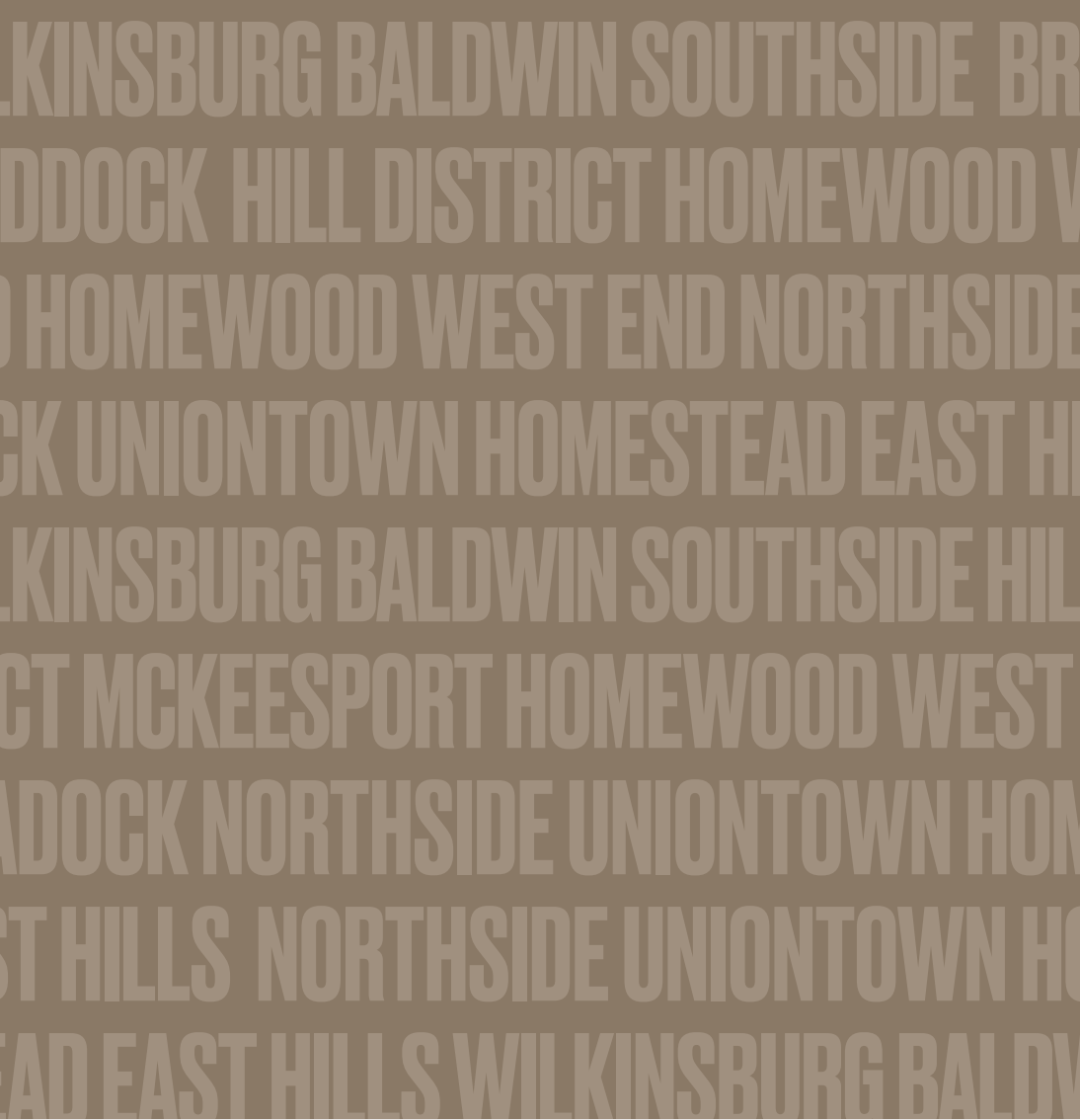




HERE'S A STIGMA AROUND BEING  
A SINGLE PARENT. THAT'S WHAT I  
CHOOSE, BUT PEOPLE LOOK DOWN  
ON YOU. 'YOU'RE NOT MARRIED?  
AND YOU HAVE THOSE KIDS?' DAMN  
STRAIGHT I HAVE THOSE KIDS. BE-  
CAUSE I LOVE MY KIDS. | I USED  
TO WEAR A WEDDING RING ON MY  
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COMMUNITY  
MARKET, TO  
GO TO THE DO  
OFFICE, AND  
EVERYWHERE ELSE. | I NEED AN  
EDUCATION AND I DON'T KNOW  
HOW TO DO IT. I'M STUCK. | THE

## A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SINGLE MOTHERS IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY

**A 100 PERCENT  
PITTSBURGH  
PROJECT**



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# FOREWARD

**WHEN WE ADOPTED 100 PERCENT PITTSBURGH,** The Pittsburgh Foundation's organizing principle in 2015, the goal was to direct a majority of our convening and policy work, advocacy and grantmaking, to serve the specific populations in our community who were most directly affected by poverty. Our staff relied upon rigorous quantitative research to develop a sobering picture of the lives of those who struggled to meet basic needs in a region that is, for some, a national example of prosperity and opportunity. The findings of our research revealed that two populations, youth ages 12 to 24 and single women raising children, were most directly and devastatingly affected by poverty.

In our first research report, *A Qualitative Study of Youth and the Juvenile Justice System* (2017), we described the findings and recommendations from a qualitative research study in which youth who were at risk of juvenile justice system engagement shared their stories and experiences. We then launched a grants program based on the participants' recommendations on how to better meet the needs of young people in our community. The youth-serving agencies that were funded by the program will report on the outcomes of the Foundation's investments in 2019 and 2020.

The second qualitative research study, described in this report, focuses on single women raising children. We were humbled by the strength and resilience of the women we met through focus groups and individual conversations. We learned about their efforts to meet basic needs and the informal support systems that are essential to their ability to survive. We learned that the social welfare system itself, which still struggles with racist policies of the past and present, often stigmatizes those it serves, and this stigma is a major barrier to the efforts of single mothers to care for themselves and their children. One consequence of these policies is that, in Pennsylvania alone, there are thousands of households, headed by single women living on incomes at 25 percent of the federal poverty level when they are receiving cash assistance from the government. In many other families, mothers are working 40 hours or more a week and bringing home wages below poverty.

It is important to say that single mothers are not a monolith. They live in rural, urban and suburban communities. They represent diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and can be found at every economic level. And despite the challenges that many single mothers face, they are so much more than their struggles. They have hopes and dreams for themselves and their children. The women we met generously shared their stories and offered suggestions about how a truly human-centered, family-serving system should serve people in need.

The report that follows owes a significant debt of gratitude to the women who agreed to share their lives with us and to the nonprofit partners whose mission is to serve the people of our community. I also want to acknowledge the work of our program staff, particularly Michelle McMurray, who led the design team and served as lead facilitator for the study, and Tika Good and Dr. Michael Yonas who supported the work as well.

