emerged from Family Leaders and the broader statewide advocacy landscape: Families aren't asking for more navigators or programs layered onto a system that already works against them. They are asking for the underlying conditions — tax policy, public assistance design, housing access — to change. Statewide polling conducted through the Michigan Children & Families Summit* work reinforces this: 56% of likely Michigan voters say the state should be doing more to support families, 34% identify the cost of food and groceries as their single biggest challenge, and 41% of Michigan households report they cannot afford basic needs. This demand is the throughline connecting IIF's Year Two findings to its policy levers and to the statewide Families First Policy Framework described later in this report.

**More information on the Michigan Children & Families Summit is available in Appendix C of this report.*



YEAR TWO



YEAR TWO

KEY FINDINGS

The findings below draw on the Year Two Research & Evaluation Summary Report (Appendix A, DataWise Consulting, July 2026), which analyzed data from the annual Social & Emotional Well-Being Survey (October 2024 and October 2025), the annual Financial Well-Being Survey (November 2024, May 2025, and May 2026), and interviews with Family Leaders conducted in February and March 2026. Unless otherwise specified, baseline metrics were assessed in the Social & Emotional Well-Being Survey in October 2024 and the Financial Well-Being Survey in November 2024. Year Two metrics were assessed in the Social & Emotional Well-Being Survey in October 2025 and the Financial Well-Being Survey in May 2026.

Findings are organized around the three domains that shape economic mobility for the cohort. In keeping with IIF's commitment to felt difference over a narrow success metric narrative, each domain presents both meaningful progress and areas that continue to need attention. Because the cohort includes 30 families, percentage changes should be read as directional signals rather than statistically definitive trends.

"Even though I'm making more money now that I get this gift monthly, I still feel like I'm trying to get ahead. Now I just feel like I'm being pressed on every side."

Family Leader

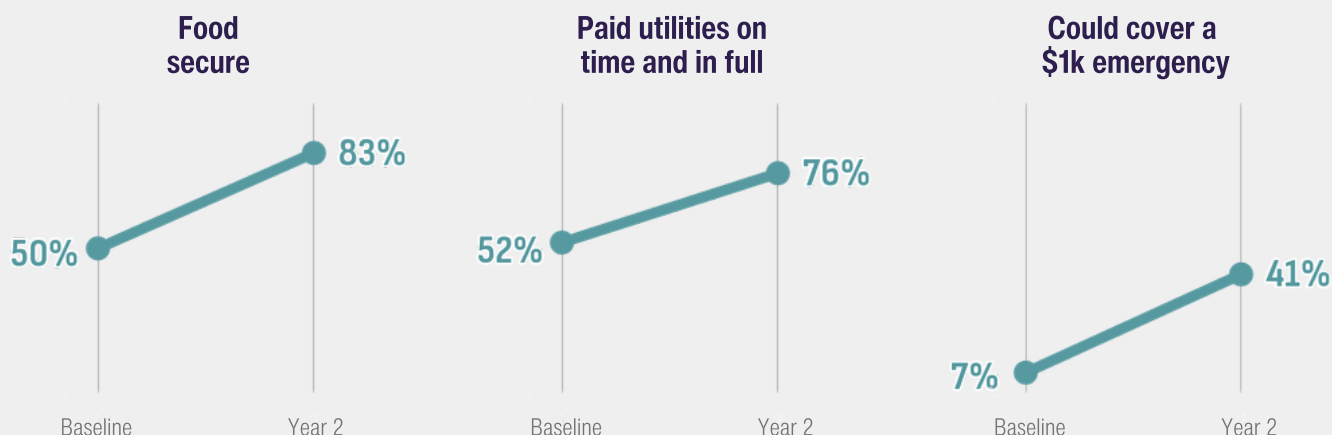
DOMAIN 1

ECONOMIC STABILITY & HOUSEHOLD FUNCTIONING

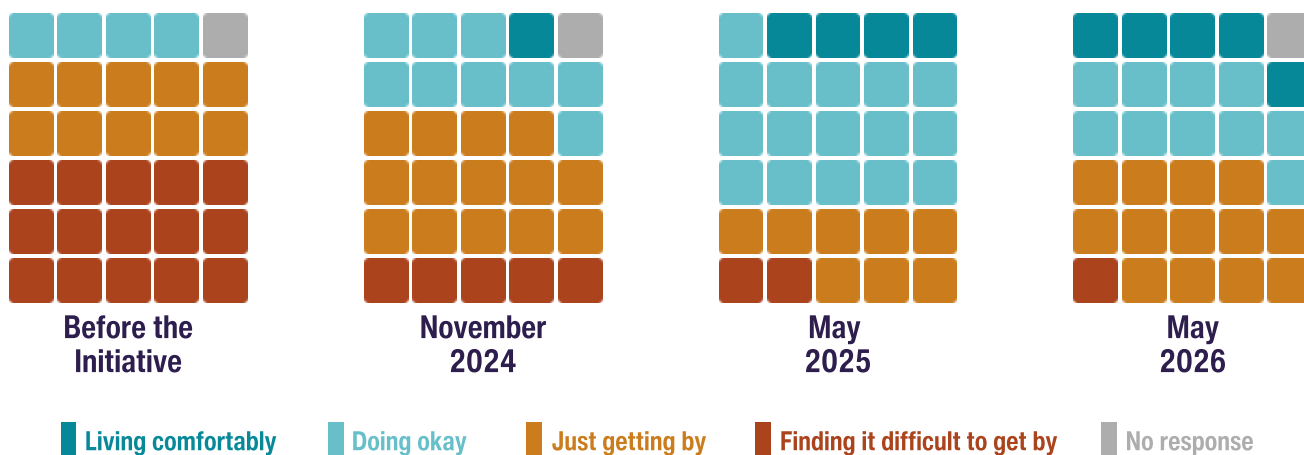
Family leaders are experiencing greater day-to-day financial stability and capacity to manage the demands of everyday life. These improvements sit alongside persistent financial stress and vulnerability to economic shocks.

PROGRESS

More Family Leaders have **enough food**, have kept up with **utility payments**, and could **cover a \$1,000 emergency** than at the beginning of the Initiative.



Two years into the Initiative, fewer Family Leaders are facing a **dire financial situation**, but half are still **just getting by**.

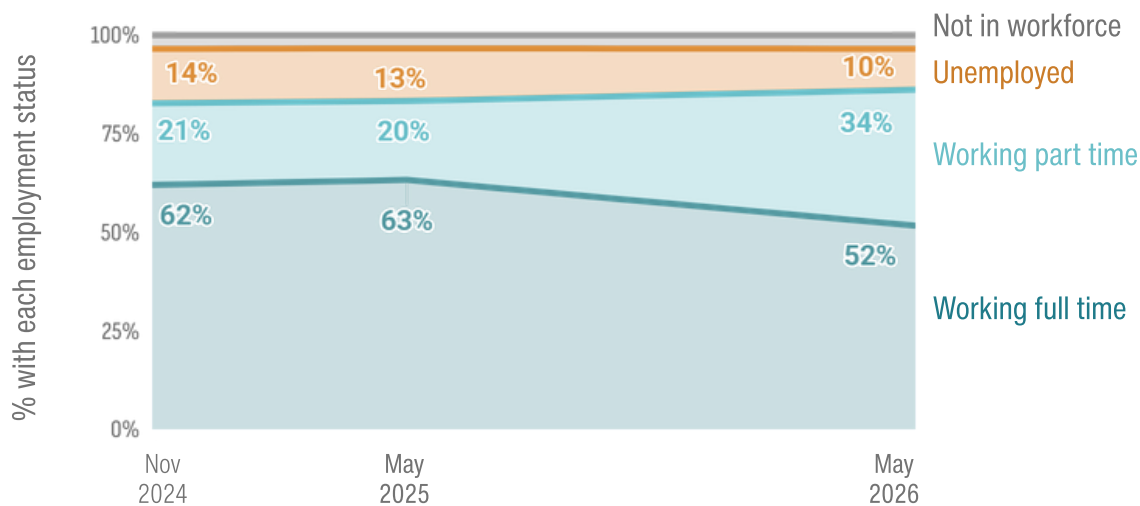


"There's the systemic barriers — not making enough money. And if I'm making too much money, then I'm not going to get support in other areas. I've become dependent on some of that support, so the idea of stepping away from it is a little scary."

