

KIDS COUNT Indicator Brief

**Increasing the Percentage of Children
Whose Parents Have Stable Employment**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

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In 2003, nearly 24 million children lived in households where no parent worked full-time and year-round (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2005). These children not only face higher rates of poverty, but are far more likely to be without the kinds of health and other family benefits often associated with stable employment. While being employed full-time significantly decreases a person's chances of being poor, in 2003, nearly 60 percent of low-income families with children had at least one parent who was employed both full-time and year-round (U.S. Department of Labor, 2005). Many low-income parents who were employed part-time or part-year report that their schedule is the result of their inability to find full-time, year-round work. In addition, most of the low-income parents who reported not working at all in 2003 were disabled or taking care of family members (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004). Research consistently demonstrates that when low-income parents have access to programs that provide income and work supports, they are able to bolster their employment stability, their earnings, and the health and well-being of their children.

When parents have secure employment, with earnings sufficient to meet their families' basic needs, children benefit in many ways. Their odds of having good nutrition, decent, stable housing, and adequate health care increase. Employment affects children in other ways as well. According to the National Research Council, unemployment is a "profoundly important stressor associated with high rates of depression, anxiety, and self-reported physical illness" (Singer & Ryff, 2001). Unstable employment or working at multiple unrelated jobs is associated with adults' poor health and early death. By easing parental depression and alleviating stress, employment can improve family functioning and create a more positive home setting for children. In addition, going to work can put parents in contact with wider social networks, which can contribute to better physical and mental health. Wider social networks also expand parents' access to information and resources that can help them support their children's development and education.

A key element in any plan to improve children's well-being is therefore a coordinated, well funded effort to help low-income adults find better, more stable, higher paying jobs. Many initiatives associated with welfare reform and workforce development have pursued this goal.

Traditionally, programs have focused exclusively on job training and job placement—certainly worthwhile objectives. However, these efforts have often failed to address major obstacles to employment, focus on retention, or consider employers’ bottom-line concerns. Too often, participants have ended up in jobs with low wages and limited prospects for advancement.

New approaches are needed—strategies sufficiently powerful and broad to address the complex realities not only of individual job seekers, but also of neighborhoods characterized by high rates of unemployment (Gibson, 2000). One observer has referred to this phenomenon as “the disappearance of work” in America’s central cities. In recent years, the decline in manufacturing and the movement of jobs to the suburbs have placed low-skill residents of inner-city neighborhoods at a greater disadvantage than in the past (Wilson, 2000). Suburban employers often have negative expectations of inner-city job applicants based solely on their address (Coulton, 1996). Work-development efforts must therefore take into account not only worker characteristics, but also neighborhood effects. They must address not only the capacity of job seekers to meet employers’ needs, but also the capacity of urban labor markets to work for low-income, inner-city residents (Fleischer, 2001).

Moreover, work-development efforts cannot succeed without intensive efforts to lower practical and cultural barriers to employment. In a 1999 survey of 44,000 families, three-quarters of parents on welfare reported one or more significant obstacles to work, the most common being poor physical health or mental health, lack of recent work experience, and lack of a high school diploma or equivalent. Other barriers include the need to care for an infant or disabled child, lack of transportation, and limited English-language skills. Eliminating or lowering those barriers has been shown to increase regular, full-time employment among former welfare recipients (Hinds, 1999).

This *Indicator Brief* outlines eight broad strategies for workforce development that are rooted in lessons learned from recent practice and research, including the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Jobs Initiative.

- **Provide employment and educational services geared to low-skill job seekers.**
- **Focus relentlessly on job quality.**
- **Focus on job retention and advancement.**
- **Address the needs of both workers and employers.**
- **Address transportation issues.**

- **Expand child care options for working families.**
- **Provide sustained support and technical assistance to community-based organizations that address major barriers to employment.**
- **Work across sectors and institutions to change the larger systems that affect workforce development.**

1. Provide employment and educational services geared to low-skill job seekers.

Since changes in the welfare system took effect in 1996, many parents have left the welfare rolls and found employment. By 2000, the number of welfare recipients had dropped from 4 million to 2 million. Fewer families entered the program and more families left, resulting in reduced caseloads. Experts credit welfare reform, a strong economy, and an array of policies intended to make work pay (Golden, 2005).

