

The Working Poor Families Project: Strengthening State Policies (Updated April 2006)

The Working Poor Families Project (WFPF), funded by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Mott Foundations, partners with nonprofit organizations across the U.S. to assess the conditions of low-income working families and the efforts of state governments to support these families through public policy. As of January 2006, the WFPF supports groups in twenty states to assess and strengthen state policies. The project launched in 2002 in five states and since then has added new states each year. Overall the project has worked in twenty-three states. The Working Poor Families Project non-profit partners are:

2002

Arkansas	Southern Good Faith Fund
Michigan	Michigan League for Human Services
Texas	Center for Public Policy Priorities
Wisconsin	Center on Wisconsin Strategy

2003

Colorado	The Bell Policy Center
Illinois	Chicago Jobs Council
Maryland	Job Opportunities Task Force
Massachusetts	The Women's Union

2004

California	California Budget Project
Maine	Maine Center for Economic Policy
New York	Center for an Urban Future Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy
Ohio	Community Research Partners The John Glenn Institute The Center for Community Solutions
Washington	Seattle Jobs Initiative Statewide Policy Action Network

2005

Connecticut	Connecticut Association for Human Services
New Mexico	New Mexico Voices for Children
North Carolina	North Carolina Budget and Tax Center

2006

Arizona	Children's Action Alliance
Indiana	Institute for Working Families
Mississippi	Enterprise Corporation of the Delta
Pennsylvania	PathwaysPA

The WFPF focuses on state workforce development policies, defined broadly, that impact on the ability of adult workers to achieve economic security for their family. Three components of workforce development are addressed within each state: 1) education and skills training for adults; 2) economic development; and 3) income and work supports. In this context, the WFPF supports state nonprofit groups to engage in a two-part, phased process involving assessment, analysis and action.

The *State Policy Assessment Initiative*, conducted the first year a state nonprofit joins the WFPF, involves an in-depth assessment of the conditions of working families within a state and an analysis of the state policies and program operations that can help workers advance and achieve economic security. The assessment is based on a framework of indicators, provided by the WFPF, that identify current conditions and related state policies and program efforts. The Project uses three types of indicators: data-based, policy, and program performance. These data allow states to analyze substantive policy and program areas. This examination culminates in a *State Policy Assessment Report* that points out where a state's investments and policies stand in relation to other states and the nation and identifies areas for improvement. Most importantly, the report recommends actions for strengthening state policies and program operations. The Project provides financial and technical support in the assessment phase.

The *Strengthening State Policy Initiative*, implemented following the release of the state policy assessment report, involves a focused effort to educate and inform key stakeholders on the needs and opportunities to strengthen specific state workforce development policies. Each WFPF state group develops a policy agenda for action based on the findings and analysis of their assessment report. They then work to implement the agenda, often in collaboration with other stakeholders in the state such as community-based organizations, issue oriented think tanks, associations of education providers, local businesses and their respective associations, and state agencies. The priorities of state organizations vary, as do the political and economic climates for change. Nonetheless, all states seek to improve policies and focus greater attention on a nexus of issues facing low-income working families. The WFPF supports the *Strengthening State Policy Initiative* by providing financial and technical assistance.

Thanks to the assessment, analysis and action of WFPF state groups, states have taken important steps to initiate, improve and preserve policies and programs that help working families achieve economic security. These efforts have led state officials to strengthen policies involving their community college and adult education systems, skills training programs, economic development investments, and income and work supports.

WFPF partners report that as a result of their involvement in the project, they have:

- Contributed to the strengthening of state policies and practices;
- Increased and sustained state funds that support the goals of the WFPF;
- Increased organizational capacity and built important new relationships that are key to strengthening public policies; and
- Generated detailed information that helped focus attention on specific state policies.

Below, we provide state-by-state examples from each of these four categories.

Strengthened State Policies and Program Practices

The primary goal of the WFPF is to strengthen state policies and program practices that can help low-income working families succeed in the labor market. Each of the WFPF organizations identified specific opportunities for change. While success does not come easily or quickly, several states have helped create improvements in specific state policies and programs. Their educational efforts continue.