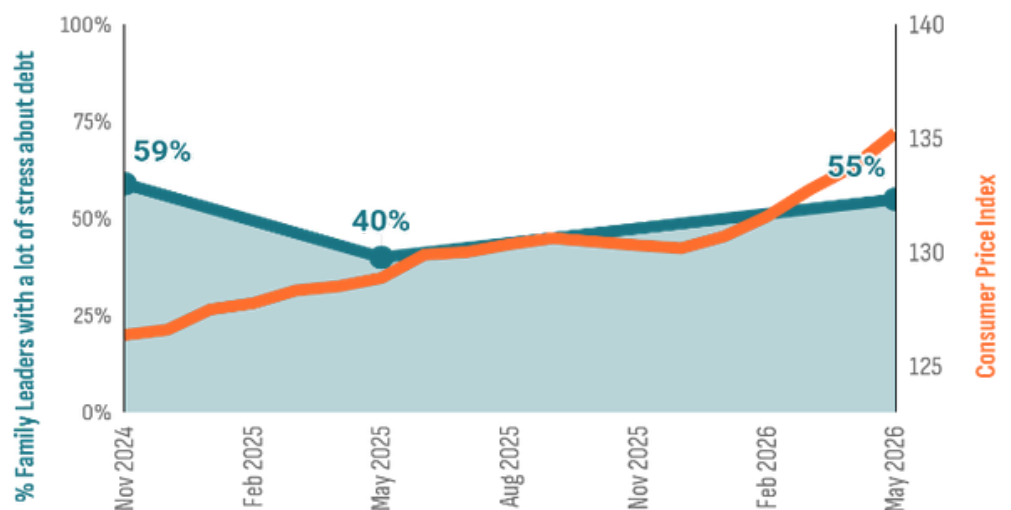
Family Leader

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

Although most are employed, **fewer Family Leaders have full-time jobs** than they did at the beginning of the Initiative.



Debt-related stress dipped at the beginning of the Initiative, but rebounded as **cost of living** surged in early 2026.



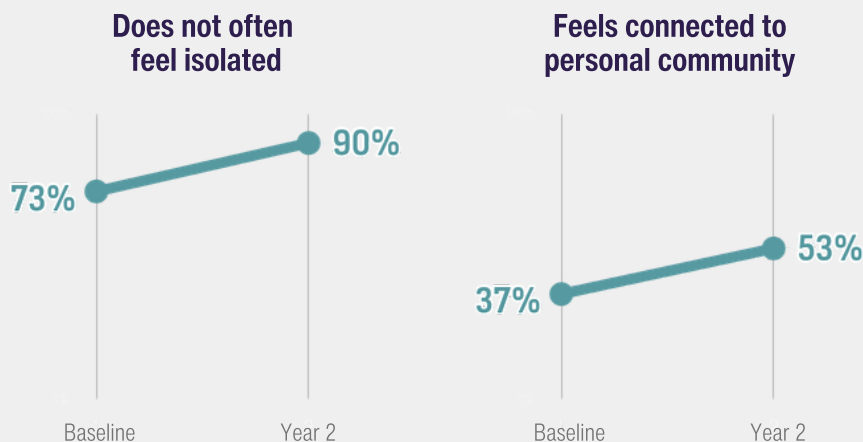
DOMAIN 2

RESILIENCE, WELL-BEING & SOCIAL CONNECTION

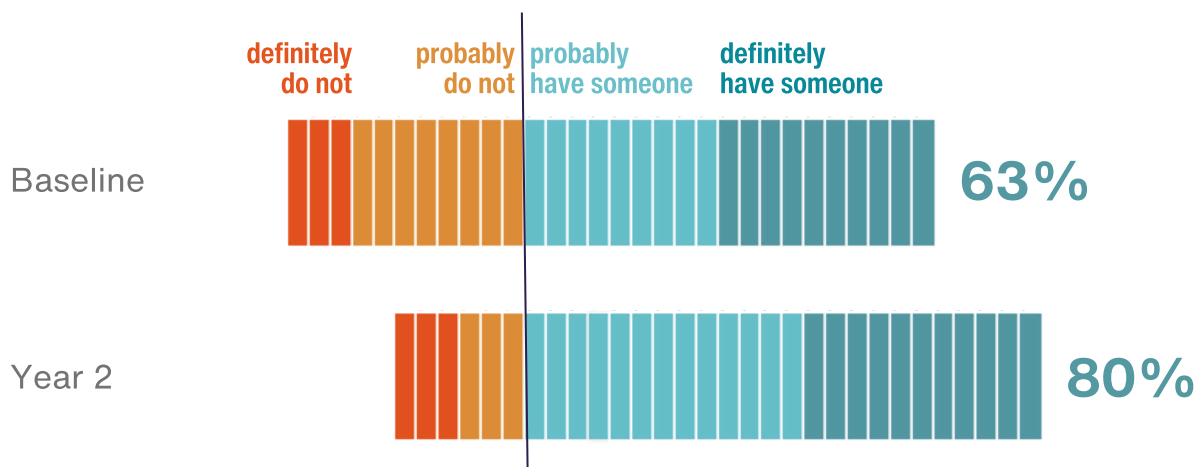
Family Leaders reported meaningful increases in hope, confidence, and connection — even as mental health concerns and healthcare access barriers remain prevalent.

PROGRESS

A growing number of Family Leaders report **not often feeling isolated** and a sense of **connection to a personal community**.



More Family Leaders say they **have someone to turn to for advice**, demonstrating increased social support.



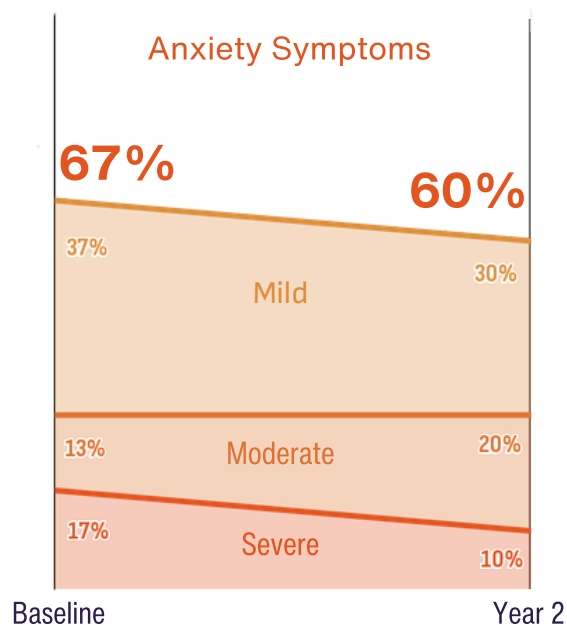
"When you step into the cohort, it's like the outside noise, you don't hear it anymore. Then when you walk out the door, you get sort of a sadness, because it's like, now I have to go back. But the good thing is, I have jewels and gems now. I have little nuggets that I can take with me outside these doors."