Many welfare leavers continue to need help finding and keeping jobs. While work effort has increased since welfare reform, progress has not been steady. Families who left welfare in 2000 or later are less likely to be working than families who left welfare in the 1990s (FREMSTAD, 2004). The proportion of families that left welfare and were not employed rose from 50 percent in 1999 to 58 percent in the tougher labor market of 2002; during the same period, the proportion of leavers who returned to welfare rose from 20 to 26 percent (Golden, 2005).

Work supports are even more important today than they were when welfare reform was first introduced. Welfare reform took place at a time when demand for low-skilled workers was relatively strong; since 2000, such jobs have been harder to find. Moreover, the more employable welfare recipients have already left the rolls; those who remain tend to significant barriers to work, including very low skill levels, poor physical and mental health, or sick children. More welfare recipients will be reaching their time limits and will be especially vulnerable when economic downturns occur. Federal funding for work supports, including child care, is crucial because states are no longer flush with cash, as many were in the boom years of the late 1990s. Some states have completely spent down the reserves they built up in those years (Winship & Jencks, 2004).

- **Create coherent, coordinated employment services.** Many states provide at least some of the services job seekers need to locate, prepare for, and retain good jobs. However, such services are often scattered among multiple bureaucracies and supported with

separate funding streams. By coordinating and consolidating services, states can promote more permanent transitions into the labor force and higher paying jobs (Haskins, cited in Duncan & Chase-Lansdale, 2000).

- **Help low-skill job seekers prepare for and locate good jobs.** Unemployed parents can benefit from job training and placement initiatives. However, most existing programs are geared to people who already have marketable skills and are ready to join the work force. In the wake of welfare reform, numerous states have redesigned their jobs programs to emphasize rapid job entry rather than participation in longer-term education and training programs. These programs, often known as “work first” programs, are rooted in the conviction that immediate entry into the labor market is the most direct path to self-sufficiency (Pavetti, Olson, Nightingale, & Duke, 1997).

For many job seekers, those who lack work experience and basic job skills, such programs are not sufficient. Many lack the skills needed to succeed in the workplace: almost two-thirds of welfare recipients receive very low scores (in the bottom quartile) of the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT), a measure of basic skills that bears a strong relationship to future earnings and employment. If they live in neighborhoods where relatively few residents have jobs, they may lack basic knowledge about the world of work or networks of acquaintances that lead to good jobs. They may have difficulty getting necessary paperwork in order. Writing a resume or filling out applications may prove difficult—especially for recent immigrants.

- **Address the needs of low-income immigrant families.** Many low-income working parents are recent immigrants. These families are hard pressed to make ends meet despite work: 53 percent of immigrant working families with children are low-income versus 26 percent of native-born working families (Golden, 2005). Immigrant families often have trouble learning about or accessing benefits to which they and their children are entitled.
- **Teach basic skills.** The vast majority of jobs available to non-college graduates require the ability to read or write paragraphs, use arithmetic, or use computers (Holzer, 1996). However, relatively few welfare-to-work initiatives or other education and training programs are equipped to deal with job seekers’ extremely low basic skills. Those that do

exist share several features: they provide participants with close supervision and increasing levels of responsibility, reward small steps toward success, and encourage peer support (Pavetti *et al.*, 1997).

- **Provide personal support.** As they transition to work and balance family and workplace duties, parents may need personal support through intensive case management, individual counseling, supervisor training, mentoring, peer support groups, hotlines, or Employee Assistance Programs (Department of Labor, 1999). They may need assistance with practical and cultural challenges, such as finding appropriate clothes, negotiating transportation, preparing for an interview, or preparing necessary paperwork. They may also need help with larger issues: learning to grasp a sense of time or space that differs from their own; learning about the work habits and codes of behavior that are valued in most workplaces; and acquiring habits of language and speech expected by employers.

- **Add rungs at the bottom of the career ladder.** Job seekers may benefit from training opportunities that simulate work. They may need opportunities to learn the routines and habits associated with work and to build an employment record, from which they may be able to move on to paid jobs. Effective strategies include the following:
 - **Subsidize initial work opportunities.** Some states and communities are making provisions for public service employment to expand work opportunities. West Virginia has provided community service jobs to welfare recipients for several years. Wisconsin's welfare reform plan makes use of community-service jobs for many parents in depressed parts of the state. The New Hope program in Milwaukee provides community service jobs for those unable to find private-sector employment (Wilson, 2000).

