



Building Movement Project



Recognizing All Families to Expand Our Movements:

INSIGHTS FROM THE FAMILY JUSTICE NETWORK



*a better
balance*
the work and family legal center

**FAMILY
VALUES
@ WORK**

**FORWARD
TOGETHER**

Winning
Justice for
Working
Women



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Learn more about the national organizations that made this report possible:

A Better Balance
<https://www.abetterbalance.org>

Family Values @ Work
<http://familyvaluesatwork.org>

Forward Together
<https://forwardtogether.org>

9to5
<http://9to5.org>

INTRODUCTION

The majority of U.S. workers—nearly 80 million individuals—have no legal right to paid sick time or paid family and medical leave.¹ Only 15% of workers receive paid family leave through their employers to bond with a new child or care for a loved one’s serious health condition, and fewer than 40% receive medical leave for their own health needs through short-term disability insurance.² This lack of protection forces workers to make impossible choices between losing pay or jeopardizing their employment during critical life moments like when they are sick, need to care for a loved one, or are welcoming a new child into the family. Over the past decade, campaigns for paid leave for U.S. employees have picked up momentum across the country. These policies aim to codify and protect the right of employees to earn paid time away from work for illness or to care for family members. Many paid sick day laws also have “safe time” provisions that guarantee workers the right to use their paid time to access resources when they or their loved ones experience domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.

Although advocates and organizers are winning campaigns for paid leave, the legal definitions of family that shape leave and benefit policies are too often constrained by images from 1950s television programs that invariably featured a married, heterosexual, white couple raising two or three biological children. It must be noted that the past century’s popular media never *really* reflected the family bonds and obligations of the vast majority of people in the United States.³ The fact that this imaginary ideal still profoundly affects social and legal expectations about family leads to public policies that exclude, penalize or punish LGBTQ people, blended families, single-parent households, families impacted by incarceration, those caring for non-biological children outside of legal guardianship, multi-generational and multi-national families, and more.

Our Families Have Changed

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that more than 80% of households depart from the “nuclear family” model.

Approximately 85 million people in the U.S. live in extended families, and one in five households with children included nonrelatives or relatives other than the child’s parents or siblings.

Everyone cares for a loved one at some point in their lives. The failure of laws in the United States to both support family caregiving and recognize the rich variety of families is a major shortcoming. Fortunately, advocates have been increasingly successful in the fight to guarantee paid leave and expand legal conceptions of who constitutes “family.” Because concepts of family and caregiving are so central to the human experience, the lens of this work can also help create new relationships across movements, engage new leaders, and build power in profound ways.



INNOVATION THROUGH COLLABORATION LAYS THE GROUNDWORK FOR INCLUSIVE FAMILY DEFINITIONS

The Family Justice Network (FJN) was established to connect organizations across the country and support efforts to push progressive policy campaigns to inclusively define family. Before the network was founded, LGBTQ-identified staff at two national organizations—A Better Balance (ABB), a legal advocacy organization dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, and Family Values @ Work (FV@W), a network of state and local coalitions working to advance family-friendly workplace policies—were critical to calling out the issue and bringing groups together to center inclusive family definitions in paid leave campaigns.

In the fall of 2014, ABB and FV@W convened a meeting in Washington, DC of advocates from more than 30 mostly national organizations with the goal of forming a “brain trust” to knit together the intersecting and overlapping agendas of campaigns for LGBTQ rights and work-family leave policies. This meeting, held nine months before the U.S. Supreme Court’s historic ruling on same-sex marriage, anticipated the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ people to secure legal protections nationwide against discrimination, particularly in the workplace. Less than four years since that initial meeting, the Family Justice Network has grown to provide technical assistance, coordination and other support to campaigns in three dozen states working to expand recognition of diverse family structures and raise awareness of the need for inclusive paid leave protections.

The power of the Family Justice Network comes from the collaboration among several national organizations, representing a variety of movements – from economic and reproductive justice to LGBTQ equality, from labor to the movements for healthcare and disability rights.