Postsecondary Education

- Arkansas' WFPF report highlighted the facts that few residents have a college degree and that the state under-invested in need-based financial aid for working adults. This information contributed to the creation and funding of a flexible need-based financial aid program for adults, the Arkansas Workforce Improvement Grant (AWIG). The scholarship program is designed for non-traditional students, allows part-time course enrollment and covers certificate as well as degree programs. AWIG's funding has grown significantly in three years. The Arkansas organization also called for the creation of "career pathway" strategies to facilitate the successful transition of remedial and low-skill students into postsecondary training programs and careers. After issuing their report, the Southern Good Faith Fund partnered with other organizations to design and launch a Career Pathways Pilot Project; the first year the program graduated over 100 students with credentials for jobs in high-demand sectors. Following the demonstrated success of the pilot, the Governor announced \$16 million in funding to expand Career Pathways to eleven community colleges. In 2005 the legislature made the Career Pathways program permanent, incorporating this high wage job training initiative into the state TANF program. Eligibility was expanded to people with incomes up to 250 percent of poverty. In addition, in 2005 the Arkansas legislature approved a \$500,000 appropriation for the National Guard Tuition Assistance program, which reimburses two-year colleges for the cost of waiving 25 percent of the tuition for Guard members. Although authorized in 2003, few colleges participated in this program until the Southern Good Faith Fund highlighted its underutilization in a policy brief.
- Illinois' WFPF report documenting the unmet demand for need-based financial aid had a sobering impact on state legislators. Although budget shortfalls in 2004 precluded increasing funding for the state's need-based tuition assistance grant (MAP), Women Employed achieved several major changes in the program's guidelines that year. MAP grants are now available during the summer semester, important for low-income working adults who attend school year-round. In addition, the length of time a student is eligible for MAP is now calculated by credit hours, rather than semesters, allowing low-income adults the flexibility needed to work and parent while taking classes. WFPF participation contributed to changes in the state student assistance formula that resulted in 1,000 additional grants to students, and prioritized grants to students with the greatest need. With improved fiscal times in 2005, Women Employed led the effort to increase investment in MAP by \$12 million.
- The Bell Policy Center in Colorado noted the low level of state investment in need-based financial aid as a barrier for low-wage workers to obtain credentials that can lead to higher earnings. The legislature approved additional funding for need-based financial aid by converting some merit aid to need programs, using profits earned on the student loan

portfolio, and selling a student loan guarantee and servicing operation to the private sector. These investments will increase access to postsecondary education for low-income workers.

- The Washington State WPPF partner, the Seattle Jobs Initiative, joined organizations in successfully advocating a pilot project in 10 selected community colleges that will allow students taking four or five credits to be eligible for state financial aid. In addition SJI and South Seattle Community College developed a career pathways pilot program to deliver training for low-income people in two employment sectors.
- In 2005 the California Budget Project supported policies that allow concurrent enrollment in high school and community college and align career-technical curricula (K-12) with community colleges to assist students in preparing for the workforce.
- In 2005 the Ohio legislature expanded the scope of the postsecondary articulation and transfer system to permit the transfer of career-technical education coursework to state institutions of higher education.

Job Training

- In Texas, a key member of the State House Appropriations Committee used research from the state WPPF report to successfully add new training opportunities for low-income workers, particularly TANF recipients, and to require better reporting on wage changes of program participants as a measurement of program success. In addition, the Texas Center on Public Policy Priorities successfully promoted a new funding formula for a high-demand incumbent-worker training program, the Skills Development Fund. In the next two-year budget cycle, the program is expected to enable an additional 10,000 working Texans to increase their skills and wages through training.
- As a result of the findings and recommendations from the Arkansas WPPF, the state agency in charge of TANF now allows education and training to count toward program recipients' mandatory work participation hours. This will better prepare TANF leavers for success in the labor market. In addition, because of a new requirement, the state TANF agency reports whether leavers are achieving wages above federal poverty level (see Accountability Section). As mentioned above, the state allocated a TANF surplus to the community college system to develop better job training programs for TANF-eligible customers.
- The Michigan League for Human Services used its WPPF report to spearhead efforts to develop a new policy framework to assist welfare recipients and low-wage workers to succeed in the labor market. The shift away from Work First to the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) program signals an emphasis on helping welfare recipients and other at-risk workers stay employed, gain skills and advance rather than emphasizing placement in any job. The JET program will begin as a pilot in four geographic areas.
- In its WPPF report the Wisconsin partner, Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), recommended better alignment and integration of the state workforce development system, improved access to education and training, and better standards for measuring system performance. One important achievement is new state policy that sets a minimum standard that each Workforce Investment area invests 35 percent of WIA funds in worker training that leads to high wage jobs.
- In an effort to prepare returning prisoners for employment, the Job Opportunities Task Force worked with the Division of Corrections and the Maryland legislature to allow up to \$250,000 each year from the State Use Industries revolving fund to provide employment readiness and transitional services for select inmates.