 - **Provide supportive work environments.** Work opportunities appear to be most effective when they involve inexperienced workers in group work with close, supportive supervision. The National Supported Work Demonstration Project provides highly disadvantaged welfare recipients with subsidized employment in a supported work environment. Participants carry out a variety of tasks, including building repair and maintenance, security, and

child care. Some sites run programs that sell goods or services to the public, generating revenues partially offset project costs.

- **Provide work-based training.** Another approach provides short-term job training that combines basic academics with vocational instruction. An example is the vocational training model employed by the San Jose Center for Employment and Training (CET). Young high school dropouts with low reading levels and minority single mothers taking part in CET have shown significantly higher levels of employment and earnings than their counterparts who did not take part in the program.
- **Provide incremental work experience and/or community service.** This has been referred to as a “job safety net”--publicly funded, low-wage service jobs that offer a sense of purpose and a pathway to employment for people who want to work but cannot find openings or lack the skills they need to get a job. Many welfare recipients are not immediately ready for private-sector employment or the education, training, and work activities typically provided by welfare-to-work initiatives. They can benefit from work experiences that serve as stepping stones to more traditional jobs or training programs. Project Match, based in Chicago, is an example of a community-based welfare-to-work program designed to help those who are least ready get and keep jobs.
- **Ensure that those who staff workforce development initiatives are culturally competent.** Programs need to develop innovative strategies for integrating issues of race and ethnicity in their own projects as well as in all facets of workforce development, including recruitment, job placement worker retention and advancement, and employer relations (Gibson, 2000).
- **Use TANF funds to support the developmental disability system.** Developmental disability work programs, both sheltered and supportive, may be appropriate for some jobseekers who are unable to transition from welfare to work or to keep a job due to cognitive disabilities (Anderson, 2002).

- **Recognize the link between access to health care and successful job entry.** Health problems, mental health issues, and drug or alcohol dependency are major obstacles to steady employment. Yet, until they find employment, many adults lack access to appropriate services. Expanding access to comprehensive health care is therefore a key to increasing parental employment. In theory, Medicaid has extended health services to large numbers of low-income Americans, but beneficiaries in many states face persistent access problems. Equity remains a major challenge as coverage for adults varies markedly across states. Access to employer-sponsored health coverage is far more likely in some states than in others. Generally speaking, states have shown little innovation in expanding health coverage and access for adults (Golden 2005).

2. Focus relentlessly on job quality.

Many welfare leavers take jobs with wages that cannot meet a working family's basic needs. Many report limited opportunities to advance out of low-paying, entry-level positions (Andersson, Holzer & Lane, 2003). Most receive no employer-provided health insurance or paid sick or vacation time. In short, they lack the economic security that is important for all families. Workforce development programs and policies should seek to ensure that all working families earn enough to meet their basic needs, including stable and decent housing, nourishment, and clothing.

- **Move beyond job entry alone as a performance indicator.** Many workforce development initiatives gauge performance on the basis of the number of job placements they make. Leaving the welfare rolls and gaining employment are important but insufficient steps toward economic security and family well-being. When they measure success, programs need to link job entry with one or more indicators of job quality, such as earnings level or benefits received (Stevens, 2001).
- **Adopt an approach to defining a “family-supporting wage” that reflects cost of living in a given location.** The federal poverty line has often been used to gauge whether families have enough income to meet their basic needs. However, there is now broad consensus that an income at the poverty line cannot support most working families. New tools have been devised to provide a more realistic measure. For example, “basic family budgets” have been developed for specific communities across the nation and family constellations (such as one parent/one child, two parents/two children). These

tools calculate what it takes to have a no-frills standard of living that is safe and decent (Bernstein, Brocht, & Spade-Aguilar, 2000; Economic Policy Institute, 2005).