More About FJN's National Partners

- › **FAMILY VALUES @ WORK** is a national network of coalitions in 27 states working to win paid sick and safe days and paid family and medical leave.
- › **A BETTER BALANCE** uses a range of strategies—including legislative advocacy, litigation, research, public education, and technical assistance to state and local coalitions—to help employees meet the conflicting demands of work and family.
- › **FORWARD TOGETHER** is a multi-issue women of color led organization that builds state power and multi-issue networks, and leverages its relationships with over 200 organizations across the country, through their Strong Families network.
- › **9TO5** is a national membership organization that organizes for public policies that empower working women.
- › **THE EQUALITY FEDERATION** is an advocacy and capacity building organization serving and supporting state-based LGBTQ advocacy organizations in the United States.

Family Values @ Work, A Better Balance and Forward Together have provided deep technical assistance as well as financial resources to build capacity and relationships among their state partners to challenge public perception of who counts as “family” and actively pursue more inclusive family definitions in public policy. In addition, 9to5 and the Equality Federation play leadership roles within the FJN, and their affiliates in many states are key partners in the local and statewide campaigns for paid leave protections with inclusive family definitions. Since each of these five national organizations include a state focus in their strategies to build power, FJN campaigns have created relationships and networking between on-the-ground campaigns that generate power and momentum to advance policy change on the issue of paid leave in particular places, while also creating a pathway for future engagement on federal policy and building a national movement around the shared values that are illuminated by the issue of family recognition.

FAMILIES NEED BOTH POLICY AND CULTURE CHANGE

At their ideal and most inclusive, model paid leave policies explicitly define the relationships included in these policies so the onus is not on workers to make the case that their loved ones are protected and covered. FJN campaigns have won paid sick time laws that include “gold standard” model family definitions in eight places—Arizona, both the city of Chicago and surrounding Cook County (Illinois), Los Angeles, St. Paul (Minnesota), Rhode Island, New York City, and Austin (Texas)—effectively covering more than ten million workers. FJN campaigns have also won inclusive laws—in the state of Georgia, the city of Minneapolis and other places—that, while not as broad as the gold standard, still expand the rights and recognition of many workers with diverse family configurations. In places where it is not yet possible to advance policy that includes

FJN's "Gold Standard" Language

FJN members have prepared a detailed guide to family definitions with a range of inclusive models. The two most frequently used “gold standard” models are:

- 1) In addition to listing specific family members, including “any other individual related by blood or whose close association with the employee is the equivalent of a family relationship,” or
- 2) In addition to listing specific family members, including “any individual related by blood or affinity whose close association with the employee is the equivalent of a family relationship.”



the model language, FJN campaigns work to ensure that paid leave policies broaden family definitions as much as possible, and assure that policies don't codify exclusions against families that are not served by narrow definitions of nuclear families and heterosexual marriage.

Winning policy campaigns is not the only goal of the Family Justice Network. Network partners are also contributing to a culture change that centers recognizing all families. This culture shift is visible in the tenor of the debate on these policies. As efforts across movements expand to build momentum for inclusive family definitions, unlikely alliances become possible and traditional opponents evolve into supporters. For example, early in 2018, a conservative public policy think tank published an article on its website that called on lawmakers to “just get out of the business of attempting to delineate acceptable family relationships, and leave it to the individual employee.”⁴ Over time, it seems that there is less traction—among policymakers and the press—around opposition messages suggesting that inclusive legislation is not workable or threatens traditional ideas about family.

FJN partners deliberately expose numerous entry points to the issue of family recognition - not only the concerns about LGBTQ inclusion within workplace rights, but acknowledging that immigration and racial justice and many more issues also compel the recognition of more diverse forms of family. Because family—whether biological, legal or chosen—affects everyone, organizing and relationship building around the shared value of honoring and recognizing all families is both an effective driver for policy change and a powerful engine of new movement building at the intersection of numerous issues.

What are “Chosen” Families?