- In Washington State, the WFPF partners helped transform proposed cuts to the Work First program into a \$15 million appropriation to stabilize the program and increase to one year the amount of time TANF clients can participate in training.

Adult Education

- Maryland's efforts on the WFPF uncovered the lack of any state program designed to increase the skills of low-income incumbent workers. The Maryland WFPF partner successfully persuaded the Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation to add adult education, including GED and English as a Second Language, as an eligible activity for its incumbent worker matching grant program. This will improve earning opportunities for low-skill, low-wage workers. In 2005 and 2006 the Job Opportunities Task Force successfully partnered with the state agency to obtain increased funding for adult education. With these increases, Maryland's spending on adult education will have tripled in three years.
- As part of the WFPF, the Illinois Chicago Jobs Council highlighted the need to improve the state's adult education outcomes by exploring alternative adult education models. Since the report's release, the Illinois Community College Board has dedicated pilot funding to support "bridge programs" that prepare adults who lack basic skills for success in postsecondary and training programs that lead to career advancement. The Community College Board dedicated funds to pilot transportation-industry bridge programs in two economic development regions of the state; the Board and Chicago's Mayor's Office of Workforce Development partnered to co-fund two health care bridge programs. In 2005 the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity awarded grants using the Governor's WIA discretionary funds for two sector bridge programs, one in warehousing and one in healthcare. Additionally the Illinois Department of Corrections launched bridge programs in manufacturing at a correctional center focused on blending drug treatment and employment services for pre- and post-release inmates. Illinois also took steps to increase the employability of people when they leave prison by providing incentives to prisoners who obtain a GED certificate while incarcerated. A new law requires the Illinois Department of Corrections to increase the number of slots for GED classes by 100 percent over four years.
- Arkansas' WFPF efforts stimulated the legislature to create a study committee to examine how better to integrate adult education and workforce development services. The committee's report made specific policy recommendations that the policy-making boards of the adult education and Workforce Investment Act system universalize specific best practices to coordinate local adult education and One Stop services. Adult education and One Stop partners adopted a number of these best practices, such as establishing a standardized participant referral process.
- In 2005 the Seattle Jobs Initiative worked with the Statewide Poverty Action Network to gain increased funding for the Limited English Proficiency program to assist immigrants and refugees in securing employment.
- The New York City Council nearly tripled the city funding for English for Speakers of Other Language programs. In addition, the City Council appropriated \$14 million in tax-levy funds for "NYC Works." The program targets city residents who are unemployed and underemployed. The need for increased funding for ESOL programs was highlighted in the NY WFPF partners' assessment report.

Economic Development

- The Illinois WFPF report noted the need to better link economic development funds to job creation and wage standards, and to better utilize federal WIA funds to build the occupational and literacy skills of workers. In FY 2004 and again in FY 2005, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity dedicated WIA funds to support two economic development programs, Job Training and Economic Development (JTED) and the Critical Skills Shortages Initiative (CSSI). JTED funds community/business partnerships to train unemployed and low-wage, low-skill workers. CSSI aligns workforce programs to meet the needs of Illinois' employers for skilled workers, while ensuring that the populations (including "at-risk" populations) served by various workforce programs gain access to jobs that lead to economic self-sufficiency. Economic development regions in Illinois are now investing in workers who have limited skills but, with training, can advance into higher paying careers.
- In Massachusetts, The Women's Union working in concert with a broader state policy initiative known as SkillWorks, helped create a pilot career ladder initiative in the health care field. The legislature funded a career ladder program for home health care workers who are trying to reach economic self-sufficiency. Seven home health care agencies received grants from the program that will enable over 5,500 incumbent workers to learn new skills, increase their wages, advance their careers and provide better care.
- The New York WFPF partners highlighted the need for reform in the state Empire Zone tax credit program. This call helped lead to increased accountability requirements for businesses receiving Empire Zone tax credits.
- The Center for Public Policy Priorities in Texas promoted increased accountability and reporting from the Governor's Office of Economic Development and Tourism—the entity that administers the Texas Enterprise Fund and offers large cash grants to employers for relocation and expansion. In 2005 the legislature required that the number, wages and benefits of jobs attributed to Enterprise Fund contracts be disclosed in a biennial report. To protect public investments, clawback provisions were established for contract non-performance.

