



WOMEN ACHIEVING GREATER ECONOMIC SECURITY (WAGES)

Final Learning and Evaluation Report

**2021-22 Final Report
Executive Summary**



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Executive Summary

Women Achieving Greater Economic Security – WAGES

Too many Colorado women live in or on the edge of poverty or work in low-wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement. In 2017, The Women’s Foundation of Colorado (WFCO) implemented WAGES - **Women Achieving Greater Economic Security** - to advance and accelerate economic opportunities for Colorado women and their families. WFCO funded 15 direct service (DS) and 8 policy advocacy (PA) organizations to implement services and strategies that were designed to propel women into careers that enable them to meet their needs and the needs of their families, with a special focus on equity and two-generational approaches. OMNI Institute served as the learning and evaluation partner of the initiative.

Through WAGES, **23 diverse and expert organizations came together** to share and innovate strategies, foster new conversations and collaborations, and inform the larger field of stakeholders interested in improving economic opportunities for women and their families. Over the four years of WAGES, DS and PA grantees navigated a changing legislature, the COVID-19 pandemic, civil unrest over systemic racism, all while working to support Colorado women and their families through comprehensive and whole-person on-the-ground services and systemic solutions.

This final executive summary report provides an overview of key learnings from the evaluation over the four years of the grant. Overall, WAGES DS providers served **1,226 diverse participants**. When considering that family members also benefit from women improving their economic security and well-being, an estimated **4,056 individuals were reached in total**.



Most participants served through WAGES were **single parents** (65%) with one or two children (70%). They lived across Colorado, with about 38% living outside of the Denver Metro area. WAGES participants were **more racially/ethnically diverse** than the Colorado population. Among WAGES participants, the majority identified as Latinx/Hispanic (46%), followed by participants who identified as White (24%) or Black or African American (22%).

At program entry, over 40% of participants were experiencing **lack of access to affordable housing and child care, transportation barriers, and limited employment history**.¹ WAGES grantees were providing participants with a variety of services to support advancement towards a livable wage, most commonly **case management, cash assistance, and employment services**.

¹ Refers to all women served, including those who began programming prior to the pandemic.


Qualitative data suggest that **cash assistance, financial coaching, referrals and wrap-around services, and ongoing support**, even post program-completion, are important for participants' success. In the latter part of the grant, DS grantees focused on addressing challenges that were sharpened by the pandemic as WAGES participants dealt with turbulent and uncertain job security. Whole person supports and ongoing financial assistance will be especially critical as WAGES participants continue to recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.


“**Flexibility** stands out. We also saw that many women were able to improve their self-sufficiency with just a small amount of **financial support** indicating that relatively small barriers can keep women stuck for a long time. In addition, women in the program developed their sense of what is possible as they gained self-efficacy.”

- WAGES DS Grantee

WAGES Participants' Outcomes²

Although the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for WAGES participants, many were still able to achieve success while learning new skills to keep their families afloat. Over the **four years of the grant**:

 **346 participants made employment gains**, 37% of whom were unemployed and attained employment, 21% of whom experienced within sector gains (e.g., a promotion), and 15% of whom went from part-time to full-time employment. Participants were employed in fields such as health care, human services, information technology (IT), construction, and financial services.

 **442 participants reached educational goals**, 26% of whom obtained a high school diploma or GED, 17% of whom received a professional certification, and 10% of whom obtained a college degree. Grantees noted that many participants put educational goals on hold while they addressed immediate needs created by COVID-19.

Impact Stories: As part of the final evaluation, OMNI sought to share the stories of women who participated in WAGES. In the winter of 2021-2022, OMNI conducted interviews with seven WAGES participants who were identified by grantee organizations. These women shared their experiences so that others could learn and understand how diverse women seek to advance their economic security. Participants were asked about their goals, how they were initially connected with grantee organizations, what supports they received, what challenges they had overcome, their experiences with applicable public policies, and their future outlook. Throughout the full report, we insert these stories so that readers can hear directly from women the impact of WAGES on their lives. In this executive summary we include two of these stories for illustrative purposes. Please note that we used pseudonyms in six out of seven cases to protect participant's anonymity. Ashley's story identifies her by first name with permission. OMNI and WFCO thank the participants for their generosity and courage sharing deeply personal stories of the joy and pain that they have experienced.

² Outcomes were reported on participants as they became available (i.e., while in or after completing programs). The number of participants achieving outcomes is influenced in part by differences in the number of participants served by grantees who target educational versus employment-based programming.