- **Seek better working conditions for employed parents whose earnings cannot support their families.** In recent years, the emphasis on moving welfare recipients into the labor force has kept attention focused on unemployed parents, primarily women. However, millions of families are living in poverty or near poverty despite the fact that at least one parent has full-time, year-round employment. In 2001, about one-third of American families with children under age 18 and headed by nonelderly adults had low incomes, defined as less than twice that year's federal poverty level (about \$28,300 for a family of three). Most of these families include working adults, yet struggle to make ends meet. Compared with families earning a bit more (with incomes between two and three times the federal poverty line), these families have more trouble making rent or mortgage payments, putting food on the table, and affording health care (Golden, 2005).

3. Focus on job retention and advancement, providing support services both during and after placement.

Many people need sustained support as they make the transition to work. For workers with low skills and little experience, keeping a job often turns out to be even more difficult than finding one. In the absence of support services, those who make the transition from welfare to work often lose their jobs soon after landing them. If they do not work very much during the year, their earnings increase less than their welfare benefits decrease, they are worse off than they were before their "successful" job search (Haskins, 2002). For the purposes of its evaluation, the Casey Jobs Initiative stipulated that retention is indicated by limited gaps between jobs, usually no more than 30 days (Fleischer, 2001).

- **Ensure that workers have the supports needed for stable employment and advancement.** Researchers say that up to three-quarters of employed welfare leavers perform at least as well as their coworkers, and their job-turnover rate is relatively low. However, welfare leavers typically begin with low wages and have limited opportunities to move up the job ladder. They often need help developing the skills associated with career advancement. A much smaller group of welfare leavers have significant problems keeping jobs due to absenteeism, poor attitudes toward work, and problems with coworkers. This group needs targeted on-the-job help or other counseling (Golden, 2005).

- **Factor into policymaking the role of supports such as subsidized child care and health insurance in creating job stability.** Research on welfare leavers shows a “boomerang effect”: a quarter of those who left the welfare rolls in 2000 or 2001 were back on assistance in 2002. Roughly half of those returning recipients had reported leaving welfare for work. Compared with those who keep their jobs, those who return to welfare are much more likely to be in poor health, to have low levels of education, and to have young children. Employees who received such supports as subsidized child care and health insurance were less likely to return to welfare (Golden, 2005).
- **Incorporate job retention into the mission of all agencies and organizations involved in workforce development.** Efforts to strengthen worker retention in the labor market are as important as job placement and must be targeted toward employers and employees alike. Newly placed workers must be closely monitored and provided with support and follow-up services, including support groups, telephone calls and meetings, as well as financial, housing and child care assistance. Employers who understand the negative impact of high turnover on the bottom line need to take a more active role in ensuring that entry-level workers from diverse backgrounds succeed in the workplace. Employees need to be encouraged to stay in jobs and establish a stable job history, which can lead to greater wage-earning potential or career advancement. Both need opportunities to learn about one another’s concerns so that the potential for misunderstanding or conflict factors that can contribute to high turnover decreases.
- **Take retention into account in gauging agencies’ performance.** The success of agencies responsible for employee placement should be based on retention, not just job entry.
- **Provide re-employment services.** People who lose their jobs may need assistance in order to learn from their experiences and apply for a new job.

4. Focus on the needs of both workers and employers.

Effective workforce development strategies have a dual customer focus: they improve the odds those entry-level workers will have job success while improving the odds that employers will meet

their bottom-line goals. A key lesson of Casey's Jobs Initiative is that employers must be engaged in all phases of workforce development. When job-training programs fail to engage employers, the result is a workforce that does not meet employers' needs (Gibson, 2000).

- **Seek the help of “brokers” who can link community-based organizations engaged in workforce development with the business community.** A crucial challenge for workforce development programs is to broker new relationships with potential employers and encourage them to work in partnership with community-based organizations in training and hiring unemployed and underemployed people. Improving communication across the cultural divide that separates employers from community-based organizations and agencies is a related task. Employers need to see how their company or organization will benefit from changes in their workplace culture, including their hiring, training, and retention policies. They need to understand the challenges low-income, entry-level workers frequently face, including a lack of housing and difficulty finding child care and transportation. At the same time, workforce initiatives need to appreciate employers' concerns and constraints.
- **Collaborate with Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs).** In the past, Private Industry Councils (PICs) managed the local operations of federal employment and training program. Since the enactment of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, these bodies were reorganized and given broader authority. The new organizations, called Workforce Investment Boards, are councils of business and community leaders charged with the governance and oversight of employment-oriented education and training programs in states, cities, and counties. According to a recent report, local and state WIBs have embraced this broader role and are important partners for organizations committed to workforce development. WIBs have begun to consider local job seekers and employers as their customers, and are reaching out to both groups. Both state and local WIBS are engaged in strategic planning efforts. State boards are focusing on policy development, while local boards are making progress in assessing local workforce needs (National Leadership Institute for Workforce Excellence, 2002).
- **Challenge restrictive hiring policies.** It may be possible to persuade employers to change hiring policies, giving greater weight to job-related competencies and less weight to traditional requirements. Casey's Jobs Initiative has found that employers may be more