Families are not limited by biological or legal ties; they often include close, mutually supportive relationships with close friends. “Chosen” families form when two or more individuals form a close, family-like relationship. Such families might be long-term partners, friends who have become like siblings, or a neighbor who provides regular care to an elderly individual. According to research from the Center for American Progress, nearly one-third of people in the United States report having taken time off of work to care for a friend or chosen family member for a health-related reason, and figures are significantly higher for LGBTQ individuals and people with disabilities.

TWO SNAPSHOTS:

Family Recognition Work in Georgia and New Mexico

This report explores the success of family recognition organizing campaigns in Georgia and New Mexico that were funded and stewarded by Family Justice Network partners. In each place, recent efforts have shown how much change is possible when people are organized around the widely-shared value of family. They also demonstrate the potential to move everyday people to get involved when issues are framed to highlight the failure of public policy to reflect and protect diverse families. Each state illustrates that progress toward changing both policy and culture begins by connecting people and building movement around progressive "family values" – that is, the value of recognizing and honoring *all families*.

GEORGIA

Georgia's state legislature passed the "Family Care Act" in March 2017. This new policy requires employers to allow workers to use their earned sick days to care for family members and is significant because it includes a non-exclusionary definition of family that covers children, spouses, parents, grandparents and anyone else that a worker could claim as a dependent when filing their taxes. The final law was the end result of years of broad-based organizing across the state of Georgia that won support from policymakers across the aisle.

Spurred by new funding prioritized by Family Justice Network partners, 9to5 (a founding member of Family Values @ Work), Georgia Equality (a state LGBTQ organization affiliated with the Equality Federation), Feminist Women's Health Center (a reproductive justice organization and member of Forward Together's Strong Families Network), and Families First (a human service organization) partnered to conduct public education about the new law in communities throughout the state, specifically, reaching beyond the metro Atlanta region.



Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal signs the Family Care Act surrounded by legislative champions and coalition members.

Photo: Office of Gov. Nathan Deal



A Healthy Workforce ABQ press conference held in 2016, when the group submitted more than 24,000 signatures to place paid sick days on the ballot.

Photo: Isaac de Luna



To let Georgians know about the potential benefit of the Family Care Act and to lay the groundwork for more statewide cross-movement organizing, advocates held community meetings around the state that featured a photography exhibit called “Typical Georgia Families”. The photo exhibit was first developed through a partnership between the Feminist Women’s Health Center and Forward Together, using powerful visuals—produced by acclaimed photographers—to highlight the ethnic, generational, and geographic diversity of both blood and chosen families throughout Georgia, and to depict their lived realities. For the community meetings, the four partner organizations invited participants to view the photo exhibit before hearing about the Family Care Act and other emerging legislative issues. Then the hosts partnered with local leaders to facilitate small group conversations about how current policies affect the lives of participants and their families. Through the conversations and the outreach to connect with community leaders and organizations outside of the Atlanta area, all four groups strengthened their relationships and built power in locations where it will be needed for future organizing on a range of issues beyond paid leave policies, such as campaigns for fair wages, restorative justice, and to oppose so-called “religious liberty” laws that undermine anti-discrimination protections and access to healthcare (particularly LGBTQ and reproductive health information, options and services).

NEW MEXICO

Strong Families New Mexico—a program of Forward Together—and several other community-based groups in Albuquerque worked together on the 2017 “Healthy Workforce ABQ” ballot initiative, which A Better Balance helped to research and draft. With early technical assistance and, later, financial support from several FJN partners, the Albuquerque coalition committed to and organized public support for the chosen family provision within this paid sick and safe days ballot. Originally slated

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for a vote in November 2016, when turnout would typically be higher due to state and federal elections, corporate opposition engaged in time-intensive litigation that prevented the initiative from appearing on the ballot at that time. After a judge pushed the vote back to municipal elections in October 2017, opponents continued to litigate and deployed significant resources against the campaign, influencing election officials to force voters to read the full ballot language in 6-point font—rather than a short, clear ballot question—and driving mis-information through paid media.