Family Leader

CONTINUING CHALLENGES

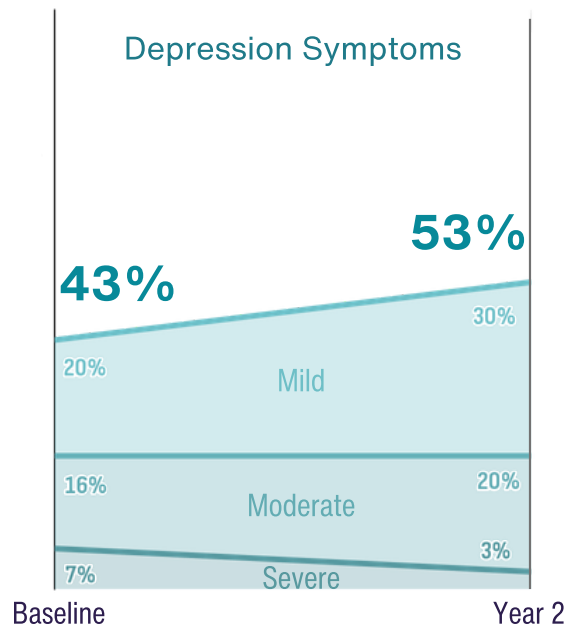
Family Leaders are **3x as likely** to experience **anxiety symptoms** as national benchmarks.*

Although rates dropped slightly, 6 in 10 Family Leaders recently reported at least mild anxiety symptoms.



Family Leaders are **2x as likely** to experience **depression symptoms** as national benchmarks.*

Rates increased slightly; recently, over half of Family Leaders reported at least mild depression symptoms.



**Please note the national data cannot be disaggregated by both race and income simultaneously. As a result, we are unable to make a direct comparison between the national averages and the 30 Family Leaders participating in the Investment in Families Initiative - all of whom are income constrained and identify as Black or Latina.*



"Do I go to the doctor when I'm feeling sick and get that \$250 bill or \$1,500 emergency bill, or do I just try to be a primary doctor at home and for myself? That can be a barrier, having access to health care."

Family Leader

RESPONDING TO WHAT FAMILY LEADERS ASKED FOR: A MENTAL HEALTH CLINICIAN

Mental health and healthcare access barriers have been named consistently by Family Leaders across the first two years of the Initiative. In direct response to the cohort's expressed needs and interests, the Initiative added a dedicated mental health clinician to its wraparound support structure in Year Two, shifting IIF's model from referral-based mental health support to embedded, accessible care. This addition is itself an example of IIF's core design principle in action: families named the gap, and the Initiative's supports evolved to meet it.

DOMAIN 3

FAMILY OPPORTUNITY & FUTURE MOBILITY

Family Leaders described how increased stability has opened opportunities for their children and connected their own goals to intergenerational aspirations for their families' futures.

PROGRESS



Increased access to enrichment activities, extracurriculars, and experiences for children that many Family Leaders did not have access to growing up themselves.

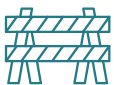


Family Leaders reported being **more present and engaged** with their children and having greater capacity to focus on future goals and longer-term planning rather than immediate financial concerns.



Education continues to emerge as a key pathway toward career advancement and long-term aspirations.

CONTINUING CHALLENGES



Financial, housing, transportation, and childcare barriers continue to affect Family Leaders' ability to pursue education, employment, and personal goals.



Family Leaders described ongoing difficulty navigating systems and accessing available resources.

"I want my kids to be able to have any dream they have even if it's wild and seems so out there ... to do my part as their mother to make these things accessible for them. I don't want a door closed in their face."

Family Leader

IMPLICATIONS

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS CROSSWALK: YEAR ONE TO YEAR TWO

Year One surfaced four broad policy considerations grounded in the cohort's early experience. Year Two data and Family Leader interviews sharpened those considerations into three concrete policy levers the Collaboration Council will pursue over the next 18 months. The table below tracks that evolution.

<i>YEAR ONE POLICY CONSIDERATION</i>	<i>WHAT YEAR TWO DATA & INTERVIEWS SHOWED</i>	<i>YEAR TWO POLICY LEVER</i>
Adopt Flexible Support Models/ Reduce Harm While Systems Evolve & Invest in Relational Infrastructure	Debt-related stress rebounded to 55%; Family Leaders described losing support as income rises ("benefits cliffs"), and named healthcare cost as the top barrier to care (30% affected). Evictions increased from 7% to 14%; Family Leaders described credit and program barriers to entering homeownership programs "from ground zero."	Protect, Expand & Simplify Public Assistance Programs and Improve & Expand Housing Supports
Center Family Voices in System Design	Family Leaders continued to name livable wages and fair taxation as central to real financial stability, alongside full-time employment declining from 62% to 52%.	Advance Fair Tax Policy

Relational infrastructure is truly the foundation on which the cohort model continues to grow and thrive, as reported by the Family Leaders themselves, who share often that the community and relationships they have built together are the main sources of impact for them individually and their families. This specific operating structure through which all levers are identified, prioritized, and pursued permeates the entire Initiative, including the Collaboration Council.



THE COLLABORATION COUNCIL

The Collaboration Council is a dedicated group of individuals, including Family Leaders in the cohort, and organizational representatives from diverse sectors committed to changing system behaviors to advance more equitable outcomes for Michigan families. It exists to translate the deep insight generated by Family Leaders' lived experience into influence that informs and transforms the larger systems families encounter every day.

MISSION

The mission of the Collaboration Council is to take deep insights from the lived experience of Family Leaders to shape bold actions that change systems and improve the everyday lives of families in ways they can feel.

VISION

We envision a future where families are at the center of decision-making, and where the policies, investments, and institutions that shape daily life are designed to help every family flourish across generations.

Systems Change, as the Collaboration Council defines it, is the process of shifting the conditions that sustain persistent problems by transforming harmful worldviews, building relational power, and changing structural policies, practices, and resource flows to advance whole-family well-being.



THREE POLICY LEVER PRIORITIES

Drawing on Year Two findings and Family Leader interviews, the Collaboration Council identified three policy levers to strategically focus on over the next 18 months. On July 8, 2026, cross-sector Collaboration Council members, including Family Leaders, funders, agency and coalition partners, and researchers, met in policy-specific breakout groups to define long-term, intermediate, and short-term goals for each lever using the [Midwest Academy Strategy Chart](#) methodology. These three goals (as outlined below) are preliminary ideas that were built out at the Collaboration Council's October gathering.

1

Advance Fair Tax Policy

2

Protect, Expand & Simplify Public Assistance Programs

3

Improve & Expand Housing Supports

1 Advance Fair Tax Policy

Group members opened by naming the scale of the problem: Michigan ranks 48th nationally in tax fairness, with the top 5% of Michigan earners paying a smaller share of their income in state and local taxes than everyday Michiganders, and large corporations often paying less than small businesses. The group also pointed to precedent for what's possible: the [2021 Child Tax Credit](#) measurably reduced child poverty, and [Massachusetts' voter-approved Child and Family Tax Credit](#) (with California now considering a similar measure) has generated significant new revenue.

WHAT THE GROUP IDENTIFIED

GOAL HORIZON

IN JULY

IN OCTOBER

Long-Term

Michigan's budget and tax system should reflect our values — dignity, opportunity, and shared prosperity, starting with families. Working families currently shoulder the greatest burden in Michigan's tax system.

Intermediate

Secure increases to child tax credits, building on a policy tool with a demonstrated track record of reducing child poverty.

Their intermediate goal by January 2028 is to introduce a millionaire tax to fund the child tax credit and baby bonds.

Short-Term

Explore a business tax dedicated to childcare costs (modeled on a New Hampshire business-community-led effort) and build relationships with Michigan business owners to open that conversation.

Their short-term goal for April 2027 is to build a coalition, collect signatures, connect with grassroots campaigns, and develop a narrative.

The Collaboration Council's discussion centered on two compounding problems Family Leaders and practitioners both described firsthand: benefits cliffs that punish families for earning more, and application and renewal processes so burdensome they discourage families from accessing help at all. One participant shared that a tuition-free adult career training graduate secured a higher-paying job, only for the family to experience a net loss once benefits phased out; another described the same pattern at wages as modest as \$15–16 per hour. Participants also named the current political climate — where families are frequently characterized as wasteful or abusive rather than trusted experts in their own lives — as an active barrier to protecting these programs, alongside operational strain from overwhelmed caseworkers and a shift to universal caseloads that participants described as detrimental.