willing to rethink restrictive policies once they have had a few successes hiring people without high school diplomas or ex-offenders (Fleischer, 2001).

5. Address transportation issues.

For many parents, getting to work is a major problem. One-quarter of unemployed workers say that transportation represents a major obstacle to steady employment as they try to leave the welfare rolls (Department of Labor, 1999). Employers agree that transportation is a problem: In a survey of 700 employers conducted in 1997, two out of five said that their jobs are not accessible by public transportation (Regenstein, 1998).

- **Change rules that prevent car owners from receiving assistance.** In many cases, the value of a car is considered part of a household's assets, and can keep otherwise eligible families from receiving needed public assistance. Recognizing that many people cannot get to jobs without wheels, some states have begun disregarding \$5,000 of the value of a car used to get to and from work. Steps have been taken to introduce this exemption on a national basis.
- **Improve public transportation systems to allow access to jobs outside of cities.** The Department of Labor's Welfare to Work initiative, recognizing that welfare caseloads have become more concentrated in inner-city and rural areas while most job growth has occurred in the suburbs, has recommended: expanding urban transit systems to serve "reverse" and "off-hours" commuters. Other strategies include creating rural transit/van programs and using school buses during off-hours to transport low-income workers to and from job sites.
- **Foster entrepreneurship in the transportation field.** Economic development efforts that provide training or micro-enterprise programs for small business owners can focus on van/bus companies or auto repair shops.
- **Provide assistance for car ownership.** Programs that assist low-income workers buy, finance, or repair cars, can also reduce barriers to steady work.

6. Expand working families' options for child care and after-school care.

According to a Government Accounting Office study of welfare-to-work programs across the nation, 60 percent of participants say that a lack of child care is a barrier to work. Moreover, many jobs available to low-skilled workers take place during nontraditional hours, when child care is typically not available (Szekely, 2004). Efforts to increase parental employment need to encompass strategies designed to help parents find available, reliable, affordable child care. Key strategies include the following:

- **Incorporate early childhood services into welfare reform plans.** Some states and cities are taking innovative approaches to this challenge. In some cases, local agencies are joining forces to offer an array of services, including not only child care, but also child health and mental health services, parenting education, and support services in the welfare-to-work transition. For example, Rhode Island's Starting Right initiative has expanded eligibility for subsidized child care to more families. All families who meet income guidelines (not just those receiving or transitioning from welfare) can receive child care reimbursements if they use approved providers. Rhode Island has also taken the lead in providing health insurance benefits to center-based and family child care providers if they care for state-subsidized children and meet eligibility requirements.
- **Increase the number of licensed child care spaces.** Research shows that unlicensed, informal child care is often of lower quality than regulated settings. But many families turn to unlicensed, informal forms of child care in order to meet new work requirements. States can help to promote children's well-being by encouraging families to use licensed caregivers whenever possible, and by paying subsidies only for children cared for in regulated settings (Zaslow, Tout, Botsko & Moore, 1999). At the same time, they need to expand the number of licensed child care openings.
- **Help parents make good choices for their children.** Many states have funded resource and referral agencies not only to provide information and referral services to families, but also to undertake a range of quality improvement activities. In addition, some have undertaken special products or campaigns aimed at educating parents about the value of quality child care programs.
- **Provide support to family child care providers.** A number of states have funded the development and support of family child care networks through local recruitment efforts,

training, and technical assistance. Others have taken a different approach, providing mini-grants for start-up of family child care homes and funding mentoring projects.