Impact Story: Healing while Pursuing a Career in Construction

31-year-old Ashley never imagined a career in construction. The mother of two boys, who were 11 and three years old at the time of the interview, was living in Denver and battling postpartum depression after the birth of her second child. When her aunt told her about the paid pre-apprenticeship program through Collaborative Healing Initiative within Communities (CHIC), it was just the opportunity that Ashley needed. **“This will be something that gives me purpose to get up in the morning as well as getting me back into the work world,”** she shared. Ashley was drawn to CHIC’s focus on inner healing and self-discovery, in addition to the professional development she would gain for a career in construction.

Ashley enrolled in the pre-apprenticeship program during the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant safety measures were in place such as required masks, social distancing within the classroom, and pivoting to virtual meetings when possible. Despite the challenges with the pandemic and still managing her post-partum depression, Ashley was focused on her goals of completing the pre-apprenticeship certification. **“Accomplishing the program was really exciting. With my depression, it can be hard coming out of that. The program gave me purpose every day and made me set an expectation on myself that I was going to get up and go to the class every day and meet this goal.”**

In addition to her own self drive, the paid aspect to the pre-apprenticeship was also instrumental in allowing Ashley to finish the program, as was the social and emotional support she received from staff and classmates. Ashley earned certification in OSHA compliance and operating a forklift within six weeks. These two certifications prepare her for a variety of different positions within construction. In addition to training, CHIC took pre-apprenticeship students on tours of different construction companies and helped with resume development, interviews, and financial literacy. Ashley said this added support was especially helpful as a woman entering a male-dominated field. **“There’s not a lot of women in the construction world, but there’s so much space for us.”**

Ashley credited certain policies, public programs, and community supports as instrumental. After being let go from her job in March 2020, Ashley received unemployment benefits, which helped her support her family during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP), the Child Earned Income Tax Credit, and the Child Care Assistance Program also helped lighten the childcare load, and Ashley received Colorado Works (Colorado’s Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF]) and SNAP benefits at the time of her interview. Ashley said that without these policies and programs, she would not have been able to participate in the pre-apprenticeship program. **“I receive SNAP benefits, and that’s amazing because I don’t have to worry about how I’m going to feed my children. I probably wouldn’t have joined the program if I had things like that to worry about.”**

For the future, Ashley looked forward to **“kicking depression’s butt,”** participating in the workforce, and staying involved with CHIC. She wanted to give back to her community and continue sharing her story in hopes that it will help other women. At the time of her interview, she was looking into apprenticeship programs and various construction companies for possible employment. Her long-term goals were to buy a house and serve as a good role model for her sons. **“I want to show my boys this is what you have to do to achieve your goals and be a good part of society.”**



Impact Story: Discovering a Passion for Teaching while Volunteering

Roxanne was a single mother of a nine-year-old daughter and lived in the Denver metropolitan area at the time of her interview. Roxanne was first introduced to Community Partnership for Child Development (CPCD) after enrolling her daughter in their Colorado Preschool Program (CPP). At the time, Roxanne said she was living day-by-day, more focused on surviving than forming future-oriented goals. However, she missed her daughter while she was away at school and began volunteering in the classroom. That's when the teachers at CPCD noticed Roxanne's natural talent for teaching and encouraged her to consider pursuing early childhood education as a career. **"They helped me form goals. My daughter's teacher started to get me to think about a future and turn something into a long-term goal rather than a 24-hour goal,"** she explained. Staff members at CPCD helped Roxanne build her self-confidence and encouraged her to pursue further education. **"They didn't give up on me, they didn't leave. They encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone and gave me opportunities."** After receiving her Classroom Based Assessment (CBA), Roxanne transitioned from a part- to full-time employee at CPCD.

Although there were challenges that came with remote learning for both Roxanne and her daughter, COVID-19 created new financial opportunities for Roxanne. As a teacher with CPCD, Roxanne received job-attached unemployment over the summers. Because it is technically unemployment, she was also able to receive extra pandemic unemployment funds, which allowed her to build up her savings for the first time in her life. Roxanne was unable to go back into the classroom once school resumed, but she was able to teach virtual preschool from September 2020 to May 2021. This experience prepared her to take on a bigger role as a teacher and conduct her own classroom. **"Kids know to just stare at a screen but getting up and participating in an activity is different...It was a lot of thinking outside of the box."** CPCD also offered unlimited time off for COVID-19 related reasons, such as getting sick or having to care for a sick loved one. Since Roxanne's daughter was attending school in person, there were several times where she had to stay home due to COVID-19 exposure, so this policy was crucial support.