Conditions of Employment: Income and Work Support

- The Bell Policy Center, Colorado's WFPF partner, worked with a coalition to promote two ways to strengthen the state's unemployment insurance system for low-income working families: provide an alternative base period to determine eligibility and recognize domestic violence as a valid cause to leave a job. In 2005 the legislature approved both reforms but the Governor vetoed the alternative base period legislation that would have allowed recent work efforts to count toward UI eligibility.
- In 2004, the New York state legislature voted to increase the state's minimum wage to \$7.15 an hour over a three-year period and then overrode the Governor's veto. The WFPF report was released at a critical time in this debate. Albany insiders credited data from the WFPF report, notably the finding that over 500,000 families in New York were working yet poor, with placing pressure on the State Senate to override the gubernatorial veto and pass the first New York state increase in the minimum wage in over 30 years.
- In 2005 the Kentucky General Assembly passed, and the Governor signed, comprehensive tax reform that expands the state's low-income tax credit, an initiative long supported by the Kentucky Chamber of Commerce and championed in its WFPF report. The non-refundable

credit will remove tax filers with incomes below the federal poverty level from the state tax roles, and will reduce taxes on those with incomes below 133 percent of poverty, increasing the disposable income for over 216,000 low-income Kentucky tax filers.

- The Ohio Governor and legislature took action on one of the WFPF report's recommendations to remove the state income tax from persons with incomes below \$10,000, and expand access to subsidized childcare. Eligibility to subsidized childcare was increased to include families with incomes up to 185 percent of poverty and the co-pay levied on eligible families was reduced.
- In 2005, the Maine Center for Economic Policy successfully educated the public and policy makers about the need for family leave for workers and a reduction in property taxes for low-wage households. The Maine legislature passed a bill to require businesses that offer paid sick leave to allow workers the flexibility to use it to care for sick family members. In addition the legislature expanded the property tax circuit breaker program, offering tax relief to low-income families.
- In 2005 the Maryland WFPF partner supported efforts to establish a state minimum wage of \$6.15 an hour. The new law went into effect in 2006 after the legislature overrode the Governor's veto. The Job Opportunities Task Force also actively supported reductions in the waiting list for childcare assistance for low-income families by prohibiting the state agency from transferring childcare funds to other programs running budget deficits. JOTF was a member of the Unemployment Insurance Committee that gained an increase in the maximum weekly benefit and strengthened the charging provisions for employers.
- The Seattle Jobs Initiative joined a statewide advocacy group to create and fund an Individual Development Account program, the most comprehensive state-supported asset development program in the country.
- Texas' WFPF partner helped expand access to financial education by requiring the workforce development system to integrate FDIC's financial education curriculum into their programs.
- A key recommendation of Wisconsin's WFPF was to raise the state's minimum wage. The Center on Wisconsin Studies (COWS) subsequently released a separate report that analyzed the impact of increasing the state's minimum wage. As a result, COWS' Research Director was appointed to the Governor's Minimum Wage Advisory Council. The recommendation to raise the minimum wage was enacted by the Wisconsin legislature. Wisconsin's minimum wage moved to \$5.70 per hour on June 1, 2005. The second step of the increase raises the state's minimum wage to \$6.50 on June 1, 2006.
- The Maine partner also supported an increase in the state's minimum wage. In the spring of 2006, the legislature approved a two-step increase that will take the state's minimum to \$7.00 an hour by October 2007.