This report is not the end of our work but rather represents the beginning of the next phase of 100 Percent Pittsburgh implementation. We will take the recommendations in the report and operationalize them in all aspects of our work. Our goal is to continue to listen, to learn and to be vigilant in our efforts to strengthen and transform social and political systems to assure that every person in our community can actively contribute to, and benefit from, the new prosperity that we believe is the future of this region.

Sincerely,

**Maxwell King**

President and CEO, The Pittsburgh Foundation

# THE PITTSBURGH FOUNDATION IS LISTENING

In 2015, The Pittsburgh Foundation adopted a new organizing principle, 100 Percent Pittsburgh, to shape its efforts to address the persistent and deepening economic inequality and racial inequity in the region. Under this principle, the Foundation has committed to providing opportunities for all residents to be full participants in the improved local economy. Three values — racial equity, voice and courage — guide our approach to fostering meaningful social change, compelling the Foundation to ensure that those who are most affected by inequity are at the center of creating solutions to the barriers that keep them from thriving. Thus, central to its work is engaging and amplifying the voices of those who are not yet a part of the region's renaissance.

The Foundation's research shows that at least 30 percent of residents are being left behind in the economic resurgence that has characterized the Pittsburgh region. Single mothers are a significant share of residents in the Pittsburgh region who have been left behind.

During the economic recession that began in 2007, the growth of poverty among single female-headed households in Allegheny County increased by nine percent (De Vita & Farrell, 2014). Their incomes have not risen as the economy has improved. While only 28 percent of households in Allegheny County are headed by a single mother, they account for 72 percent of all families with children in poverty. In the City of Pittsburgh, families headed by single mothers make up 42 percent of all families, but 78 percent of families experiencing poverty (U.S. Census Bureau). They are disproportionately impacted by poverty despite working hard to care for themselves and their children, including mothers like Shannon (*pseudonym*):

**SHANNON** is a 43-year-old single mother who moved to Braddock, Pennsylvania, seven years ago. She has six kids ranging in age from four to 23. She's often concerned that she doesn't spend enough time with her younger children because she must work two, sometimes three jobs to make ends meet. None pay particularly well but the trade-off is that the jobs are close to her house so she doesn't spend much on gas. If it weren't for her three college-enrolled children, who help with cooking, cleaning and child care, she's not sure how her family would make it. Shannon's day starts early, about 6:00 a.m. when she wakes up to get her younger kids ready for school. Once she drops them off, she's on her way to her first job where she works from six to eight hours. After a short break, she's on to the next job where she usually works until 2:00 a.m. She maintains this schedule seven days a week. She hardly sleeps and rarely has time for herself; everyone else's needs come first. But she's determined to keep going. Shannon's dream is for all her kids to graduate from college.



Shannon is just one of the dozens of single mothers with whom The Pittsburgh Foundation spoke during an eight-month pilot project designed to better understand the lived experiences of single women raising children. The Foundation sought to increase understanding of the challenges facing single mothers living in poverty, the strengths on which they rely, and potential strategies to improve the services and systems intended to support them. This report is a summary of the findings from this inquiry. It is not intended to be a definitive narrative of single motherhood. Its purpose is to amplify the experiences and wisdom of the single mothers who courageously shared their stories with the Foundation. These are their recommendations, and they provide valuable insight into the steps that foundations, government, nonprofits and others can take to better serve single mothers in the Pittsburgh region.

**OFTEN FEELS LIKE THERE IS NO RIGHT WAY TO GET AHEAD.  
WHEN ONE THING IS WORKING, ANOTHER AREA FALLS  
APART AND ITS BACK TO SQUARE ONE.**

- PARTICIPANT

## BACKGROUND

According to the Allegheny County Department of Human Services, there are 36,469 families headed by single mothers in Allegheny County. They are more likely than those headed by single fathers and two-parent households to live below the federal poverty level — \$16,317 for a one-parent family with one or more children. Forty-one percent of all single-mother households (14,909) earn below the poverty line, compared with 25 percent of single-father households (2,245) and three percent of two-parent households (2,571) (Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2018). Fifty-six percent of black family households are headed by a single mother compared to 16 percent of white family households in Allegheny County (U.S. Census Bureau).

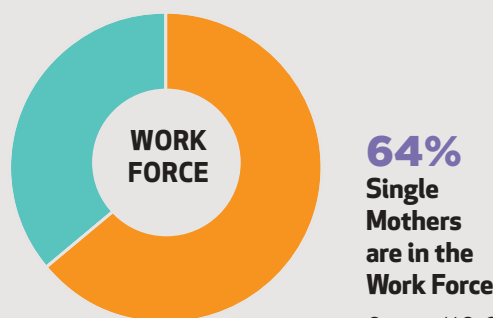
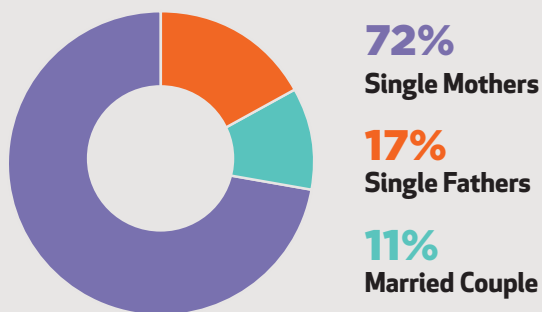
### Allegheny County's single mothers:

**Are Working:** Sixty-four percent of single mothers are participating in the labor force compared to 70 percent of two-parent households in which both parents are employed (U.S. Census Bureau).

**Have a High School Diploma or Greater:** Eighty-four percent of mothers single at the time of their child's birth self-report that they have earned at least a high school diploma or GED, and 48 percent have some post-secondary education such as college credits or a degree (Allegheny County Health Department).

**Live in Many Different Communities:** Even when they are poor, single mothers live across varied neighborhoods. While over 60 percent reside in just 10 communities, in part because these communities are centers of public housing, single mother-headed households account for all poor households in some 32 Allegheny County communities, including suburban locations such as Robinson Township, Sewickley Heights and Ben Avon (Allegheny County Department of Human Services, 2018).