Although the measure lost (by just 718 votes) in Albuquerque, the state’s most populous city, advocates believe their central strategy to increase turnout of unlikely voters was successful. “If you look at who turned out by age group in Albuquerque and who turned out from the coalition, the people we were reaching on the doors and by phone...More people of color voted,” one advocate said. “We got more young people to vote. We increased the likelihood of unlikely voters turning out to vote. So what’s a huge win is our tactics; we have evidence that they worked.” In addition to building a committed base they can engage for the long term, the Healthy Workforce ABQ campaign also succeeded in putting workforce issues front and center on the Albuquerque City Council’s agenda moving forward. The coalition is currently pursuing paid sick and safe days legislation that protects chosen families. The City Council is still debating the proposal.

KEY INSIGHT 1:

Organizing Around Family Helps Build Power to Win Broader Policy Change

Advocates have been fighting for paid leave policies for years in both Georgia and New Mexico. The successive efforts to advance policy led advocates to broaden—rather than narrow—their policy demands to be more inclusive of diverse types of families.

In Georgia, proposed bills allowing workers to use their earned sick days to care for family members had repeatedly been introduced in the legislature throughout the past decade. In 2012, advocates were prompted to reconsider how proposed sick leave legislation defined family when a prior version of the policy went before the Georgia State House for consideration. An advocate from Georgia described how “One of the state representatives who was on the committee at that time—an openly gay, black woman—said, ‘I’m not going to vote against your bill, but I just want to point out that it wouldn’t protect my family.’”

Members from 9to5 Georgia and the coalition that had initially pushed for the policy then met with representatives of Georgia Equality and—with legal research support from A Better Balance—began to shape a policy proposal that would recognize the reality of more families. Those conversations included careful consideration of what language would be effective in helping families but would also have a viable path to passage by conservative legislators who hold the majority of seats in the state legislature. Although the final law did not use FJN’s “gold standard” language, the legislation used tax dependency to expand the family definition and include more types of loving relationships. This strategy of recognizing tax dependents as family rather than specifying the types of family relationships that would be covered allowed the proposed policy to pass with majority Republican support and be signed into law by a Republican governor. “It was so non-controversial,” one Georgia advocate said, describing policymakers’ reaction to a policy including tax dependents: “They really didn’t bat an eye.”



9to5 members getting ready to talk to legislators about the Family Care Act for the 9to5 Lobby Day at the State Capitol.

Photo: Cindia Cameron, 9to5

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In Albuquerque, a 2015 Fair Workweek Act proposal before the City Council sought to address a range of issues including paid sick days, hiring practices, advanced scheduling notice for shift workers and more. Organizers withdrew the legislation when it became clear that there wasn't enough support on the City Council to override the anticipated veto of the city's conservative mayor at the time (a new, progressive mayor was elected in 2017). Nonetheless, the organizing effort had energized the grassroots community. "In returning back to our membership, we looked at what was the most important element of that host [of issues], and it was the sick leave," said one of the organizers with a grassroots organization that led the initial fair workweek efforts in Albuquerque.

Given the community support for paid sick and safe days policies, the organizations regrouped the following year and decided to mount a petition drive - taking the policymaking function directly to the city's voters. At that point, Strong Families New Mexico (SFNM) became a part of the campaign effort. "We were really excited about it because we had been in conversations nationally around family definition and paid leave was something we were starting to look at more," said a staffer from SFNM. "So we were like, 'This is a perfect fit. They want to run something with paid sick days,'" and when SFNM talked to coalition partners about using an inclusive definition of family, they found that the broader coalition was "on board with including 'blood or affinity' so that all families are included in that city ordinance." The resulting 2017 ballot initiative lost by a razor-thin margin and remains a priority for local advocates. The inclusive definition of family will be a central component of any future policy efforts, and advocates are considering how to work with the city's new mayor and LGBTQ members of the City Council to effectively champion policies that speak to the values of family recognition.



Strong Families New Mexico worked with community-based groups on the 2017 "Healthy Workforce ABQ" ballot initiative.