"The process of applying for these programs in the first place is too cumbersome and prevents people from accessing them. There's so much red tape, so many loops."

Collaboration Council Breakout Participant

The Protect, Expand & Simplify Public Assistance Policy Lever Group identified a gradual benefits rollout and a fixed application and renewal process as long-term goals. A key insight from the discussion is that the challenge exists on both sides of the system: in families' ability to access programs and in the programs' ability to help families advance rather than hold them back.

GOAL HORIZON

WHAT THE GROUP IDENTIFIED (OCTOBER)

Intermediate

Their intermediate goal for January 2028 is to review the Universal Case Load.

Short-Term

Their short-term goal is to review eligibility standards by April 2027.

Group members grounded the conversation in direct experience navigating income-based housing programs, describing feeling stuck in units in locations that don't work for their families, with no ability to transfer, and facing the choice between staying in an ill-fitting unit or restarting the entire application and waiting-list process elsewhere. Application fees, income requirements (often 3x rent), and credit requirements were named as recurring barriers, and even families who secure a housing voucher face a time limit to find a qualifying unit — one participant noted the frustrating irony that vouchers often require income 2–3 times the rent: "If you're making that much money, you wouldn't need the voucher."

"It's chasing your own tail when trying to get housing."

Collaboration Council Breakout Participant

GOAL HORIZON	WHAT THE GROUP IDENTIFIED	
	IN JULY	IN OCTOBER
Long-Term	Make the housing system easier to navigate by simplifying the process so families don't get stuck.	
Intermediate	Adjust housing voucher requirements, including income thresholds that currently exclude the families vouchers are meant to serve.	The intermediate goal they aim to accomplish by January 2028 is to cap or ban application fees to put money back in renters' pockets.
Short-Term	Reduce or eliminate housing application fees.	Their short-term goal is to determine, by April 2027, who and what controls the application requirements.

Each lever is grounded in detailed working notes maintained by the Collaboration Council and its partners, and each connects directly to the statewide Families First Policy Framework described in the next section.

FAMILIES FIRST

POLICY FRAMEWORK

Family Leaders in the Investment in Families Initiative are one voice within a much larger, statewide chorus. Across Michigan, Family Leaders, advocates, and system leaders are asking policymakers to put families first — and IIF's Collaboration Council is part of that coalition.

The Families First Policy Framework was developed through the Michigan Children & Families Summit, a series of convenings hosted by the Steelcase Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, drawing on prior summit gatherings, small focus groups of summit attendees, and a communal survey conducted in fall 2025. The Framework is organized around five Strategic Policy Pillars. The full framework is included as Appendix C.

THE FIVE STRATEGIC POLICY PILLARS



HOW IIF'S POLICY LEVERS CONNECT TO THE STATEWIDE FRAMEWORK

Each of the three policy levers identified by the Collaboration Council has clear alignment with the Families First Policy Framework, reinforcing that what Kent County Family Leaders are experiencing and asking for mirrors the priorities being raised by families across Michigan:

- Advance Fair Tax Policy aligns directly with Pillar 4 (Modernize Michigan's Tax and Budget System). Family Leaders' call for fair taxation echoes the Framework's finding that families shoulder the greatest burden in Michigan's current tax system, even as most likely voters say the state should be doing more.
- Protect, Expand & Simplify Public Assistance Programs connects to Pillar 1 (Make Michigan Affordable) and Pillar 2 (Build a Care System Families Can Count On), as both call for assistance, childcare, and care systems designed around what families need, not around eligibility cliffs and administrative burden.
- Improve & Expand Housing Supports connects directly to Pillar 1's call for affordable, stable housing through increased supply and targeted family-focused supports, and reflects the same voucher and application barriers MCFS landscape mapping identified statewide.

By anchoring IIF's Year Two levers in this statewide framework, the Initiative positions the experience of 30 Kent County Family Leaders as concrete, lived evidence for a policy agenda already being carried forward by a broader coalition, strengthening the case for change at both the local and state level.



LOOKING AHEAD

ADVOCACY IN MOTION

With three policy levers identified, the Collaboration Council will move into organizing and implementing advocacy efforts connected to each priority over the next 18 months. Family Leaders will engage in group-determined policy and advocacy actions alongside community partners, ensuring that advocacy strategy — like every other part of this Initiative — is shaped by those with lived experience, not designed around them.

PHILANTHROPIC CONSIDERATIONS

Year One offered three philanthropic considerations for funders seeking to align power, practice, and purpose: embedding participatory design requirements in grantmaking, encouraging public-private partnerships that center family voice in governance, and promoting transparency in how philanthropic funds are allocated and evaluated. These considerations remain the Steelcase Foundation's operating commitments in Year Two.

A BLUEPRINT FOR OTHERS TO ENGAGE

As IIF moved through its second year, the Initiative began to translate its model into a broader blueprint, alongside sector-specific playbooks, so that other funders, systems leaders, and communities could engage with this way of working. Stay tuned: opportunities for how you and your sector can plug into this collective work are coming in Year Three.





Investment In Families

Steelcase Foundation

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the 30 Family Leaders whose courage, insight, and leadership drive this work, and whose voices shape every page of this report.

We are grateful to our partners: the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, DataWise Consulting LLC, UpTogether, ICCF Community Homes, Bellwether Public Relations, Brigham Consulting, Carbon Stories, and the many organizations and programs that walked alongside Family Leaders this year.

We also thank the members of the Collaboration Council, the Narrative Advisory Group, and the Research Advisory Group for the time, insight, and accountability they bring to this work, and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and fellow members of the Michigan Children & Families Summit for their statewide partnership on the Families First Policy Framework.



PARTNERS

UpTogether is a systems change organization working to disrupt the status quo approach to ending poverty because it's not working. They distribute the monthly cash transfers to the Investment in Families Initiative Family Leaders, which is part of the wraparound support received through participation.

ICCF Community Homes became the host of the Investment in Families Initiative coordinator position and the dedicated Michigan Department of Health and Human Services caseworker, as well as the location host for Initiative programming during Year Two. ICCF's housing expertise is also an important resource for the cohort partners participating in the Investment in Families Initiative.

Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) has provided a dedicated case worker to support the navigation of systems for all 30 cohort partners participating in the Investment in Families Initiative. Their work is integral to gaining valuable insight and feedback on how current systems are working or not working for Michigan families.

Brandi Berry (Mental Health Clinician) joined the team of partners supporting the Investment in Families Initiative during Year Two to provide voluntary and confidential real-time support and referrals for follow-up to Family Leaders during cohort gatherings. Brandi brings experience and expertise as a mom, a doula, a therapist, and a licensed social worker.

DataWise Consulting LLC

DataWise is the dedicated research partner for the Investment in Families Initiative. Their team works in collaboration with the 30 Family Leaders and the four Research Advisory Group members to ensure the consistent gathering of data to inform the work of the Initiative and its constant evolution.

Bellwether Public Relations

Bellwether is the dedicated public relations and narrative partner for the Investment in Families Initiative. Their team works in collaboration with the 30 Family Leaders and the four Narrative Advisory Group members to ensure intentional and strategic storytelling around the lived experiences and narratives of the Family Leaders as the work of the Initiative continues to evolve.

Brigham Consulting

Brigham partners with leaders and organizations to align what they value with how work actually happens. They provide guidance, support, and alternative framing to how we think and speak about previously held narratives with the 30 Family Leaders and the four Narrative Advisory Group members as we move the Initiative forward.