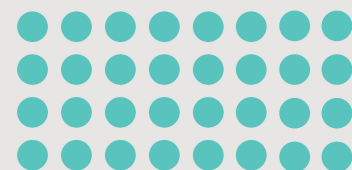
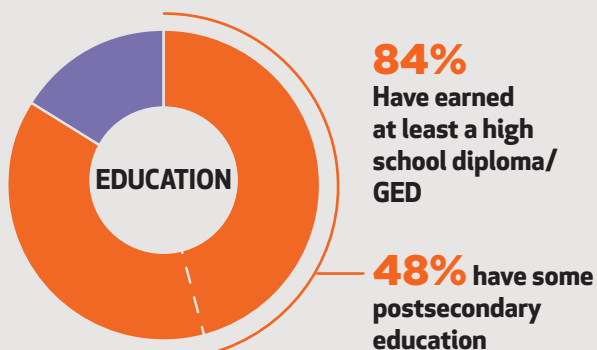
### Families Living Below the Poverty Line in Allegheny County



Source: U.S. Census

Though many of these mothers are striving to exit poverty, data point to structural barriers that impact outcomes for single mothers living in poverty and their families:

- Cash benefits to low-income families with children have declined in both nominal value and real terms since 1996. Pennsylvania has not raised its monthly Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) cash benefit for families since 1990, remaining at just \$403 per month for a family of three (Just Harvest, 2014). During the period 2001 to 2016, Pennsylvania's TANF spending on cash benefits to low-income families shifted from 30 percent to only 20 percent, reducing access to assistance that bridges the gap between what families earn and what they need to meet basic needs (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2018).
- The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that 12 million renters and homeowners pay more than 50 percent of their annual incomes for housing and notes that a family with one full-time minimum-wage worker cannot afford the local fair-market rent for a two-bedroom apartment anywhere in the country (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2018). In Pittsburgh, the affordable housing shortage has reached nearly 15,000 units for households earning 30 percent or less of the median household income or \$12,003 (Mullin & Lonergan Associates Incorporated, 2016). Affordability for these households often means accepting housing units that are in areas of concentrated poverty, have structural issues and system deficiencies, or otherwise pose health and safety risks for themselves or their families (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2017).



Single Mothers account for  
*ALL* poor households in some

**32 Allegheny County  
Communities**

- Low-income families spend a much larger portion of income on child care, contributing more than half of monthly incomes to this expense. Most would qualify for programs that provide a subsidy for child care, but there is not enough funding to cover them (Glynn, 2012). In Allegheny County, over 50 percent of all 3- and 4-year-old children in low-income families eligible for publicly funded Pre-K are not being served (Kids Count Data Center, 2018).
- Low-income parents often navigate an inadequate public transportation system to drop children off at subsidized day care centers, purchase food, and travel to work, school and appointments. In Allegheny County, the Port Authority implemented service cuts from 2007 to 2013 that resulted in increased fares and a greater than 50 percent reduction in bus routes (Sustainable Pittsburgh, 2016). This limited service resulted in a greater number of transit deserts, forcing residents to walk two or more miles to catch the bus.
- Twenty-two percent of transitions out of poverty are associated with an increase in earnings (Huff, 2011). However, relatively few low-income working mothers have the requisite training and skills to earn the wages that they need and end up in jobs that often pay low wages, have limited hours and fail to provide benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave. Additionally, single mothers face barriers to earning credentials that translate to higher earning potential. These include unaffordable tuition costs, conflicts with work hours, poor transportation and lack of child care (Povich, Roberts, & Mather, 2014).



Parents and children participating in an interactive play group at Angel's Place, a non-profit organization providing early childhood education and family support for single parents.

## PROJECT DESIGN

In Fall 2017, the Foundation's Program and Policy staff engaged 17 nonprofit organizations to review the available data, solicit their perspectives on the strengths and challenges of single mothers, and gather feedback on an approach for engaging single mothers in conversation about their lives. Staff worked closely with four organizations to invite single mothers to participate in five focus group meetings in the following Allegheny County locations: Braddock, Northside, South Side, Natrona Heights and Wilkinsburg. Forty-two women, average age of 36, participated in these discussions from September 2017 to February 2018. Sixty percent of the participants were black, and the average number of children per participant was three (see the appendices for the methodology for this qualitative research).

Five key findings emerged from the focus group discussions with single mothers in Allegheny County. Their powerful testimonials reveal the vital role of support from family and friends, the difficulty of escaping poverty, the limitations of government and nonprofit services, how stigma amplifies their burden, and the incredible resilience and courage required to survive. They also elevate the importance of engaging single mothers as experts that are best-positioned to identify solutions to the problems that impede their success. For each of the themes, a summary is presented, followed by key quotes from participants that illustrate their points of view. The report concludes with recommendations from the single mothers and providers about opportunities that can be developed to help them achieve a better quality of life for themselves and their families.

**"MY DAUGHTER'S MY MOTIVATION. WHEN I LOOK AT HER, I FEEL LIKE IT'S ALL WORTH IT, EVERYTHING I'M GOING THROUGH. MY DAUGHTER TELLS ME EVERY DAY, 'MOM YOU'RE MY BEST FRIEND.' THAT'S MY BEST FRIEND."**

- PARTICIPANT



**"SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO DIG DEEP. YOU HAVE TO GO TO INFINITY AND BEYOND SOMETIMES."**

- PARTICIPANT



# WHAT WE HEARD FROM SINGLE MOTHERS

After talking with several single mothers, some recurring themes were identified: outside support is crucial, there are systematic barriers preventing them from getting ahead, child care is unaffordable and overall there is a stigma attached to utilizing services.



Graphic recording is a notetaking technique that visually captures meeting content on paper with markers and pastels. This technique was used to help facilitate and guide the participatory research process with graphic artists, Leah Silverman and Emily Marko. Pictured are the notes taken from focus groups with single mothers.

## THEME 1: SUPPORT

### If not for family and friends...

Most participants identified at least one “supportive backbone person” in their lives who helped them navigate day-to-day responsibilities as well as crisis situations. They highlighted the importance of close relationships with family members on whom they relied for rides to work, to care for their children in emergencies or for a place to live. They also described the importance of friends, especially when parents or siblings were not in their lives. However, it’s important to note that some participants did not have a person on whom they could lean for support. Excerpts from their discussion about support follow:

#### GRATITUDE FOR FAMILY

- “My family gives me a motivational pep talk, you know, a kick in the butt, that swift kick you need. ‘You can do it.’”
- “If it weren’t for my parents, I don’t know where my son and I would be. Sorry for being emotional. I went through a really hard time when he was first born, and if I didn’t have that family support, I don’t know what I would have done. My mom still, even to this day, you know, if I’m tired and it’s 7 o’clock in the evening and I need to go to bed, she would watch him. My mom works 12-hour days and my dad works 12 hours a day, and they still seem to make it work.”
- “My mom, she supports me in everything. Like when I work, if I can’t get off to pick up my sons, she jumps and goes and gets them.”
- “With my second son, his paternal grandmother is his G-mom. That’s phenomenal. I wasn’t used to that kind of support to be honest, from family. I wish people would understand how important it is for grandparents to really step in that role.”
- “I work two different jobs. I have six kids... My oldest kids help me. Without them, I don’t know if I could make it. They do my [4-year-old] daughter’s hair, give them baths, they cook dinner because sometimes I’m not there to help. Stuff like that... If it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t make it.”

#### SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

- “I’m from the Hill. I moved there seven years ago. They been there for me from day one. Furniture, clothes, everything. Food bank, pick up my kids from bus stop, get-together parties, everything. Shoulder to cry on. My mother wasn’t there. She was in the streets. Anything goes wrong I call them, ‘Come right now!’”
- “Everyone that lives in Sheldon Park is like a support system for me. They have kids. This is going to be my first one. If my baby gets sick, I can call anyone. I’m freaking out. I don’t know what to do — but I know they’re coming.”
- “I get my support from the GED class [laughter]. Seriously, that’s a big part of it. I did not think I would be able to do it. They were nonstop on my back, on getting it done. They’re my biggest support system... You say, ‘I can’t’ and they say, ‘You can. We’re going to help you.’ And it’s not just the teachers. It’s everyone that’s there.”