- **Improve the qualifications of providers.** Several states have created statewide career development systems or curricula in support of degree programs. Many states have made training available to providers through scholarships for Child Development Associate (CDA) and other credential training. North Carolina's TEACH program has been cited as a model professional development system.
- **Expand out-of-school-time programs for school-aged children.** For most working families, school schedules and job schedules are out of synch. Out-of-school time and community school initiatives are beginning to address the dearth of positive opportunities for school-age children during non-school hours. Work development efforts need to work toward expanding programs that provide developmentally appropriate care to children when schools are closed but parents are at work. They may want to collaborate with national efforts to expand families' options for the care of their school-aged children, including Making the Most of Out-of-School Time (MOST) and Extended-Service Schools (ESS) Initiatives.

7. Provide sustained support and technical assistance to community-based organizations that contribute to workforce development. A key challenge for communities is to integrate workforce development with human services and education (Fleischer, 2001).

- **Provide assistance with management and finance.** Service integration requires many changes in how systems are managed and financed. Many changes in rule-making, data-systems management, and staff development are needed. Private- and public-sector organizations can provide technical assistance to community-based service reform efforts, helping them plan, implement, document, and evaluate system changes.
- **Stay focused on jobs.** Workforce development programs may be most effective when they deal holistically with job seekers, their families and communities. After all, the problem of unemployment and underemployment are intertwined with many other social, economic, and environmental problems faced by low-income communities. Programs may therefore collaborate with many other community-based organizations. The

challenge is often to work collaboratively with others while staying focused on the tough challenge of getting more people into the workforce (Molina & Nelson, 2001).

8. Work across sectors and institutions to change all of the systems that affect workforce development and access to work supports.

Increasing the number of children whose parents have good jobs requires systemic change on a broad scale. Connecting low-income residents with high-quality jobs that offer career advancement requires buy-in from all affected stakeholders: low-income workers, employers, elected officials, community-based organizations, government agencies, and others. No single institution or delivery system can improve the lives of families who live in areas of concentrated poverty. Lasting change requires commitment and collaborative effort from all concerned.

- **Ensure that eligible low-income families have knowledge of and access available work-support programs.** Many eligible low-wage families—particularly those with no experience with the welfare system—do not take part in financial work support programs for a variety of reasons, including the complex application processes that require transportation and time away from the job; forms that are not available in other languages; insufficient knowledge about the programs for which they are eligible; and the stigma often associated with receiving public benefits (Miller *et al.*, 2004).
- **Involve all stakeholders in planning workforce development efforts.** All planning and program design efforts, as well as efforts to influence government policies, should take into account the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. Reach out to potential allies, including labor, religious groups, civil rights organizations, and women’s groups.
- **Sustain public engagement efforts.** Make consistent efforts to infuse workforce development issues into national and local policy discussions, stressing the idea that a substantial rise in employment levels will lead to broader community improvements (Molina & Nelson, 2001). A chorus of voices is often needed to get this message across. For example, the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support is a national collaboration of 20 grassroots groups and networks with affiliates in 65 cities around the country. This campaign coordinates activities at the local and state level that keep workforce issues in the public consciousness.

- **Build on the strengths of families and communities.** Experience and research on jobs initiatives point to the powerful influence of places on the well-being of families and individuals. The capacity of a workforce development program to produce results hinges not only on its design and implementation, but also on the strengths and weaknesses of the community in which it takes shape. By building on community assets—including its employers, formal and informal networks, congregations and other affinity groups, human service providers, and neighbor-to-neighbor relationships—programs can help communities become places that support work (Molina & Nelson, 2001).

For further information:

The Annie E Casey Foundation
JOBS Initiative
www.aecf.org/initiatives/fes/jobs

Center for Community Change
(202) 324-0567
www.commchange.org

Welfare Information Network
(202) 587-1000
www.welfareinfo.org

Center for Law and Social Policy
(202) 328-5140
www.clasp.org

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC)
(212) 532-3200 (NY) or (510) 663-6372 (CA)
www.mdrc.org

National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support
(202) 339-9354
info@nationalcampaign.org

National Center for Children in Poverty
Columbia University
Mailman School of Public Health
(646) 284-9600
www.nccp.org

Neighborhood Funders Group
(703) 448-1777
www.nfg.org

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