Carbon Stories

Carbon exists to help people communicate the value of what they make and do through intentional content, where they treat every project as a chance to grow and create work they are honored to be a part of. Carbon has been documenting the Investment in Families Initiative journey since day one, capturing big milestones and small moments through still and video photography.



WE THANK YOU
FOR YOUR SUPPORT OF OUR
FAMILY LEADERS



Steelcase Foundation

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APPENDIX A

YEAR TWO RESEARCH & EVALUATION SUMMARY REPORT

July 30, 2026

Summary of Research Findings: Year 2

Steelcase Foundation Investment In Families Initiative



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DataWise Consulting, LLC

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Introduction and overview

In 2024, the Steelcase Foundation launched the 10-year [Investment In Families Initiative](#) to partner with Family Leaders in Kent County, MI. The goal is to better understand families' needs and aspirations over time and to shift how systems behave so they can more effectively support families. As the research and evaluation partner selected by the Steelcase Foundation, DataWise Consulting is evaluating how long-term supports, including family cash transfers, wraparound services, and personalized navigation contribute to Family Leaders' progress toward their self-defined goals through the Initiative's cohort model.

This report presents an integrated analysis of Family Leaders' experiences, progress, and ongoing challenges across the first two years of the Investment In Families Initiative. Findings are organized around domains that shape economic mobility, recognizing that progress, opportunity, and stability are influenced by multiple and interconnected aspects of Family Leaders' lives.

How findings were selected

Findings were selected based on several criteria:

- magnitude of change
- consistency across data sources
- alignment with family leader narrative experiences
- relevance to economic mobility
- usefulness for the Initiative's learning

Collectively, these criteria helped identify findings that clarify Family Leaders' progress, ongoing challenges, and considerations for future Initiative planning. Priority findings were selected to reflect both [areas of progress](#) and [areas requiring continued attention](#).

Organizing framework

The findings that follow are organized around family leader life domains rather than data source. Findings across three DataWise reports from Year 2 research activities were examined through an economic mobility lens, recognizing that such mobility is at the core of the Steelcase Foundation's goals and future policy advocacy metrics. Considering this, the [EMPath Economic Mobility Bridge framework](#) (EMB) informed the conceptual foundation for this analysis. The EMB recognizes that economic mobility is shaped by interconnected factors that extend beyond financial circumstances. These factors include family stability, well-being, financial management, education and training, and employment and career. This framework supports a holistic understanding of family leader experiences and the conditions that influence stability, opportunity, and mobility over time.

Data sources

The report draws upon findings from three data collection tools in the Initiative:

- **Social and Emotional Well-being Survey:** Wave 1 (October 2024), Wave 2 (October 2025)
- **Financial Well-being Survey:** Wave 1 (November 2024), Wave 2 (May 2025), Wave 3 (May 2026)
- **Qualitative interviews** with Family Leaders (February and March 2026)

To illustrate changes over the first two years of the Initiative, survey findings are typically presented as a comparison between results from Year 2 and results from the first wave of each survey (administered in October and November of 2024). Findings presented as a single data point reflect Year 2 results only.

Methodological considerations

Findings presented in this report are informed by multiple sources of quantitative and qualitative data, providing insight into Family Leaders' experiences, felt difference, and perceptions of progress and barriers across the first two years of the Initiative. The following considerations should guide interpretation of the findings.

Findings should be interpreted as indicators of family leader experience and observed trends rather than evidence of causation. Benchmark comparisons provide useful context but should be interpreted cautiously given the relatively small cohort size. Because the cohort includes 30 families, changes in a relatively small number of Family Leaders may result in noticeable percentage shifts from year to year.

Qualitative findings (from family leader interviews) provide important insight into how Family Leaders experience, interpret, and navigate change over time. Family leader narratives add context and meaning to quantitative findings while illuminating experiences that may not be fully captured through survey data. Findings should be interpreted as reflective of the perspectives of Family Leaders who shared their experiences through interviews.

Family leader life domains

Findings across the first two years of the Initiative suggest meaningful progress across multiple domains associated with economic mobility: **Economic Stability and Household Functioning**, **Resilience, Well-being and Social Connection**, and **Family Opportunity and Future Mobility**.

Family leaders reported greater financial stability, stronger coping resources, increased social support, and positive impacts on children and family experiences. At the same time, financial stress, mental health concerns, healthcare access challenges, and other structural barriers

continue to shape family leader experiences. Together, these findings highlight both the **progress Family Leaders are making** and the **importance of sustained investment in the supports, resources, and opportunities that contribute to long-term economic mobility**.

Domain 1: Economic stability and household functioning

Findings suggest that Family Leaders are experiencing greater day-to-day financial stability and increased capacity to manage the demands of everyday life. Improvements in food security, financial functioning, emergency preparedness, and household stability point to meaningful gains in Family Leaders' ability to meet immediate needs and navigate financial challenges.

In contrast, persistent financial stress, limited savings, employment concerns, and housing instability indicate that many Family Leaders remain vulnerable to economic shocks. While Family Leaders appear to be building a stronger foundation for long-term economic mobility, that progress remains sensitive to conditions that can disrupt financial stability and opportunity.

Key findings

Ability to meet basic needs

- Food security increased from 50% to 83%.
- Concerns about running out of food decreased from 48% to 14%.
- Being able to pay utility bills “in full and on time” increased from 52% to 76%.

Financial stability and resilience

- Family leaders reporting *living comfortably* or *doing okay* increased from 37% to 51%. Notably, only 14% of Family Leaders had reported *living comfortably* or *doing okay* before being selected for the Initiative.
- Being behind on finances *never* or *rarely* increased from 24% to 52%.
- Ability to cover a \$1,000 emergency increased from 7% to 41%.
- Homeownership increased from 3% to 21%.

Continuing financial vulnerabilities

- While debt-related stress initially decreased from 59% in 2024 to 40% in 2025, it has since increased to 55% in 2026.
- Full-time employment declined from 62% to 52%.
- Evictions increased from 7% to 14%.

“Even though I’m making more money now that I get this gift monthly, I still feel like I’m trying to get ahead. Now I just feel like I’m being pressed on every side.”

Family leader perspectives

Family leader narratives echoed many of the improvements observed in the quantitative findings. Family leaders described greater financial stability, increased confidence in their ability to manage household needs, and a growing sense of financial control.

Several Family Leaders noted that the additional resources allowed them to move beyond immediate survival concerns and begin planning for the future. Family leaders' narratives also reflected the reality that financial pressure remains present even as circumstances improve.

"I can focus on school because I'm not hyper-focused on financial downfalls."

Domain 2: Resilience, well-being, and social connection

Family leaders reported meaningful increases in hope, connection, and belonging across the first two years of the Initiative. Measures of confidence, coping, social support, and community connection all moved in a positive direction. Family leaders also described feeling more connected to others, more supported in pursuing their goals, and more optimistic about the future.

Mental health concerns remain prevalent, and barriers to healthcare continue to affect many Family Leaders. The findings suggest that **hope, belonging, and social connection are important dimensions of well-being that can evolve even when other challenges remain present**. Rather than representing competing realities, these findings reflect the complexity of Family Leaders' experiences and the multiple factors that contribute to well-being over time.

Key findings

Hope, confidence, and coping

- Average hope score remains stable and relatively high at 4.2 (on a 1 to 5 scale).
- Confidence handling personal problems increased from 67% to 74%.
- Ability to manage difficult problems remained high, increasing slightly from 90% to 96%.
- Ability to remain calm because of coping skills increased from 50% to 66%.
- Feeling that things were *often* going their way increased from 30% to 44%.

Connection, belonging, and support

- Having someone to turn to for advice increased from 63% to 80%.
- Feeling isolated from others *often* decreased from 27% to 10%.
- Feeling connected to a personal community increased from 37% to 53%.
- Having a voice in one's local community remained low but increased from 11% to 17%.
- Sixty percent *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that they feel connected to others in the cohort.
- Ninety percent *agreed* that they have a voice within the cohort.
- Ninety-four percent expressed interest in developing stronger relationships within the cohort.