- “I moved recently from another country. I have a couple of friends I met in the library. Sometimes you need some advice that you cannot find on the internet or Google. Then you can throw those question to the group. Sometimes they help you and they give you their phone or email. Something good comes from that. That’s how you meet friends and other families.”
- “It sucks not to have that family support. But it’s nice to have that friend support.”

### NO SUPPORT SYSTEM OF ANY KIND

- “I don’t have any family here. I came here because of domestic violence. I’m pregnant and everything, so my grandma sent me up here. She knew some people here but they moved back to Florida. I stayed here in shelter after shelter. It’s hard. Now I don’t have any support.”
- “There are days when I don’t feel like going, but who’s going to get me diapers, who’s going to get food? I don’t have no one to turn to. My brother was the only one I had to rely on, but he passed away a month ago. I don’t have anyone to turn to now.”
- “I’m not from the city of Pittsburgh. My family is literally two hours away so I go through a lot, but I manage it. I tell everybody, as long as there’s a God I’m going to get through it.”

## JULIE

When Julie found out she was pregnant, she and her boyfriend were living together in a house in a nice neighborhood. She was working a full-time job and had just completed her freshman year of college. Her life appeared to be going as planned, but Julie was keeping a painful secret. Her boyfriend was emotionally abusive and, as a result, she had given up almost all her relationships with friends and family. Not long after her son was born, Julie made the courageous decision to end the relationship. Her parents were the only people she could turn to and eventually she moved back in with them. With their support, Julie was able to stop working for an entire year to care

for her son full-time, heal from the abuse and decide how to get her life back. Today, Julie has just one more semester to complete before she graduates from college and is working part-time outside of the home. She has even started a home-based business, which she works on at night after she puts her son to bed. But she’s worried about her future. Earning just minimum wage, she doesn’t make enough to get by on her own, and she’s not sure if she’ll be able to get a better-paying job in her field after graduation. She’s scared that she won’t make enough money to pay for food, rent, child care, transportation and other necessities. Her dream is to be independent.

## THEME 2: SYSTEM BARRIERS

### A lot to get a little

Participants consistently discussed the barriers that they encounter in accessing the resources they need. They described program requirements and service hours that do not align with the reality of single parenthood. Women explained how they were forced to jump through hoops to get the supports that they needed — if they were available in their communities at all. They also identified unaffordable child care and inadequate transportation as additional burdens. That said, participants described some resources that helped.

### IT'S HARD TO GET HELP

- “You have to do so much to get so little, you know what I mean? So, it brings you down. It really does.”
- “I go back to public assistance to try to get a bus pass because I was spending more to get to work... she said, ‘We can help you get a car.’ I didn’t come down here for a car. I don’t even know how to drive... Lo and behold, I lost the job this past October due to my transportation getting me there late.”
- “Services are hard to navigate and parents are discouraged from reaching out when they don’t hear back from anyone or they have to work when the services they need are offered.”
- “I knew about WIC [Women, Infants and Children]. My parents were on that whenever I was little and it’s very well advertised. Other programs are not. So, trying to figure out about them and working through the system was challenging for me.”
- “The information doesn’t get disseminated properly... It’s selective as far as what agencies are actually going to disseminate the information and to whom. And I would also like to add that the hours of operation — too many times agencies and organizations are only open when people are at work. The hours need to be extended, so it’s accessible to the populations that truly needs it.”

### CHILD CARE IS EXPENSIVE AND HARD TO ACCESS

- “I went down to see CCIS [Child Care Information Services] to apply when he was three months. At the time, I was receiving unemployment. They said, “Well, your application is going to be denied because you’re receiving unemployment.” I was like, “Oh, okay.” Then I started thinking about it. How is it even going to be possible for someone to try and get themselves together if they don’t have child care to begin with.”
- “It’s always a struggle because some of my hours are evenings and my son’s day care closes at six o’clock. So sometimes it’s a hands up, hands down, because there I got to find someone to pick him up or someone to keep him or someone to take him home, so I can do evening hours. So every day fluctuates. Every day could be a different thing for me during the week.”
- “Four hundred [dollars] every two weeks for day care you have to pay out of pocket. Some cost more than that. Where am I going to get that?”
- “Child care is outrageous...so I don’t have child care on weekends. I have my built-in babysitter, but I can’t take advantage of my parents...so trying to find day care with untraditional hours is really hard to find.”
- “One of the biggest obstacles for single moms must be reliable child care. Affordable child care, especially if you don’t have a support system. I don’t live near family at all. My family lives four hours east. And you want to always know they’re being taken care of by someone reliable. You don’t want to be at work worrying about who’s taking care of your kid.”
- [provider] “Working with young moms who are part of the foster care system, I have noticed that they face great challenges. They cannot work and go to school unless they have some type of permanent connection to family. CCIS will only pay for child care while the mom is in school, which becomes a challenge in gaining employment and learning skills necessary for independence.”

**“FOUR HUNDRED [DOLLARS] EVERY TWO WEEKS FOR DAY CARE  
YOU HAVE TO PAY OUT OF POCKET. SOME COST MORE THAN THAT.  
WHERE AM I GOING TO GET THAT?”**

- PARTICIPANT

**THEME 2: SYSTEM BARRIERS** *(continued)***SAFE, DECENT, AFFORDABLE HOUSING IS HARD TO SECURE**

- “You put them up Northview Heights, put them in the danger zone. I’m like, ‘Come on!’ Because it’s ridiculous, it’s ridiculous. But I feel like they’re not trying to stop nothing that’s going on there. Clearly you could be at the rent office and look up the street and see the bull crap that’s going on and they’re not doing anything about it. The drug dealing, they come back where I live, outside and sell drugs, and have their little junkie and it’s not like it marijuana.”
- “When [the landlord] is supposed to have work orders, they get amnesia, as if you’re making it up and the work order just disappeared.”
- “My sister called to have [the landlord] come and get the mold out of her house, because me and my niece got sick. My throat closed and my niece got really sick and she was in the hospital. My sister had to call the health department to get them to take the mold out of her house.”
- “You know it’s so difficult to find affordable housing. The landlords do not want Section 8 [housing vouchers] ...you don’t know me and I don’t know you, but I have Section 8. [The landlord] said, ‘Ma’am I don’t want your Section 8.’ I broke it down to him, and I was able to get him to at least change [his mind].”
- “So, you know what I’m doing? I’m going to start looking up how I file a law suit on you. The last past year and half I’ve been asking you to come fix my shower. Begging you to come, but ya been collecting my rent and ain’t did nothing. I mean, if I don’t pay my rent, you know what you’ll do? You’ll take me right up to the magistrate, right up to the magistrate. We don’t fight for what we want, we won’t have it.”