Photo: *Courtesy of Forward Together*

That advocates in Georgia and New Mexico expanded their definitions of family in policy proposals after not initially succeeding with more limited efforts illustrates the opportunity that organizers and advocates see in crafting policy demands that recognize all families. The fact that both Georgia and New Mexico are often considered purple /swing states makes these choices even more noteworthy. Given the current political climate in the United States, it is instructive—though possibly counterintuitive—that expanding the definition of family is a strategic move when building successful campaigns. In fact, organizing around family recognition offers a compelling and values-based narrative that helps build power to win policy change.

KEY INSIGHT 2:

As Policy Demands Expand, So Does the Circle of Partners

In both Georgia and New Mexico, advocates leveraged longstanding relationships to bring a diversity of organizations and communities into the campaigns. In Georgia, there has been collaboration among progressive organizations based in Atlanta for years, and ongoing nonpartisan civic engagement work had connected groups with different constituencies to each other in a meaningful way, particularly through personal relationships between staff. Similarly, in New Mexico, the coalition took shape through “typical nonprofit relationship network stuff,” as one advocate put it. But in both states, the campaigns were also intentional about expanding their reach to other organizations and other regions beyond the major metropolitan areas. This strategy of reaching outside of the usual partnerships was not about winning the immediate policy fight, but about planting the seeds for future statewide organizing.

Connecting to New Organizations

In both states, the coalitions engaged with and created space for organizations outside the usual realm of policy and organizing—such as direct service organizations—to join their fights. Groups or individuals that are more oriented toward direct service rather than organizing can still have a valuable role in shaping the conversation and being part of community reflection in order to shift ideas. A focus on family recognition—and the reality that we all, at some point, provide care to a loved one—can also be an effective tool for engaging organizations and individuals who may typically be less involved in policy issues.

In Georgia, one of the four lead organizations planning the community conversations was a family service organization with a robust advocacy program. But they also recruited more traditional service-oriented organizations as partners in the community conversations. For instance, one of the local partners outside of Atlanta was an agency that reached approximately 6,000 people a year with a



Members of Asian Americans Advancing Justice getting ready to lobby state legislators to support the Family Care Act.

Photo: Cindia Cameron, 9to5

range of services including education, case management and other supports to help families address the barriers and obstacles they face and become self-sufficient. When the organizations planning the community conversations in Georgia reached out with an invitation to be part of the meeting about family recognition work, “It came at a time where we were just really starting that conversation of family,” said a staffer of the local agency. The organization had identified instances where clients were unable to qualify for a given means-tested program because eligibility was determined by a state- or federally-imposed formula that assessed income based on a limited legal definition of family that failed to recognize all the people who were actually part of the household. “We do recognize that families that we serve, they’re different,” the staffer said. “Giving us the opportunity to really look at the definition of families has really allowed us to begin to explore how we really change our definition of families to better serve our community.”



In New Mexico, the campaign created opportunities for service providing organizations to be part of the effort by recognizing the strengths of these groups—like their ability to have deep, values-based conversations with the communities they serve—that are not typically appreciated in a fast-paced ballot initiative campaign. “One thing I know about myself is I’m not a front liner. I’m not out there protesting,” said one staff member who worked in the direct services programs of an organization with a larger mandate around women’s health and wellbeing. “I really love and have a passion for sitting in circles and having deep conversations that shift ideas and ways of being. And I think that when we look at the idea of beloved families, beloved communities, there’s just something about it that feels very inclusive and I think brings us to the center of our hearts.”

Another factor that led some service organizations to engage with the family recognition work was a push from LGBTQ staff. One leader from an organization providing education services to Albuquerque’s immigrant community reflected on their involvement, saying “One of the key reasons it happened is because we had staff that were part of the LGBTQ community ... They were also Mexican immigrants. They had also had the experience as young people of struggling within their families and then with their communities to come out.” The organization worked to incorporate conversations about family diversity into programs and intentionally started using the language of “honoring different kinds of families” at cultural events in a way that might not have come as naturally or quickly without the internal push. “It was done in a very celebratory way. Not everybody reacts great to it, but by and large, it created a space where things just felt much more accessible.” As this leader noted, having LGBTQ staff bring their experience and whole selves to their work “was a reminder for the rest of the staff ... it was a driver” of the organization’s family recognition work. This leadership from LGBTQ staff in service organizations

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mirrors the trajectory of these conversations at ABB and FV@W, and reinforces the importance of all kinds of nonprofit organizations having diverse staff with lived experience of intersecting issues.