Mental health and healthcare access

- Thirty percent of Family Leaders experienced barriers to healthcare, with cost cited as the primary barrier.
- Sixty percent of Family Leaders reported mild, moderate, or severe anxiety symptoms, a slight decrease from 67%.
- Symptoms of depression increased from 43% to 53%.
- Reported depression was just over double the average for U.S. women.¹_{F0}
- Reported anxiety was nearly three times the rate compared to the average rate for U.S. women.²_{F1}
- Ever having been diagnosed with depression (63%) was approximately double that reported among women in Kent County (31%).³_{F2}

Family leader perspectives

The strongest themes emerging from family leader narratives centered on hope, belonging, and connection. Family leaders described gaining confidence in their ability to pursue goals, developing stronger coping skills, and finding encouragement through relationships with other cohort members. Many Family Leaders also spoke about the importance of being part of a community where they feel seen, valued, and supported.

"I have found community, a place where I belong, and a place where I can dream. And there's so much hope in that."

"When you step into the cohort, it's like the outside noise, you don't hear it anymore. Then when you walk out the door, you get sort of a sadness, because it's like, now I have to go back. But the good thing is, I have jewels and gems now. I have little nuggets that I can take with me outside these doors."

¹ Note that the comparison group for both anxiety and depression measures is all U.S. women, with no breakdown by race, income, etc. Additionally, due to differences in the size of the cohort group and the national comparison group, findings should be interpreted with caution.

² Same as above.

³ Note that the comparison group here is all women in Kent County, with no breakdown by race, income, etc. Additionally, due to differences in the size of the cohort group and the county comparison group, findings should be interpreted with caution.

Mental health concerns and barriers to healthcare remained present in family leader experiences, reinforcing the importance of continued attention to emotional well-being and access to care.

"Do I go to the doctor when I'm feeling sick and get that \$250 bill or \$1,500 emergency bill, or do I just try to be a primary doctor at home and for myself? That can be a barrier, having access to health care."

Domain 3: Family opportunity and future mobility

Family leaders frequently described the ways in which the Initiative influenced opportunities for their children and families. Increased financial stability has created space for children to participate in activities, access new experiences, and pursue opportunities that may have otherwise remained out of reach. Family leaders also described being more present with their children, reducing household stress, and creating conditions that support family well-being.

Many Family Leaders connected their own goals and aspirations to the futures they envision for their children. Education, career advancement, and personal growth were often described not only as individual pursuits, but also as investments in future generations. Financial, housing, transportation, employment, childcare, and system navigation barriers remain present, shaping Family Leaders' ability to pursue long-term goals and opportunities. The findings highlight how economic mobility extends beyond individual outcomes to influence family well-being, future opportunity, and intergenerational possibility.

"They are changing our lives. And I hope that we can continue to change lives, starting with our city and hopefully expand[ing] to every state in the country."

Key findings

Positive family impacts

- For some Family Leaders, reduced financial stress contributed to greater household stability and family well-being.
- Family leaders described being more present and engaged with their children.
- Family leaders reported greater ability to support the needs of their families.

Opportunities for children

- Family leaders reported increased access to opportunities, activities, and enrichment experiences for their children.
- Participation in extracurricular and enrichment activities supported children's growth and development.

- Family leaders described being able to provide experiences for their children that were not available to themselves when growing up.
- Family leaders reported benefits to their children from opportunities to connect with peers and participate in a broader community.

Goals, education, and future orientation

- Family leaders reported progress toward individualized goals.
- Education emerged as an important pathway toward career advancement and long-term aspirations.
- Family leaders described increased capacity to focus on future goals and opportunities.
- Family leaders reported greater ability to think beyond immediate financial concerns and engage in longer-term planning.

Persistent barriers to opportunity

- Financial barriers continue to affect Family Leaders' ability to pursue goals and opportunities.
- Housing barriers remain a challenge for some Family Leaders.
- Transportation barriers continue to affect access to employment, services, and opportunities.
- Childcare responsibilities influence Family Leaders' ability to pursue education, employment, and personal goals.
- Family leaders described challenges navigating systems and accessing available resources.

Intergenerational opportunity

- Family leaders expressed a strong desire to expand opportunities for their children.
- Family leaders viewed their own growth and goal attainment as investments in their children's futures.
- Family leaders described serving as role models for their children and families.
- Several Family Leaders framed progress as intergenerational, extending beyond their own households.

"I'm doing this for you guys, and it's generational, because whatever I pour into you guys from learning this, then you guys will pour into your kids."

Family leader perspectives

Family leader narratives highlighted how increased stability has shaped everyday family life, future planning, and opportunities for children. Family leaders described being more present with their families, supporting their children's interests and development, and pursuing goals that previously felt out of reach. One family leader noted her children's point of view: *"Mom is present. Mom is here."* Many viewed their progress not only in terms of their own well-being, but also in terms of its impact on future generations.

"As a kid I wasn't able to [go on a school trip]... However, for my son, he's able to do that this year."

"[Playing soccer] keeps them disciplined. I feel like they need that discipline...."

"I want my kids to be able to have any dream they have even if it's wild and seems so out there ... to do my part as their mother to make these things accessible for them. I don't want a door closed in their face."

Celebrations and considerations

The findings presented throughout this report suggest that economic mobility is neither linear nor defined by a single outcome. Family leaders described meaningful changes in their ability to meet basic needs, support their families, pursue goals, build relationships, and imagine new possibilities for the future. However, Family Leaders also continue to navigate challenges that influence opportunity, well-being, and long-term stability.

Celebrations

Greater financial stability and household functioning

Family leaders reported meaningful gains in their ability to meet basic needs, manage financial obligations, and prepare for unexpected expenses. Improvements in food security, utility stability, financial functioning, and emergency preparedness suggest that many Family Leaders experienced increased day-to-day financial stability during the first two years of the Initiative. Growth in homeownership further signals progress toward longer-term economic security and asset building.

The value of community and Initiative participation

Family leaders consistently described the Initiative as more than a source of financial support. Many emphasized the value of connecting with other Family Leaders, sharing experiences, learning from one another, and developing meaningful relationships that fostered a strong sense of belonging, support, and being understood by others with similar lived experiences. The

combination of a strong sense of voice, belonging, and interest in developing deeper relationships suggests that the Initiative community itself is an important contributor to family leader experiences and outcomes beyond cash transfers.

Strengthened hope, coping, and well-being

Family leaders reported increased hope, confidence, capacity to cope, and social support over time. Many described feeling more optimistic about the future and more capable of navigating challenges. These findings suggest that Family Leaders are building emotional and relational resources that support their overall well-being.

Family leaders also frequently described the ways in which increased stability has created opportunities for their children and families. Children have gained access to enrichment activities, new experiences, and expanded opportunities, while Family Leaders reported greater capacity to pursue educational, professional, and personal goals. Many framed these efforts as investments not only in themselves, but in future generations.

Considerations

Financial stress and wealth building

Despite improvements in financial stability, many Family Leaders continued to experience significant financial stress. Debt-related concerns remained prevalent, and savings levels remained limited for many households. These findings suggest that increased stability and long-term wealth building may not occur at the same pace and may require different support and strategies over time.

Mental health and healthcare access

Mental health concerns remained elevated throughout the research findings, and many Family Leaders reported experiencing continued barriers to accessing healthcare. While Family Leaders reported gains in hope, coping, and social support, anxiety, depression, and healthcare affordability remain important considerations. Continued attention to emotional well-being and healthcare access may provide important context for understanding family leader outcomes over time.

Structural conditions shaping opportunity

Family leaders continued to navigate challenges related to housing, transportation, employment, childcare, and system navigation. These conditions influenced Family Leaders' ability to pursue goals and access opportunities across multiple areas of life. The findings reinforce that economic mobility is shaped not only by individual effort and resources, but also by broader conditions and systems that influence opportunity.