**TRANSPORTATION IS CHALLENGING**

- “I walk to Walmart and back, five days a week. When I first started out it was 45 minutes, but now it’s about 30 minutes to get there. I walk pretty fast.”
- “Even with gentrification of the city...it makes it harder for single moms, low-income [moms]...because they send them out, way out in the surrounding areas, not in the inner city so it’s hard for [us] to get transportation to get to work or get to the day care, get them to school.”
- “I have to depend on either everyone to take me or taking the bus and at the time, like to get home from here, I lived in McKees Rocks... I had to take two buses home with my daughter who was one at the time. She would have a meltdown on the bus or she’d take her shoe off just before the bus was supposed to come. So, it was stressful, and by the time I got home, I was DONE. I was DONE for the day.”

- “I didn’t have a car for about a year of Arianna’s life and it was hard. And there was a point in time I didn’t have a car or child care, so I had a friend watch her so I could go to school. So, from McKees Rocks I’d have to take two buses to get to my friend’s [house] with Arianna and then two buses to get to school, and when I was done with school, I took two buses back to get her and two buses back home, so that was really hard.”
- “Getting my license was really hard. My mom had a car, but she has six kids. It’s hard for her to make time to teach me. And the driving school... people say, ‘Oh, you can go to driving school.’ But they’re a lot of money for one, and I can’t bring my daughter with me for driving school. For me, it took me like three years to get my license until someone was able to teach me how to drive and take me to go get the test and have a suitable car.”

### RESOURCES THAT HELP

- “I never strived, until one day we had a meeting and we sat around talking about goals. ... Since then, a lot of things that I have set as goals, I’ve achieved them. I said I was going to go back to school for online medical billing coding, and I started. I said I was going to get my license, I got my license. I said I was going to start working on my credit score, July 31st I started. It went from a 570 to 650 today.”
- “I know I’m messed up. I have drug and alcohol issues that I’m dealing with. That’s really hard, my personal biggest struggle. But I was open to people coming into my house, and they help my whole family. We have wraparound services. I went away to rehab. When I came home and I felt like everything was crazy and I couldn’t get back together again, they came to me.”
- “The fact that this program even exists. It’s kind of insane the fact that someone will watch our kids, while we go and pursue a degree and, um, getting into the work force. It’s such a great program.”

## Hope and Dreams

At the end of each session, we asked participants to share their hopes and dreams.

- To get a driver’s license.
- I want to open a small business.
- To get my GED and go to school for nursing, own my own house and a car. Give my kids a better life than they have.
- To become financially stable.
- All three of my kids have a better life than I did, graduating from college and having successful careers.
- To be the best mom I can be for my daughter.
- I am interested in empowering single moms to be victorious.
- I hope to graduate college with a bachelor’s degree in early education.

## THEME 3: STUCK IN SURVIVAL MODE

### Looking for a way to get ahead

Single mothers expressed hopes for their children's futures and their own, but also uncertainty about how to achieve their dreams. Participants illustrated how even when something good happens, they must be vigilant. A promotion or second job could trigger a cut to their public benefits, such as food assistance, or raise their rent and child care payments. The participants consistently discussed the impact of simply not earning enough money to meet all their monthly financial obligations and get ahead.

### TRYING TO GET AHEAD

- "I was receiving public assistance and they told me, 'You have to go through the work program to receive public assistance,' which I did. I got this job out past the airport. They had a shuttle to pick me up in Robinson, I get the 24 bus to Robinson, the shuttle picks me up and takes me to work, okay. But they cut my food stamps, raise my rent. A year later, they cut the shuttle."
- "Often feels like there is no right way to get ahead. When one thing is working, another area falls apart, and it's back to square one."
- "I clawed my way up. It's been really hard. I got my associate degree. Kind of figured things out on my own. I just got a car. I make over \$30,000 a year, but I have Section 8, I get food stamps, and it's scary 'cause, when I tried to get a second job at Steak N Shake waitressing so I could come up, my rent went up to \$800 a month from \$548. Took all my food stamps, child care shoots up, so you're like, 'I can't win for losing.' Claw, claw, claw, but now I feel stuck again."
- "How do you get ahead? How do you get ahead? I don't want to be on public assistance. I have a six-foot son, too. He eats mine and everyone else's. Then, I'm making this money I'm making and spending it at the store. My rent goes up and I get a raise and my rent goes up again. I live in public housing, you know. How do you get ahead? Then I'm buying bus passes. Like how do you get ahead?"
- "I need an education and I don't know how to do it, I'm stuck."
- "The ideas are there. The thought, love and the dedication are there. I'm probably not going to open a coffee place, but I have a whole folder on my computer of logos and ideas, and I feel like it never going to happen, because one, I'm black and single, and my credit is crap because I'm black and single. I'm not going to be able to get any sponsors."

### HARD TO GET OUT OF POVERTY

- “You know what scares me? What do I do? It’s a concern, finding a big girl’s job. ‘Cause I’m not in a full-time job right now. Well, will they offer day care? If they don’t, then that’s \$2,000 a month just on day care. How are you supposed to afford rent and day care and your car insurance and car payments, you know? How do you balance everything?”
- “I worked in Homestead at a wine bar and she was paying me \$10.00 an hour and I have to just ask her if she would pay me under the table. All she could say was yes or no. I asked her and she said she would, but then the commute was too far for me. I was driving \$20 to make \$40, but doing stuff trying. You have to humble yourself. Being a single mom is very humbling.”
- “I think its government... I mean they want you to work. Then when you work, they think you make millions and they want to drop your food stamps and you still going into cash that you’re trying to pay bills with and you have to buy food.”
- “The way the system is set up, it’s really hard to get out of poverty. We live in low-income housing. If I get a job, my rent would go up and then we would also lose food stamps. Even if I got an \$8.00 an hour job, I worked 20 hours a week, I would lose my food stamps. So, taking from the \$8.00 an hour job, I would have to pay more rent. I would have to pay more for food. I would have to pay a babysitter. I would have to pay for a way to get there, even if it’s walking. We don’t have a bus. I can’t go to the city to get a better paying job. It’s a hot mess.”
- “The transition that they take moms through, it doesn’t align with reality. I do believe that the system is another barrier, and it doesn’t set anyone up for anything positive in the end.”

## THEME 4: STIGMA

### Hurtful looks and words

Participants described the demeaning, humiliating and dehumanizing treatment that they receive from store clerks, case workers at the public assistance office and strangers in various public spaces. Some single mothers demonstrated their awareness that stigma seemed to be embedded in the systems designed to help them. Participants sometimes felt angry about this treatment and other times guilty, concerned that their children are ashamed or will be made fun of because they are being raised by a single mother.

### EVERYWHERE THEY GO


- “I used to wear a wedding ring on my ring finger when I went to the community market, to go to the doctor’s office and everywhere else.”
- “It gets embarrassing for me at certain times. Filling out the school emergency forms is hard for me. My kids are like, ‘Don’t even put that because what is he [their father] going to do to help us?’ So that’s a little embarrassing with my kids. And I think it bothers me more than it bothers them.”
- “When you go down [to the public assistance office] to ask for assistance, sometimes you feel kind of guilty being there. Some of the caseworkers have an attitude that makes you not want to pursue the help that’s there. I’ve been there a few times, and they’ve been rude.”