Reaching Beyond Metro Areas

Both Atlanta and Albuquerque are home to major shares of their states' populations. According to data from the 2010 Census, nearly 55% of Georgians were estimated to live in the sprawling Atlanta metro region, and roughly 43% of New Mexicans live in the Albuquerque area.⁵ While it may seem efficient for organizations to focus on organizing in major metropolitan areas, the campaigns were also intentional about expanding their reach to other organizations and other regions beyond Albuquerque and Atlanta.

Strong Families New Mexico had 10,000 conversations through a door-to-door canvass program in four counties—not just Bernalillo County where the Healthy Workforce ABQ Initiative would be on the ballot—and found widespread support across the counties on issues like paid leave, alternatives to incarceration, access to reproductive health including abortion, and policies that treat all family formations respectfully and equally. SFNM was deliberate about doing broad outreach as part of this canvassing effort and designed questions that would guide future organizing on issues beyond the measure at hand. “Having that forward-thinking, not just a focus on paid sick days, but how can we use these contacts at the doors to bring people in on another campaign worked,” said one organizer. “There’s a lot of ways that we learned what works and what didn’t to build our own strength for better campaigns in the future in New Mexico.”

Similarly, in Georgia, the lead organizations found the community meetings provided an invaluable opportunity to build connections and relationships outside of Atlanta.



Strong Families New Mexico's canvass team in McKinley County. This photo was taken in Gallup, NM, during the team's first day at the doors talking about what families need to thrive.

Photo: Courtesy of Forward Together

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“It basically helps with the base building to be able to connect with folks like local activists who are already on the ground and form relationships with them,” one Atlanta-based advocate said. “Those are the folks who are really going to go out in the community and say, ‘Hey, don’t forget to call your senator about this thing. This is important.’”

The conversations and outreach to new communities and organizations also encouraged new connections among local partners. At one of the conversations in a community 100 miles south of Atlanta, one staffer from a local social service group met a leader from another organization that addresses barriers faced by individuals with a criminal record. The two local leaders have stayed in contact with each other, leading the staffer from the service organization to reflect on how to be more intentional and accountable about serving people impacted by incarceration, particularly since the state of Georgia has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country.⁶ The staffer said “When we’re thinking about the participants and qualification for services, we need to make sure that we’re being inclusive, that it mirrors the makeup of our community. Times have changed and we have to recognize that and we have to really just be intentional about making sure we change with time as well.”

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KEY INSIGHT 3:

Successful Efforts Require Funding and Infrastructure

The Family Justice Network has played a critical role as a nexus between organizations working at local, state and national levels. FJN is building the potential for progress on the state level to contribute to national momentum by providing funding, facilitating connections and networking among groups, and cultivating a shared understanding of the values that animate the family definition and recognition work.

The national infrastructure and leadership of FJN helps coordinate state groups with a variety of strategies and contexts for their campaigns. FJN also helps illustrate the full national context into which local partners can see themselves contributing. A gathering that FJN convened in Portland during the summer of 2017 showcased the potential of these various state coalitions and campaigns to add up to a national movement. "It was exciting to see the big picture of the effort, and how an equality group can play in that area," said one of the LGBTQ advocates. They went on to describe how the work supported through FJN connected their own organization to "those broader labor issues, or aging issues, or working families issues. We're all in there but it was great to see that whole connection come together." The investment in a coordinated national effort that could set this context and establish a structure for collaboration across the country was vital. So was FJN's investment directly into the organizations on the ground that were the best agents to build movement at the state and, by extension, national level.