Accountability and Program Success

- While all states boast a decline in their welfare roles since 1996, few measure whether the people exiting the public assistance system for work have made progress toward economic self-sufficiency. The legislatures in both Arkansas and Texas were stimulated by the state WFPF partners to require state agencies to collect and report data on earnings of those leaving cash assistance programs. With this information in hand, policymakers in those states have begun focusing on how the TANF system can better prepare participants to succeed in the labor market.

- The Colorado WFPF partner recommended that the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) collect and make public data to show how effective higher education institutions are at attracting and retaining low-income and minority students. In a meeting with the Colorado Bell Policy Center staff, CCHE's Executive Director agreed to work with the organization to identify and provide data on low-income and minority students' attendance at Colorado's colleges. The Center will produce a report from the data.

Leveraged Public Funds

To enroll and serve more low-income working adults, states must make additional investments in postsecondary education, targeted skills training and adult literacy programs. When grounded in the realities of the labor market, these investments result in increased economic opportunities for low-wage workers. The WFPF highlights the need for additional investments. In several states, policymakers have responded by increasing funds for programs targeted at low-wage workers. In just three years, efforts in several states have provided millions in new and redirected funding for education and training programs.

- In Arkansas, state funding for the Arkansas Workforce Improvement Grant (AWIG), a need-based financial aid program targeted to adults, grew from \$500,000 to \$3.2 million in three years, in part because of the educational efforts of the WFPF partner. In addition, the Governor identified \$16 million in TANF surplus funds to expand Career Pathways programs to eleven community colleges for TANF-eligible customers. Part of what drove the state's support for this effort was a new requirement, stimulated by the WFPF, that the state TANF agency report whether leavers are achieving wages above federal poverty level. Arkansas also leveraged \$50,000 of adult education funds to implement the Career Pathways Pilot Project, a program that assists low-skill adults transitioning into career training programs.
- As a result of the Maryland WFPF partner's findings and recommendations to increase the low level of funding for adult education, the state Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation expanded the use of \$1 million in federal WIA money for incumbent worker training to include adult education programs aimed at increasing skills of low-income workers. Urged on by advocates, the governor and legislature each increased state funding for adult education in 2005 and 2006. Approved increases will take state expenditures from \$2.3 million in FY 2005 to \$6.8 million in FY 2008.
- Illinois' WFPF partner recommended that the state leverage federal dollars to enable individuals with limited skills to participate in intensive vocational training or postsecondary education programs. Illinois is now targeting approximately \$850,000 to "bridge" programs in health care and transportation, with \$100,000 from the Adult Education Leadership Grant funds and \$750,000 from WIA incentive funds. In addition, the Governor pledged to set aside approximately \$600,000 a year for the next two years from discretionary WIA funds to support the state's Job Training and Economic Development program. The Illinois legislature increased funding for post secondary need-based financial aid by \$12 million in 2005.
- In the wake of a \$10 billion 2004 Texas budget shortfall that spawned massive budget cuts in social services and education, the Center for Public Policy Priorities and other advocates used WFPF recommendations to preserve flat funding for key workforce programs, including the Skills Development Fund program funded at \$25 million over two years. Successfully

safeguarded from cuts that other programs suffered, the state's largest workforce development program continued to provide training for low-wage workers. In 2005 the Center on Public Policy Priorities successfully advocated for a Skills Development Fund increase to \$40 million per biennium, enabling over 10,000 more Texans access to this high-demand training program.