## CARA

Cara describes herself as a single mom who was raised by a single mom. She recognizes that some people may see that as a disadvantage, but she believes that experience has made her the kind of mother that can help her four daughters expand their idea of what they can do. From reading books and doing crafts to fixing bikes and composting, Cara is intent on being her children’s best teacher. In fact, Cara is so committed to ensuring that her children get a great start in life that she home-schools them until they start kindergarten because quality, affordable Pre-K is not

accessible in her community. With limited financial resources, she takes advantage of no-cost online resources, the community library and free days at the museums and other community programs to make sure that her girls are exposed to diverse ideas and activities. Unfortunately, making this kind of investment in her children leaves little time to pursue her own education. Cara would like to get a college degree and maybe own her own business one day but will have to defer this dream until she has enough time and support to pursue it.



- 
- “Obviously, [staff] have to go through a lot of people every day and you know they’re not going to be emotionally invested in you. But just kind of have the common courtesy. Say hello. Look me in my eyes. You know, using manners, informing us. That’s what your job is — to help people. Why do you have the job if you’re not going to help?”
  - “Many social service workers are also living in poverty with no benefits. They get mad about providing supports to those they see as getting something more than they do, yet working less. They lack empathy because they are also struggling and lack of hope because they do not see change in the system.”
  - “There’s a stigma around being a single parent. That’s what I choose, but people look down on you. ‘You’re not married? And you have those kids?’ Damn straight I have those kids. Because I love my kids.”
  - “These EBT [Electronic Benefit Transfer] cards are embarrassing... I have literally had \$20 in my purse and been so embarrassed and had food stamps but used my cash instead of my food stamps.”

## PROVIDER PERSPECTIVE

The providers who participated in this project acknowledged that organizations serving single mothers can perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigmatize them.

They reported that many social service workers are single mothers with similar lived experiences as their clients. Due to low wages, some workers need the very supports that they are providing while others have transitioned out of poverty and have become self-sufficient. In either scenario, this can produce positive or negative interactions with clients.

In some cases, workers utilize their common experience to establish rapport and help clients navigate challenges. However, in other cases, providers observed that this may be a barrier to empathy and result in demeaning behavior.

Providers suggested on-going training, regular supervision, and support for social service workers to ensure that clients feel respected in each interaction.

## THEME 5: STRENGTH

### Getting it done

Despite the emotional and physical fatigue that they often feel from juggling work, school, child-rearing and other responsibilities, participants explained that they are motivated to keep going — usually by their children. Most agreed that they would benefit from a break, but in the absence of respite they rely on their strengths and general ability to “get it done.” However, they warned against the tendency to think that because single mothers are strong they do not need support and compassion.

### CHILDREN ARE MOTIVATION

- “My daughter’s my motivation. When I look at her, I feel like it’s all worth it, everything I’m going through. My daughter tells me every day, ‘Mom you’re my best friend! That’s my best friend!’”
- “I’m just blessed that I was able to have beautiful kids, and the same token, I been through a lot in my life, but I don’t allow it to bring me down. My son puts a smile on my face.”
- “My kids have seen me work ever since I had them. Scrub floors, whatever. Now my three older kids go to school. As long as my three other kids make it, I am not worried. I really don’t care. My life is about over.”

### HOW TO MAKE IT

- “You have to have side hustles. It’s like with me, I went to school for doing hair. I mean you have to do things like that. You got to do something.”
- “You get in this mindset that you think you can’t do it yourself. That’s a hindrance you don’t realize. There are sacrifices you do have to make for you to be able to do it. But if you constantly tell yourself, ‘I absolutely need the father. I can’t do this. How am I going to do this? I not able! You won’t. You won’t.’”
- “There was a point in time that I wasn’t working and I had lost my job and everything. I got evicted from my house. I lost my car, like all type of stuff, and I didn’t have no way to provide for my son...and I’m not even going to front, I was out here stealing to make sure my son ate.”
- “I had to do extreme couponing to make sure we had [food]. When they cut me off from food stamps, I had to really, you know, buckle down.”

- “At this point in time, I’m entering this phase in which I make too much money to get certain things... Like I don’t have healthcare. I make too much money to be on medical assistance but I don’t make enough money to pay \$200 a month for healthcare for myself... I think about what activities to participate in, because I don’t want to break a leg, because I don’t want to have to pay for it.”
- “I don’t think about myself. Sometimes I don’t shower for three days. They get a bath every night.”