Conclusion

Findings from the first two years of the Initiative reveal that economic mobility is experienced across far more than financial circumstances alone. Family leaders described improvements in their ability to meet basic needs, support their families, pursue personal goals, strengthen relationships, and create opportunities for their children. They also described gaining confidence, finding community, and developing a greater sense of possibility for the future.

The findings also suggest that progress is often interconnected. Changes in financial stability were accompanied by changes in well-being, social connection, positive family experiences, and future aspirations. Family leader narratives further illustrate how improvements in one area of life can create opportunities in others, reinforcing the multidimensional nature of economic mobility.

Financial stress, mental health concerns, healthcare access barriers, housing instability, and other structural challenges continue to influence Family Leaders' lives and future possibilities. Yet Family Leaders repeatedly described investing in futures that extended beyond themselves. Whether reflected in stronger support systems, expanded opportunities for children, or progress toward personal goals, Family Leaders emphasized building greater stability and opportunity for future generations. Their experiences provide valuable insight into the conditions that support both the ability to improve upon individual and family well-being over time.

The findings also underscore that economic mobility is shaped by more than individual behaviors or decisions. Throughout the first two years of the Initiative, Family Leaders pursued goals, strengthened relationships, and worked toward greater financial stability while simultaneously navigating broader economic, social, and policy conditions beyond their control. Recognizing these contextual influences is essential to understanding both the progress Family Leaders have made and the conditions that continue to shape economic mobility over time.

APPENDIX B

INVESTMENT IN FAMILIES MESSAGING GUIDE



Investment In Families

SF Steelcase Foundation

Investment in Families Messaging Guide

Investment in Families Shared Language

Investment in Families

The Investment in Families Initiative is a 10-year participatory research project in partnership with 30 Family Leaders in Kent County, Michigan, led by the Steelcase Foundation. The initiative has two components: a learning cohort study and policy campaign. The research project is designed to study the impact of wraparound supports designed around needs and solutions proposed by the families themselves — identifying what's working, what policies need to change, and where additional opportunities exist.

Family Leaders

Family Leaders are the 30 women participating in the Investment in Families cohort. They are all Kent County mothers with expertise in leading their families. The Investment in Families Initiative believes that all parents and caregivers who are actively guiding and supporting their families should be considered Family Leaders.

Felt Difference

A change that is real, lived, and experienced through the senses rather than just an abstract or intellectual idea of change. Felt difference registers directly in our bodies, emotions, or nervous systems.

Breathing Room

Having enough extra time, physical space, or freedom from stress to relax, think, recover, plan, and dream.

Well-Being

The state of being healthy, happy, and safe; a mix of feeling good and living a full life.

Whole Child

The "whole child" approach is an educational and developmental philosophy that nurtures a child's complete growth. It addresses their academic, social, emotional, physical, and cognitive needs, ensuring that every aspect of a child's growth is supported—rather than focusing strictly on academic test scores.

Whole Family

"Whole Family" means all the members of a family group together without leaving anyone out. It refers to everyone in the household or relative circle.

Collaboration Council

The Collaboration Council is a dedicated group of individuals and organizational representatives from diverse sectors who are committed to changing system behaviors to advance more equitable outcomes for Michigan families through the exchange of learning, guidance, and insight to strengthen and expand the learning and impact of the Steelcase Foundation's Investment In Families Initiative. The purpose of the Collaboration Council is to ensure that what happens through Investment in Families contributes to a growing national movement to rethink how we invest in families and how we define whole family well-being in this country. The Collaboration Council helps translate insights learned from the brilliance of Family Leaders into influence that informs and transforms the larger systems families encounter every day.

Collaboration Council Mission

The mission of the Collaboration Council is to take deep insights from the lived experience of Family Leaders to shape bold actions that change systems and improve the everyday lives of families in ways they can feel.

Collaboration Council Vision

We envision a future where families are at the center of decision-making, and where the policies, investments, and institutions that shape daily life are designed to help every family flourish across generations.

Systems Change

Systems Change is the process of shifting the conditions that hold persistent problems in place by transforming harmful worldviews, building relational power, and changing structural policies, practices, and resource flows in ways that advance whole family well-being.

Direct Cash Transfers

Direct Cash Transfers refer to a set monthly amount of cash that is directly deposited into Family Leaders' bank accounts to compensate them in a way that provides predictable and reliable support. This cash is provided without predetermined conditions or expectations on how it should be spent. Family leaders are trusted to use the cash in the way that is best for their families.

Words to Use & Words to Lose

Family Leaders were asked to identify language that accurately and respectfully details their lived experiences, as well as language that does not. We offer those words below for consideration when writing or speaking about families, their experiences, and the valuable role they play in these systems. Green words reflect language that is both respectful and constructive. Red words reflect language to avoid or that can be used in negative and disrespectful ways, and therefore should be avoided where possible.

Green Words – Words to Use

- Builder
- Divine matriarch
- Family leader
- Unapologetically whole
- Radically loving
- Justice system
- Selfless
- Multigenerational strength
- Anchor
- Anxiety and depression
- Mental health
- Wonder
- Hope
- Community
- Gateway
- Gift
- Advocate
- Hard working
- Inspiring
- Educated
- Leader
- Professional
- Creative
- Bridge builders
- Redefining generational wealth

Red Words – Words to Lose

- Single mother
- Struggling
- Burdened
- Dependent
- Welfare
- Black
- Hopeless
- Victim
- Queen
- Selfish
- Substantial income
- Low income
- Broken
- Alone
- Single

Messaging Guide for Media & Policymakers

Purpose: To help media, policymakers, and coalition partners represent the Investment in Families Initiative (IIF) and the Family Leaders' experience accurately, grounded in what Family Leaders themselves have said, not assumptions about them.

Core Frame

The IIF is not a program delivered to families — it's a systems-change model driven by families. Family Leaders bring lived experience directly into policy, program design, and public narrative through the Research and Narrative advisory groups and the Collaboration Council. Coverage or policy language that treats Family Leaders as recipients rather than co-architects misrepresents the model.

Key Messages (in Family Leaders' own words)

Use these as direct-quote candidates or paraphrase starting points:

- "We are not low income — we are educated, we have our own voices, and we are redefining what generational wealth looks like."
- "We are clearly at a statistical disadvantage and still powering through. Imagine what's possible if the playing field were even."
- "If you know better, do better." — a direct call for policymakers to act on the data, not just collect it.
- "It starts at home: invest in Family Leaders and in a child's early home life, and you shape the future."
- "Drop the stereotypes."

Policy Priorities Family Leaders Have Raised

- Livable wage policy
- Reduced barriers/restrictions within existing assistance programs (several described programs as working against rather than for the people they're meant to help)
- Childcare assistance that doesn't phase out abruptly with income gains
- Coparenting and blended-family support services
- Long-term sustainability of the Initiative beyond its 10-year window

Guidance for Media

- Refer to the existing Words to Use/Words to Lose in this Guide before drafting or approving coverage. In particular: avoid "single mother," "welfare," "dependent," "struggling," "victim," and "low income". Family Leaders have explicitly named these as mischaracterizing their experience.
- Any direct quote used publicly should be confirmed with the individual Family Leader and Bellwether Public Relations before publication — the language above is illustrative and anonymized from internal reflection data, not pre-cleared for attribution.
- Lead with the inside-out framing (lived experience → systems change), not a deficit narrative (crisis → intervention).

Mythbusting FAQ

Myth: Family Leaders are low-income women receiving assistance.

Reality: Family Leaders have said directly, "We are not low-income," "We are educated." Many are working professionals navigating a system that penalizes upward progress, not people defined by need.

Myth: These are "single mothers" struggling to cope.