- The Wisconsin WFPF recommendations helped stimulate a new collaborative job training program. The Industry Partnerships Project, funded through a \$1.14 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, looks to strengthen the workforce development system in South Central Wisconsin, connecting incumbent and dislocated workers to quality jobs in health care and manufacturing. The project succeeded in receiving federal support because of the strong collaboration achieved by the South Central Workforce Board, area employers, job centers, technical colleges and the Center on Wisconsin Strategy.
- In 2005 the Colorado legislature referred a measure to the ballot to allow the state to retain revenue over the next five years above the TABOR limit. Voters approved that referendum. About one-third of these revenues will go to higher education for need-based aid and to support colleges and community colleges. The legislature also converted approximately \$4.5 million of state funded merit aid into need-based aid. In addition the legislature created a new need-based scholarship program. CollegeInvest, a state enterprise that runs Colorado's 529 college savings plans, will invest \$50 million in profits earned on its loan portfolio in a trust whose investment returns will fund these scholarships. An additional \$25 million will be added to the trust through the sale of Colorado Access Network's student loan guarantee and servicing operations to the private sector. Approximately 2,300 students will receive scholarships averaging about \$1,800 per year.
- In Washington the State Poverty Action Network led efforts to secure an additional \$1.5 million for the Limited English Proficient (LEP) Pathways. This program provides job training and ESL to immigrants and refugees who are seeking employment. The Washington partners worked to pass legislation creating and funding a state program of Individual Development Accounts (IDAs). The legislature appropriated \$1 million to fund the most comprehensive matched savings accounts for low-income individuals.
- With support from the WFPF partner the Massachusetts legislature approved \$1.5 million in funding for a career ladder program for home health care workers who are trying to reach economic self-sufficiency and \$200,000 to support career development and skills trainings for low-skill women.
- A recent success under the WFPF occurred early in 2006 in Washington. The state WFPF partners, the Seattle Jobs Initiative and the Statewide Poverty Action Network, helped secure \$4 million for a new Opportunity Grants program to increase access to postsecondary education for low-income students in job-specific programs. Funds will be used for tuition, books, fees and other expenses associated with attending workforce education programs. Programs receiving funding will be linked to skill standards or industry credentials, to assure workers better access to higher wage jobs.
- The New Mexico WFPF partner Voices for Children noted in their state assessment report that the state's college affordability had slipped from a "B" to an "F" in recent years. The report found that the state invests very little in need-based aid and that students often cite financial burdens as a primary reason for not completing postsecondary programs. Consequently in 2006 New Mexico Voices for Children actively supported efforts led by the state higher education community and specifically the New Mexico Association of

Community Colleges to pass the College Affordability Act that provides \$49 million in state funding for need-based financial aid. These funds will encourage New Mexico students with unmet financial need to attend and complete education programs in state postsecondary institutions.

Increased Capacity and Relationship Building

Participation in the WFPF provided new challenges and opportunities for each of the partner organizations. For one thing, the project required the groups to go well beyond their established expertise in one or another aspect of policy, and address a wide breadth of issue areas including literacy, adult education, skills training programs, postsecondary education, economic development programs, state wage policy, employment protections, health and child care policies, tax policy, Unemployment Insurance and workers' compensation. Preparing the state assessment reports required the WFPF organizations to develop knowledge on this broad array of issues related to employment and earnings; in all cases, the groups had to forge new relationships and increase their operational capacity to successfully complete the project.

In the process of gathering and confirming policy and program data, state WFPF organizations met repeatedly with influential policymakers and other key stakeholders. Those connections often led to stronger relationships with other nonprofits, state agencies and policy bodies. The reports also led to increased contact by the media, particularly about issues related to working poor families. The visibility and credibility partners gained through these interactions promise to serve them in good stead for years to come.

The following examples illustrate how the WFPF organizations increased their capacity and expanded their relationships as a result of this work.

- In New York, two nonprofit organizations, the Center for an Urban Future and Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, combined forces to implement the WFPF. Their report, released in November 2004, generated significant media attention, raising the profiles of both organizations around the issues of welfare reform, worker wages, economic development and work supports. Shortly after the report was released, representatives from both organizations were invited to attend state agency meetings to discuss the Governor's 2005 social services budget and remain in close consultation with the state agencies that exercise oversight in these policy areas.
- A four-organization collaborative undertook the WFPF in Ohio. The project team included Community Research Partners, the John Glenn Institute, the Center for Community Solutions in Cleveland, and KnowledgeWorks Foundation. As a result of the report, Community Research Partners was invited to participate in two initiatives facilitated by KnowledgeWorks, the Ohio Bridges to Opportunity Initiative and the National Governors Association Pathways to Advancement Policy Academy. Both are designed to help working low-income families achieve financial security by increasing access to postsecondary education and training programs.
- In Washington state, the Seattle Jobs Initiative (SJI) built its policy analysis capacity through increased staffing to conduct the WFPF; the resulting report was the organization's first

tangible policy product. Through the WFPF, SJI launched a campaign to increase access to skills-based education programs.