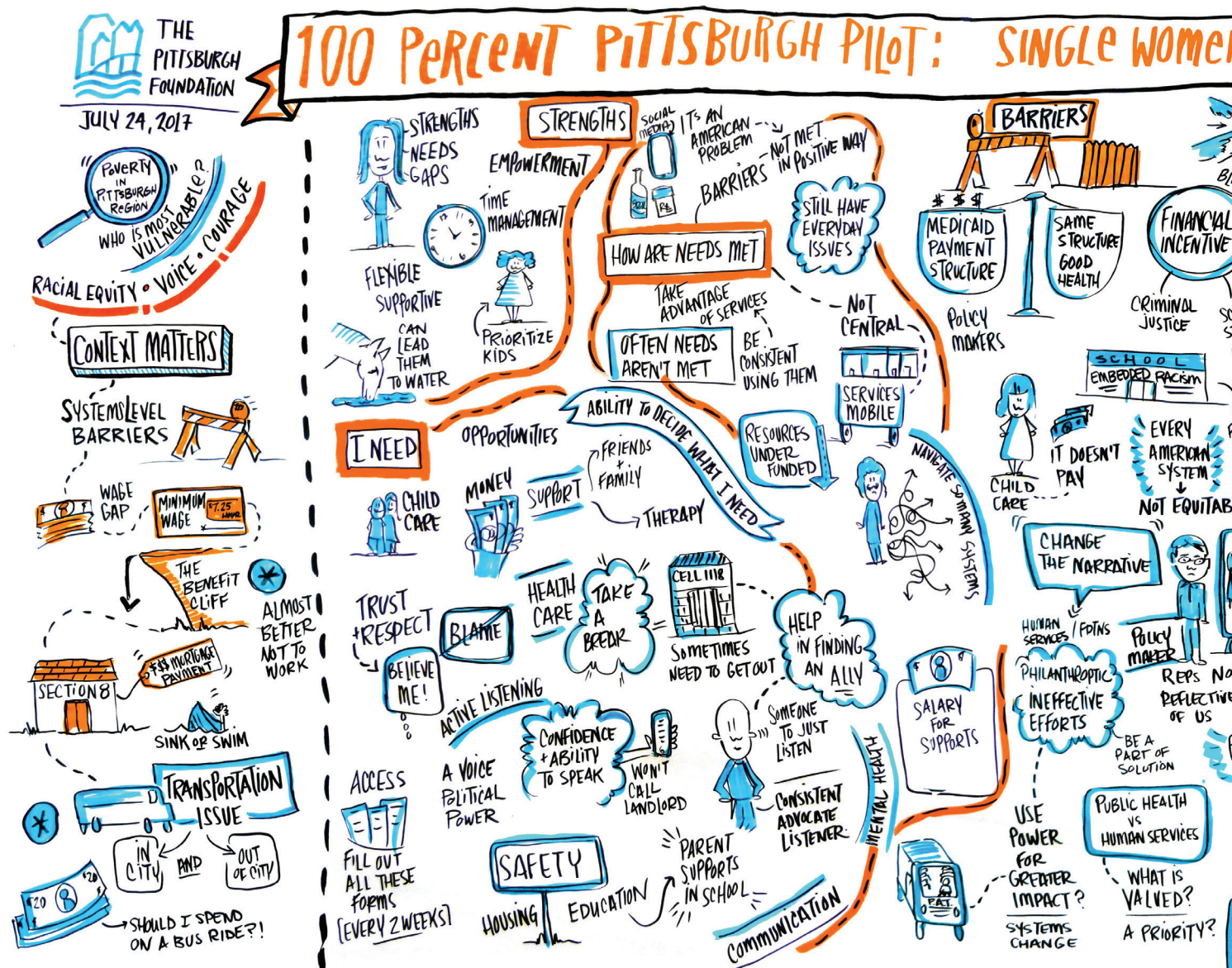
### POWER TO KEEP GOING

- “Sometimes you have to dig deep. You have to go to infinity and beyond sometimes.”
- “There’s a willpower to keep going. Even when times are bad or it’s a stressful situation, you just don’t give up. I mean people are different, but I’m going to go get it done.”
- “Another strength that I think we all have is being able to adapt.”
- “I work under dysfunction excellent. If it’s just regular stuff you can do it, and if it’s manic you can do it.”
- “I’m not easily overwhelmed, either.”
- “I try to stay focused. I know I have to do this. I take one step at a time, one step at a time. I’m spiritual, very spiritual.”
- “I’m not a procrastinator. Rough spots, I get through them. I’m used to it, I get it done.”

# HOMESTEAD

"I need an education and I don't know how to do it, I'm stuck."

- PARTICIPANT





# RECOMMENDATIONS

The single mothers and providers that The Pittsburgh Foundation talked with made several recommendations for those who want to provide effective support for single women with children and their families.



In addition to talking with single mothers, service providers were brought into the conversation to give input on their experiences and recommendations on how to improve the lives of single women raising children.

## RECOMMENDATION 1:

### **Improve the accessibility of services and resources that single mothers need to thrive.**

- **Support improved dissemination of information.** Information that is reliable and easy to get is critical for single mothers to access essential resources. Participants suggested that information such as hours of operation, eligibility and discontinuation should be regularly updated and made available through channels most often used by moms. These include schools, other assistance programs and social media. Ensure that agencies' staffs know the services provided by other organizations that could benefit their clients.
- **Support co-location of services and expand operating hours.** Barriers such as transportation, lack of knowledge about services and incompatibility of service hours with work schedules can be reduced by making it possible for single mothers to meet multiple needs in a single location. Participants also noted that extending service hours can create less conflict for single mothers who often must choose between calling off from work, risking their employment and obtaining services that can help them.
- **Expand the availability of affordable child care, including care that is offered during non-traditional hours and through quality, family-based child care.** While many single mothers depend on friends, family and neighbors to fill gaps in center-based care, this care is not always reliable — especially on evenings and weekends. Additionally, providers point to the importance of bolstering the child care system overall through more investment that supports not only quality care but the workers who provide that care. They cited data showing that, in all states, median annual earnings (\$26,124) for the child-care workforce, which is 98 percent female, would qualify a worker with a family of three for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).
- **Explore evidence-based models for improving transportation access, especially in neighborhoods and communities outside of the city.** Participants stated that, while bus tickets are helpful for low-income families that live in areas where buses run routes that are regular and frequent, they have less value in communities further from the city. In addition to expanding bus routes, participants suggested pilots of alternative transit solutions for those who face geographical and logistical barriers to transportation. Examples offered include subsidized ride-sharing to get people from their homes to employment centers; and subsidized driver's education to assist people with moving toward car ownership.

## RECOMMENDATION 2:

### **Support strategies that build practical skills, offer concrete help and provide a pathway out of poverty.**

- **Provide education about financial management and other life skills.** Financial education alone will not eradicate poverty, especially when, as participants pointed out, “you don’t have enough to make ends meet.” However, understanding budgeting and the power of a good credit score can help single mothers migrate out of poverty as their earnings increase. And while participants acknowledged the helpfulness of parenting classes, they suggested more practical support like help with home repairs, including through classes that teach them about home maintenance.
- **Improve access to homeownership.** Single mothers desire homeownership but feel that it is out of reach due to poor credit, lack of access to capital and poor understanding of the homebuying process. Participants also shared an awareness that individuals in subsidized housing are sometimes paying rent that is higher than what a mortgage would cost. They favored homeownership support that demystifies the homebuying process, provides credit repair services and assists with securing financing for home purchase to help single mothers reduce their monthly housing costs and build wealth.
- **Encourage elimination of the “benefits cliff.”** Unless the rules governing public benefits support single mothers’ transition from public assistance, they will be unable to get out of poverty. Participants recommended the implementation of a grace period between when their income increases and when their healthcare, food assistance or child care benefits change, like student loans that offer a six-month deferment for college graduates as they transition to employment. They also recommended a case management component that helps single mothers proactively prepare for and navigate this transition period.
- **Support access to living wage employment.** Most single mothers work, as do most people living in poverty. But often their wages are well below the cost of the most modest housing, food and basics. Increases in the state minimum wage and programs that promote post-secondary credentials and degrees that are in fast-growing, high-skilled, high-wage fields would move single mothers toward decreased reliance on public benefits and realization of the positive futures they envision. In conjunction with child care and transportation supports, this could help single mothers move out of and stay out of poverty.
- **Support direct cash assistance to families with children, to bring their incomes above the poverty level.** The current safety-net system provides single mothers with little flexibility in how it addresses their needs. Participants stated a preference for individual cash transfer programs — providing a cash benefit to families without strings attached — to help single mothers close the gap between earnings and their cost of living. Making fewer choices between food, clothing and medicine could be an important strategy to help families move out of poverty. Also, support expanded access to emergency cash assistance for unexpected needs that would create barriers to employment, child care or medical care.



### RECOMMENDATION 3:

#### **Support programs that promote the social and emotional well-being of single mothers.**

- **Encourage the development of programs that offer formal respite services.** Single mothers are often so focused on taking care of their kids' needs that they neglect their own. Support programs that offer planned child care for single parents, regardless of their child's health status, to provide temporary relief so that they can address personal needs such as sleep, medical treatment or just few hours alone.
- **Support the expansion of emergency child care.** Unexpected changes in work schedules, breakdowns in usual care or other emergencies can leave single mothers without safe and affordable child care options. While Allegheny County does have one crisis nursery that serves parents with children ages zero to six, it is not accessible for families that have transportation barriers or have older children that cannot be left home alone safely.
- **Encourage providers to offer programs that provide emotional support in less structured ways.** While programs that offer information and resources are valuable, sometimes single mothers just need someone to talk to and opportunities for leisure. Regular, informal social gatherings could provide opportunities for single mothers to establish positive relationships with peers, reducing social isolation, which is associated with increased stress.