Reality: One Family Leader put it exactly: "I am not a single mother, I am a mother that happens to be single." Family structure is one fact among many, not the defining identity.

Myth: The Initiative is a support program for dependent families.

Reality: Family Leaders describe wanting the opposite of dependency; several noted that "people don't want to be dependent on assistance" and that the barrier isn't motivation; it's structural: "Can't get ahead even when working hard." The Initiative is positioned as investment and partnership, not aid.

Myth: If the data shows high stress/anxiety, the Initiative isn't working.

Reality: Family Leaders report both real, documented hardship and real, measurable gains (self-reported financial stability improving, difficulty scores dropping from 15 to 2 for some). The Initiative's value is in that trajectory, not the absence of struggle.

Myth: This is primarily a financial-literacy or budgeting program.

Reality: Financial well-being is one strand, but Family Leaders repeatedly centered narrative, voice, and systems change – "Controlling the narrative," "We have our own voices" – as core to what the Initiative delivers.

Myth: A 10-year initiative wraps up its purpose in 10 years.

Reality: Family Leaders raised sustainability as an explicit, unresolved concern. "Sustainability after 10 years" was named directly as a call for policymakers to learn from this research project and build upon it in a sustainable way for more families.

APPENDIX C

FAMILIES FIRST POLICY FRAMEWORK

Five Policy Pillars



POLICY PILLAR

OUTCOMES

Make Michigan affordable for families

Affordability and stability are foundational – nothing else works without it.

- Affordable, stable housing through increased supply, zoning modernization, and targeted family-focused supports
- Affordable, reliable childcare so parents can work and children can thrive
- Affordable health care that doesn't send families into debt or force impossible choices

Build a care system families can count on

When we support caregivers, we support the entire Michigan economy.

- High-quality and reliable childcare families can trust
- A stable early childhood workforce with good wages
- Eldercare and long-term supports that allow families to balance work and caregiving
- Integrated, community-led care models that reflect diverse cultural needs
- Families who stay home to care for children or loved ones have the support they need to stay stable and secure

Quality jobs and real wages that reward work

A strong Michigan economy requires strong families.

- Wage and job standards that ensure work lifts families into stability
- Pathways into high-skill, high-wage industries for all Michiganders
- Jobs that actually work for families—where training, childcare, and transportation line up so families are not hitting roadblocks at every turn

Modernize Michigan's tax + budget system to work for families

How we tax and spend shows who we value – it's time to choose families.

- A real shift of Michigan's budget priorities toward families, not special interests
- Middle- and working-class families benefit from tax reforms and credits
- Sustainable revenue for long-term investments in children, caregivers, and communities

Strengthen public schools as the backbone of Michigan

Strong public schools educate and anchor families, strengthen communities, and secure Michigan's economic future.

- Reliable, adequate funding so every public school can deliver high-quality education and support students' full needs, no matter where they live
- Connected supports across education, health, workforce, and family services—so schools aren't doing this work alone
- Clear school-to-career pathways that lead to real, quality jobs and opportunities in Michigan
- Smart use of resources that puts teachers, classrooms, and student outcomes first

The Michigan Children & Families Summit is a collaborative convening hosted by the Steelcase Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation that brings together cross-sector leaders, policymakers, advocates, and families to develop and advance a families first policy framework for the state of Michigan.



Michigan voters are with us.

EPIC-MRA polled 500 potential Michigan voters from diverse political affiliations across a wide range of issues in April of 2026. These voters consistently supported policies that strengthen family stability, opportunity, and economic security.

Partners should not be hesitant about leading with these priorities. When engaging policymakers, business leaders, the media, and other stakeholders, remember that the public is already signaling a clear desire for leaders to do more for families. **The fact that “Michigan voters overwhelmingly agree” should be at the heart of every conversation.**

- **Democrats** responded most strongly to messages centered on economic hardship and meeting basic needs.
- **Independents** were most motivated by messages about financial stability and opportunity.
- **Republicans** responded best to messages that emphasize empowerment, choice, and economic competitiveness.
- **Across all groups**, financial stability is one of the strongest and most consistent messages tested, suggesting it may serve as a powerful bridge for building broad support around family-focused policies.



78%

A solid majority of Michigan voters say “yes” to the core priorities reflected in the Families-First Policy Framework.

74% Said they support the plan for families that will be proposed by a coalition of groups to urge state leaders to prioritize the passage of laws that address the family affordability crisis.

- 45% **strongly agree**



Polling shows that the economic and affordability argument is **the most resonate**. Michigan voters tell us this consistently. So that's where we want to stay.

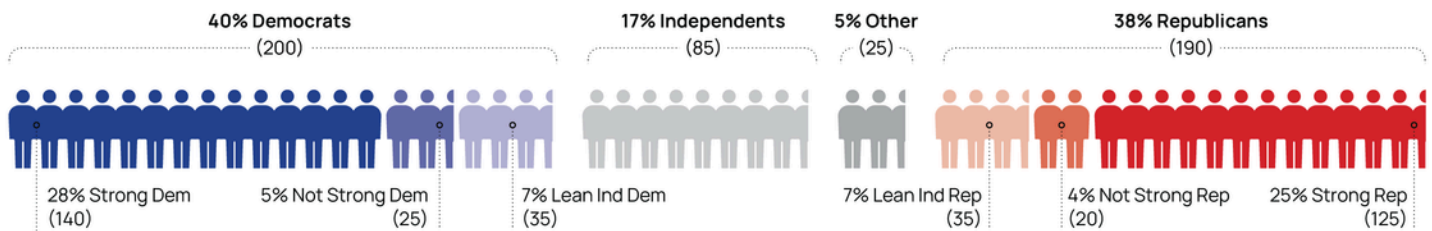
56% Said Michigan should be doing more to support families

- 34% say MI should do **much more** to support families
- 27% say MI does enough already
- 5% say MI does too much



Use this to validate what we're all fighting for. Michigan voters are with you and say the state should be doing more.

Survey Respondents



Highest-Performing Tested Themes by Partisan Affiliation

DEM Most Compelling

- 40% "Building an economy that works for families"
- 31% "Making Michigan work for families"
- 26% "Putting families first"

IND Most Compelling

- 39% "Building an economy that works for families"
- 31% "Putting families first"
- 19% "Making Michigan work for families"

REP Most Compelling

- 37% "Building an economy that works for families"
- 29% "Making Michigan work for families"
- 25% "Putting families first"



Michigan voters want families to have the stability and resources they need to succeed.

While different political audiences respond to different language, this theme consistently emerges across the political spectrum. Lead with shared aspirations around stability, opportunity, and economic security. Tailor supporting messages to your audience, but remember that voters across party lines largely agree on the desired outcome: families should be able to work hard, meet their basic needs, and build a stable future.

APPENDIX D

RESOURCES USED BY FAMILY LEADERS IN YEAR 2

The table below includes a list of organizations and programs that interacted with the cohort during the second year of the Initiative. The interactions were facilitated by IIF staff on behalf of specific cohort partners. The third column, Context, refers to whether the organization and/or program was an employer of a cohort Family Leader, an educational program utilized by the cohort, a support resource or referral program, or a community engagement opportunity for the cohort families.

ORGANIZATION	PROGRAM	CONTEXT
Bissell		Support
Calvary Church	Utility assistance through Care Portal	Support
Calvin University	Wayfinder program	Education
Care Portal	Utility assistance in connection with local churches	Support
Comp Renew	Computer Help	Support
Crossroads Bible Church	Utility assistance through Care Portal	Support
Lake Michigan Credit Union	Kindness Deposit	Support
Michigan Works! West Central	Barrier Removal and Employment Success Program - childcare assistance	Support
Safe Haven Ministries		Support
Salvation Army	Utility assistance	Support
Upcycle Bikes	Bicycle assistance	Support
Village99	Rent assistance	Support