Tapping into Existing State "Tables"

The partnerships between the advocacy and organizing groups that led the campaigns grew out of longstanding relationships that had also been supported by the State Voices network of nonpartisan civic engagement collaborations, known as "tables." Both Georgia and New Mexico have these permanent, nonpartisan "tables" that

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connect a wide range of 501(c)3 groups and pool resources that are vital to campaigns.

In New Mexico, the "state civic engagement table" helped the Healthy Workforce ABQ ballot initiative through data analysis and access to a database with information on voters. The ability to leverage technology and data has become a standard feature of progressive field campaigns. The organizers who were mobilizing voters in favor of the ballot initiative relied on the database to identify and



contact supporters, and continually track interactions with potential voters. In addition to the traditional methods of getting out the vote, Strong Families New Mexico utilized the voter file through the 10,000 conversations held through its four-county canvassing program. As discussed earlier, SFNM reached out to counties beyond the Albuquerque area to go door to door, talking to residents about paid leave, but also alternatives to incarceration, access to reproductive health, and policies that treat all family formations respectfully and equally. By expanding their focus beyond paid leave and the county where the proposed policy would have gone into effect, SFNM identified “chosen family” supporters, and will be able to use the voter file to reach back out to those supporters on issues in the future.

In Georgia, the state civic engagement table—called ProGeorgia—had worked over the course of several years to increase opportunities for a number of organizations to work together. These ongoing collaborations laid the groundwork for more meaningful and non-transactional relationships. In particular, groups in Georgia had developed enough trust to remain engaged on shared issues while acknowledging and accepting disagreement on others. “We have the trust built up from working together for five years now, very closely, very specifically, where we have come together 90% of the time,” one participant described, so that when there is disagreement, it is limited to the specific issue at hand and does not jeopardize the overall relationship.

Relationships are Important - But So Is Funding to Bring Ideas to Fruition

While some of the organizations—and staff—in Georgia and New Mexico had been in relationship for years, they still needed financial support to bring their aspirations for more coordinated work to fruition. The funding that the Family Justice Network provided made it possible for

groups that otherwise couldn't have prioritized family recognition work to take that issue on – and then to build increasingly strong relationships across issue areas.

In Georgia, advocates had already been considering how their organizations could collaborate on the intersection of workplace law and LGBTQ issues. “We have so many issues that run along the same lines with just different communities that we could all pull together,” said one Georgia staffer. So when they were presented with the opportunity to secure funding from FJN, “We finally came together and had a conversation about what it would look like, and who would bring what, and what it might ultimately end up becoming. We thought it was very powerful ... We all kind of came together and said this is such a natural fit for us and it's going to be fun.”

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Similarly, a leader of an organization in New Mexico acknowledged that new financial resources are often the critical feature that enables organizations to formalize new partnerships with each other, even if relationships of trust already exist. They said that “It’s hard to do things like paid sick days campaigns” even though these issues impact their organization’s constituency, because “It’s not the kind of thing that we can dedicate endless resources to.” The consistent leadership of Strong Families New Mexico on family recognition was important for coalition partners who had to come in and out of the campaigns depending on their capacity. But it was clear that partners were willing to join the fight when they could. As the leader said “when we can plug in with them and strengthen each other’s work, for us, that’s really important. And we know that they’re behind us.”

The relationships that already existed between groups were a necessary building block, but the opportunity for funding from national organizations like Family Values @ Work, A Better Balance and Forward Together, via the FJN partnership, was critical to quickly move from informal relationships to formalized partnership—from ideas to action. As another leader from Georgia put it: “When the FJN money emerged—that whole possibility of applying for funding to do this kind of work ... I immediately said, ‘I think there might be money to do what we’ve been talking about for years.’”

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CONCLUSION

Much of the discussion about family diversity and definition initially centered on LGBTQ equality and had origins in LGBTQ advocates pushing the issue within progressive organizations and coalitions. Naturally, the national sea change in both legal and cultural acknowledgement of LGBTQ people and relationships over the past decade has also contributed to the success of these conversations and advanced them. One advocate from Georgia said “It’s like a river moving, and there are eddies and bends, but things are moving forward ... There’s a whole momentum.”