- As a result of Maine’s WFPF report, the Maine Center for Economic Policy was invited to present a workshop at the New England Educational Opportunity Association’s annual conference. This helped the organization build stronger relationships with postsecondary education officials and generated a robust discussion regarding Maine’s low-income adult workforce needs.
- The Michigan League for Human Services leveraged its WFPF report to establish working relationships with state officials and agencies around adult education, workforce development and economic development. A special study group advising the Governor on strategies for strengthening the state’s approach to workforce development utilized the League’s WFPF report. The Governor appointed the League’s Vice-President for Policy to Michigan’s restructured statewide investment board.
- The WFPF helped several partner organizations leverage reform opportunities. Partners from Arkansas, Maine, Michigan and Ohio participated in the Pathways to Advancement Policy Academy, a best practices program sponsored by the National Governors Association that worked to change state higher education, workforce development, economic development and welfare policies to assist adults obtain postsecondary credentials.

Focused Attention on Specific State Policies

The WFPF enabled state organizations to produce specific data and information examining how effectively state policies and program practices serve low-income working adults. The state assessment reports are an important tool and resource for fostering discussions among key stakeholders. To supplement their initial reports and bolster the case for effective state policies, WFPF partners developed issue-specific materials and undertook educational efforts to present detailed information on opportunities that were not currently being used. These resources are important educational materials.

- Participation in the WFPF contributed to an invitation to the Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP) to host a weekly talk show on a local access cable channel called “State of the State” where MECEP features topics relevant to low-wage workers.
- The Ohio report, released in November 2004, called for the establishment of a performance measurement system that evaluates how state investments are assisting low-income and poor working families. Community Research Partners, the Ohio WFPF partner, is now participating in groups that are addressing state data collection issues.
- The analysis and findings of the Massachusetts WFPF partner, The Women’s Union, contributed to the development of the Workforce Solutions Act of 2005, a comprehensive bill to strengthen the state’s economic health and address inadequacies in the state’s workforce system by investing in workers, employers, families and communities. If approved, over \$25 million in targeted new training funds will help Massachusetts employers better respond to market dynamics. While the bill has not yet been approved by the legislature, the debate has created an organized, knowledgeable and vocal constituency of workers, labor and business communities that can be mobilized around workforce issues as they arise in Massachusetts.

- In the fall of 2005 the Center for an Urban Future organized a major conference about NYC's working poor families, supported by the United Way of NYC. This event brought together more than 200 policymakers, practitioners and advocates who discussed creating alternative pathways to obtain credentials and linking workforce development with economic development policies.
- The Seattle Jobs Initiative, along with Seattle University, convened a “Middle Wage Jobs” working conference in December 2005 to highlight the need for state policies that increase the number of livable wage jobs for workers without a bachelor’s degree. A newly formed coalition will focus on better utilizing state economic development and workforce programs to benefit low-wage workers.
- The California Budget Project published four reports and hosted two teleconferences to discuss the impact a state proposition to constitutionally limit state spending would have on critical services and infrastructure, including education and training programs. The 2005 ballot initiative was defeated.

Conclusion

The Working Poor Families Project, through the efforts of its state organizations, has increased the attention state policymakers give to improving economic opportunities for low-income families. The analyses provide facts about the conditions of low-wage workers and the effectiveness of public programs intended to benefit this population. Project participants suggest ways to improve job training and educational programs, increase wages and benefits for low-wage workers, and ensure that economic development funds add value to communities and families by providing jobs that pay decent wages. The recommendations seek to foster stronger public policies and program practices that benefit low-income workers and their families.

Achieving change requires collective effort and sustained input from leaders in government, business, labor and communities. Building skills, future prosperity and attracting and maintaining good jobs demand a long-term commitment and increased resources.

The Working Poor Families Project has initiated a community dialogue about the kind of society we want – a two-tiered society of haves and have-nots, or a society where hard work is rewarded and workers have the opportunity and skills to compete and advance in the changing labor market. This project has laid a strong foundation. The work to increase opportunities continues.