A group of mothers and their children celebrate together at Providence Connection's annual Thanksgiving Dinner. Providence Connections provides comprehensive education and developmental opportunities for parents and children on Pittsburgh's North Side.



## RECOMMENDATION 4:

### **Eliminate the presence of stigma in the delivery of services.**

- **Employ people who can relate.** Participants and providers believe that peers may be the most knowledgeable about how to find services and the skills necessary to navigate them. Hiring people who have similar experiences to the people they serve can help address the issues of stigma and the quality of services offered by public and private organizations.
- **Support professional development training for staff who directly work with single mothers.** Create early and ongoing training that promotes professionalism and empathy. Education that creates improved understanding of poverty, such as poverty simulations and the development of more cultural understanding, like racial equity and implicit bias training, are important for fostering less stigmatizing interactions between staff and clients. Additionally, recognizing that many staff are also living in poverty and may need the very supports that they are providing to their clients, organizations should examine the broader organizational culture, including policies, practices and resources offered to staff to identify how it may perpetuate negative stereotypes and stigma and take corrective action.
- **Encourage inclusion of single mothers in the design of programs intended to serve them.** During every stage, from program development and implementation to evaluation and redesign, organizations should identify ways to include their clients. This could increase the relevance of supports or programs that are being offered to single mothers. Without their input, even the most well-intentioned ideas can become another barrier to success.
- **Support strategies that eliminate the stigma of public benefits recipients.** Millions of families rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8) to survive, yet the stigma associated with these benefits often strips them of their dignity and makes them targets of mistreatment and scorn. Look at strategies employed by other systems and draw on partners for translating those models to the local context. Opportunities identified by the participants include redesigning the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card — currently blue and green with the word “ACCESS” printed in yellow letters on the front — to look more like a bank-issued debit card; and education and support for private market landlords to increase acceptance of housing vouchers.

## RECOMMENDATION 5:

### **Provide opportunities to participate in advocacy and systems change efforts.**

- **Reduce barriers to participation in advocacy efforts.** To mobilize single mothers, organizations must consider their needs. Many are natural and fierce advocates for themselves and their children; however, participants identified logistical barriers that often limit their participation in organized systems change efforts. Encourage advocacy groups to reduce the participation burden for single mothers by offering child care at meetings, utilizing social media to educate and facilitate ongoing engagement, providing transportation and hosting events in locations in which they are already present.
- **Encourage the development of leadership training for single mothers to increase their representation in formal leadership roles.** Participants expressed belief that many single mothers want to do things to change their community but don't know where to get started and need support. In addition to basic leadership skills, training should also include education and mentorship that helps single mothers prepare to run for office in local government.
- **Promote the creation of community commissions and parent advisory boards.** Encourage public and private entities that create or influence policies and practices to create formal channels through which single mothers can participate in decision-making processes to increase the relevancy, transparency and accountability of their systems.

**“YOU HAVE TO DO SO MUCH TO GET SO LITTLE, YOU KNOW  
WHAT I MEAN? SO, IT BRINGS YOU DOWN IT REALLY DOES.”**

- PARTICIPANT

## METHODOLOGY

In Fall 2017, the Foundation's Program Department launched this qualitative research project. Forty-two women identifying as single women raising children attended the five discussion groups. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 67 years old with a mean age of 36. The racial makeup of the participants is 60 percent black; 36 percent white; and four percent other. The average number of children per participant was three. The discussions with single mothers took place from September 2017 to February 2018 in the Allegheny County municipalities of Braddock, Natrona Heights, City of Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg, although the women identified themselves as residents of a mixture of surrounding neighborhoods, including public housing communities. In each of the focus groups, the Foundation staff asked the women questions to elicit an understanding of their strengths, successes and challenges:

1. What does a typical day look like for you?
2. What are some of the greatest strengths that single women raising children possess?
3. What do single moms need to thrive?
4. What are some of the barriers that prevent single women raising children from having the life that they want for themselves and their families?
5. What are some of the things that single moms do to navigate or overcome these challenges?
6. Do you feel like you have a voice in the decisions that impact your life?

The Foundation also engaged staff from family-serving nonprofit organizations (many of whom also identified as single mothers) to gather their perspectives about the needs and strengths of single moms. In July 2017, seventeen staff members representing a diverse group of nonprofit organizations met with Foundation staff to share their perceptions about the barriers facing the women with whom they work and opportunities for systems to serve them better.

With the participants' permission, the Foundation recorded these discussions, a professional transcriptionist prepared more than 100 pages of written transcripts, and five trained individuals coded the items in this text, using a qualitative codebook. This coding pointed to the themes highlighted in this report. The Foundation staff then conducted feedback sessions with several of the women who had participated in the focus groups and with the providers (May 2018) to review the themes and recommendations to allow members to critically analyze the findings and comment on them to increase the accuracy and completeness of the findings. With this information, the Foundation prepared the report.

It is important to note that this approach is part of an intentional effort to operationalize the 100 Percent Pittsburgh organizing principle and values: building into The Pittsburgh Foundation's practice, a consistent way of listening to everyday people that complements the existing quantitative data. This understanding is essential to address the barriers to opportunity that people face because of race and gender, and to elicit opportunities for action and meaningful changes in how people are treated and in the systems that impact their lives.

**Project Staff and Partners**

This report was developed through a collective effort, facilitated by The Pittsburgh Foundation, guided by providers and centered on the single mothers who are the source of information and expertise.

The process, management and research for this pilot was led by Michelle McMurray, senior program officer for Health and Human Services, with assistance and facilitation from Michael Yonas, senior program officer for Research and Special Initiatives, and Jeanne Pearlman, senior vice president for Program and Policy. Katherine Stoehr, an independent consultant, assisted with the data gathering and interpretation. Kathy McCauley, independent consultant, assisted with the authorship of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> These data were provided by the Division of Health Informatics, Pennsylvania Department of Health. The Department specifically disclaims responsibility for any analyses, interpretations, or conclusions.

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## ABOUT THE PITTSBURGH FOUNDATION

Established in 1945, The Pittsburgh Foundation is one of the nation's oldest community foundations and is the 13th largest of more than 750 community foundations across the United States.

The Foundation's resources comprise endowment funds established by individuals, businesses and organizations with a passion for charitable giving and a deep commitment to the Pittsburgh community. The Foundation currently has more than 2,000 individual donor funds and, together with its supporting organizations, assets of more than \$1.14 billion. Grantmaking benefits a broad spectrum of community life within Pittsburgh and beyond.

The Foundation has strengthened its focus on community, the positive impact that can be achieved through grantmaking, the engagement of donors in critical regional issues, and the convening of leadership in collaboration with funding and civic partners.



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