The momentum generated by LGBTQ progress was integral to initially opening doors for recognition of more families. But the expanded conversations about who is affected by the limits of current family definition in public policy highlight the intersections between issues of immigration, incarceration, disability, poverty, and more. Applying this intersectional analysis to understanding both the particular and universal barriers facing families offers intriguing possibilities for building power across movements using family recognition as a central organizing strategy. Another advocate from Georgia, reflecting on limited legal definitions of family, remarked that “We all know that that’s really not what most Georgia families look like these days. All we have to do is put words on this thing that most people know to be true and point out to folks that our law and our legal structures are still stuck in that really old school view of family.” Put another way, conversations about establishing inclusive family definitions don’t have to be framed as expanding the conception of family, but simply aligning the law with what is the lived experience of family for most people. As another organizer from Georgia said, “This is their family, period. This work is not about expanding it. We just need the family definition to be exactly what it is: of everyone’s family.”

The broad base of people who recognize how their own families and experiences reflect the need for inclusive family definitions is best illustrated by the opening it creates for alliances across traditional lines of difference. For more than six years, Strong Families New Mexico has been having conversations with legislators from all corners of the state and political persuasions. Time and time again, they found common ground through exchanging stories about family. An advocate from Georgia similarly made the point that this issue finds an opening with almost everyone; “People just immediately launch off into talking about their grandparents raising grandchildren, or they’ve been raising a nephew, or they have a sister in prison.” At the meeting in Portland, the advocates from Georgia shared a story of persuading a conservative state legislator to support the Family Care Act by tapping into that lawmaker’s own personal experience helping to raise an older child who was not a blood relative.

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Advocacy to encourage recognition of “chosen family” is broadening the progressive understanding of family to not only include LGBTQ families but to acknowledge how numerous systemic and structural factors—including immigration, incarceration, adoption, economics and more—shape the experience of family. Being able to care for a loved one affects everyone. And because it affects everyone, it is a promising lens to develop the skills of new leaders, to strengthen organizations by providing new opportunities to reach people and build relationships, and to expand how advocacy groups talk about their issue priorities in a way that recognizes and honors how family intersects with so many other issues. “Family is really core to how we move through the world,” said one of the advocates who worked on the Georgia campaign. “Who is legally considered your family is a core reality of people’s lives. And if your family is not legally recognized the way you need them to be—in a way that makes sense to who actually supports you in your life—that’s just going to cause challenges in every single area that almost any organization is going to work with. From your school to your healthcare to meeting your basic needs to reproductive healthcare: all of it. It’s really at the base of a lot of different social justice issues.”

Through that lens, organizing and building movement to affirm who counts as family not only serves critical policy goals to win better protections for workers and their loved ones, it offers further possibility to build movement across issues based on the shared value of inclusive recognition of all families.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 National Partnership for Women and Families. (October 2017). "Map: Paid Leave and Paid Sick Days Laws are Helping More Than 41 Million People Better Care and Provide for Their Families."
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- 2 Bureau of Labor Statistics. (March 2017). "National Compensation Survey, Table 32: Leave benefits: Access, civilian workers."
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- 3 Bowman, M. et al. (December 2016). "Making Paid Leave Work for Every Family." A Better Balance, Center for American Progress, Family Values @ Work, and Forward Together, <https://www.abetterbalance.org/resources/making-paid-leave-work-for-every-family/>
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- 4 Reeves, R. (February 20, 2018). "Let workers decide who counts as 'family' for paid sick and family leave." The American Enterprise Institute.
<http://www.aei.org/publication/let-workers-decide-who-counts-as-family-for-paid-sick-and-family-leave/>
- 5 These rates are based on comparisons between the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Estimates of the Resident Population tables for both States and Metropolitan Statistical Areas. See <https://factfinder.census.gov>
- 6 According to the Sentencing Project's website, Georgia has the ninth highest imprisonment rate, with 503 people incarcerated in state prison per 100,000 residents. For more information, see: <http://www.sentencingproject.org/the-facts/>



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