The biggest barrier that Roxanne faced was around childcare. Although she would have utilized the Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) if it was available, it was suspended when her daughter would have qualified. To work full-time and make progress on her own education, Roxanne had to pay around \$500 a month for childcare for her daughter before and after school. Roxanne was also receiving Medicaid and food assistance, but when she began working full time and making slightly more than the cut off, she lost food assistance and would have lost Medicaid had it not been extended due to the pandemic. **"There is no middle gap of a transition. No middle help. You make a dollar more, and then you lose everything."**

When asked about her future goals, Roxanne said she intended to stay at CPCD and eventually get her Associates degree, once her daughter is older. She was also in the process of becoming a homeowner and hoped to move into her own house by the end of the year. **"I've always been kind of simple – health, happiness, my daughter's education, safety, and the beach – we want to go the beach someday."**

Policy Advocacy Grantees' Efforts to Advance WAGES Priority Areas

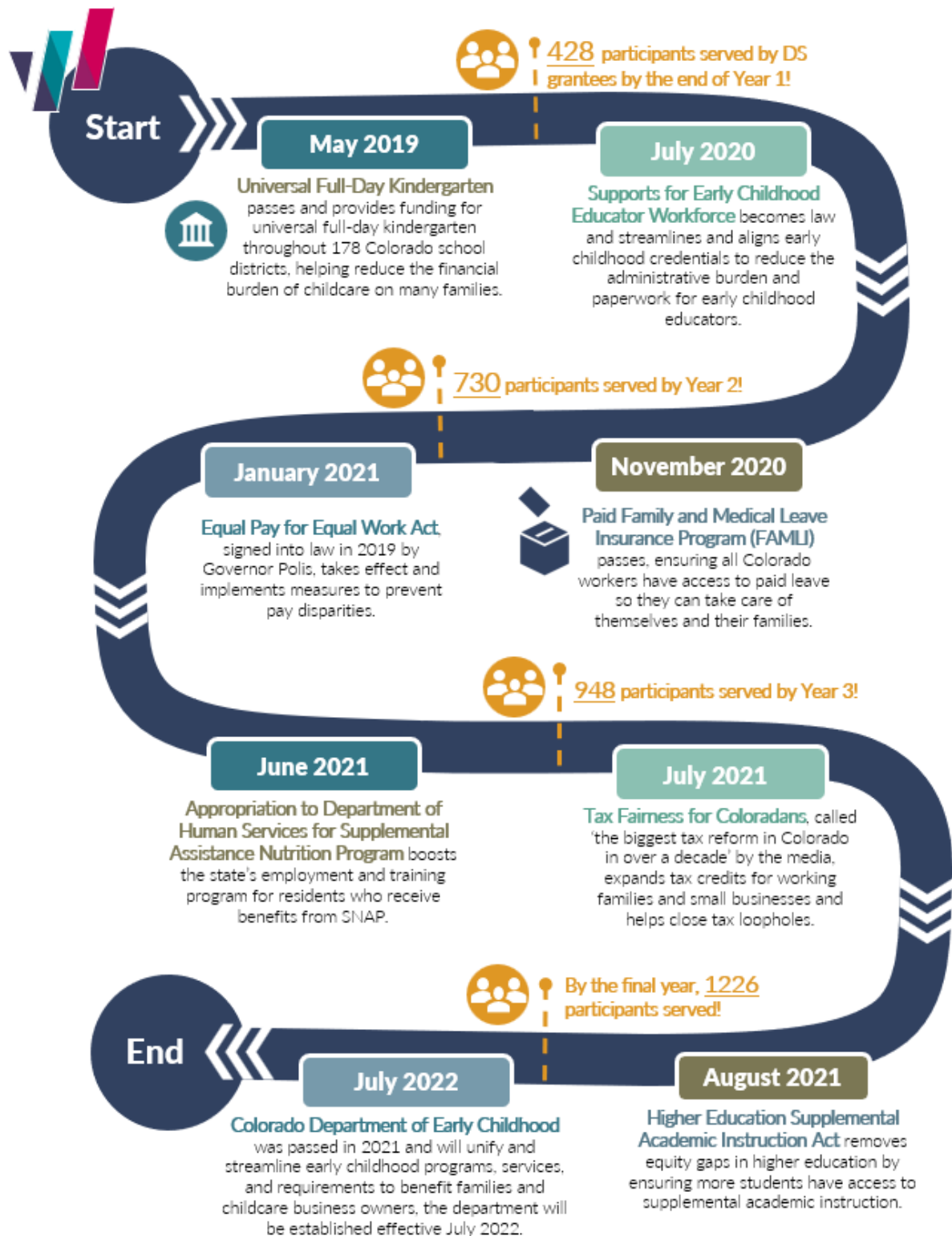
Over the past four years, WAGES Policy Advocacy (PA) grantees employed a multi-faceted approach to increasing economic security for women and their families. WAGES PA grantees focused on four core areas of work to increase economic security for women. The different strategies that WAGES grantees employed to move these priorities forward included:

WAGES Priority Areas



- **Formal coalitions:** WAGES PA grantees participated in and led formal coalitions to advance policy priorities in financial equity, workforce training, family-friendly policies, child care and education, housing and transit, and voter education/public investment. Example coalitions included: Family and Medical Leave Insurance (FAMLI) Coalition, Colorado THRIVES Coalition, Skills2Compete, AFDC Coalition, Financial Equity Coalition, Health Pre-Apprenticeship Coalition, and various coalitions on child-related tax credits.
- **Community & volunteer engagement:** Grantees led community/volunteer engagement efforts, such as community events, trainings, workshops, lobby days, and successful campaigns, including in civic leadership development, early childhood, transit, and apprenticeship pathways.
- **Research and policy development:** Grantees developed and disseminated a broad range of reports, briefs, and blogs to policymakers, opinion leaders, and the public; supported and in some cases led policy development efforts; provided research and analytic support; and engaged in research conversations. Example topics include the future of women in the workforce, the impact of covid on women, the welfare of women and jobs, the nature of middle-class jobs, making child care more affordable in CO, and achieving gender equity in Colorado apprenticeships.
- **Information dissemination to the public:** Grantee organizations disseminated information to the public in various ways, including through reports and presentations (e.g., taxes and constitutional policies, 2018 Ballot Guide), postings on websites and social media (e.g., hosting a twitter conversation on women in CO apprenticeships), and generating action alerts (e.g., on early child care educators, paid family leave).
- **Strengthened informal networks:** Grantees engaged in various activities to strengthen informal networks whether with other WAGES grantees or with other partners, decision-makers, and stakeholders. Example issues that were being tackled included understanding the implications of FAMLI on child care providers, the future of work (e.g., the gig economy) and economic mobility issues, and reforming early childhood school removal and inclusion policies.
- **Influenced policy & decision-makers:** Grantees testified in the Colorado House and Senate on multiple bills, provided research and information to bill sponsors and the legislature, held meetings with elected representatives and state agency officials in different ways (e.g., Lunch and Learns), provided presentations, mailed outreach packets, worked on campaigns, and garnered support for policy priorities.

Women reached and key policy wins over the past four years that support Colorado women and their families achieve greater economic security is visualized below.



What Helps Women and their Families Achieve Economic Security

Over the past four years, DS and PA grantees reflected on and shared tactics and strategies that worked to support Colorado women and their families make progress towards livable wages. In addition, COVID-19 exacerbated stressors and deepened the need for certain supports and strategies (e.g., financial supports, flexibility, and amplifying community voice).

Direct Service	Policy Advocacy
<p>Job training programs that include both hard- and soft-skills training, provide comprehensive supports to women and their families, and utilize relationship-building and strengths-based approaches.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cash assistance/financial supports like stipends and scholarships to reduce systemic drivers of inequity; direct cash assistance and public supports during COVID-19 to support financial stability; scholarships • Program flexibility like flexible training times, asynchronous programming, moving to online platforms, etc., particularly during COVID-19 • Connecting women directly to employment opportunities (e.g., paid internships) • Addressing digital access barriers (e.g., digital literacy skill-building, low-cost technology) • Mental health support to address chronic stressors, including from the pandemic • Dedicated case manager, advisor, and/or transitions/family advocate role • Community partnerships (e.g., for wrap-around support, workforce training, etc.) • Relationship-building, peer support, and working from strengths • Individualized goals and success plans that are attainable and break down barriers • Early childhood education and care as part of two-generation strategies • Assessing needs at program enrollment to support program completion and employment 	<p>Policy advocacy strategies that are bipartisan, multi-pronged, leverage organizational strengths and collaboration, engage impacted communities, and are well covered by the media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being nimble and responsive to changing conditions (e.g., COVID-19) • Enhancing messaging and communications strategies • Advocating for sustainable ways to increase worker benefits and wages (e.g., paid leave) • Fostering bipartisan support; working on issues with broad-base appeal; showing how issues are interconnected to build support. • Sharing research broadly and in ways that are relatable to non-policy experts • Working in diverse coalitions and laying the groundwork in the 'off-season' • Engaging the community, particularly those with lived experience around the issues • Perseverance, patience, and leveraging legislative openings • Pilot programs to assess impact new career ladder opportunities on worker retention. • Prioritizing direct action to create immediate relief • Calling attention to racial disparities exacerbated by COVID-19, especially for women of color • Expanding outreach in rural, mountain, and other regions outside of the Denver metro area to build statewide grassroots organizing capacity • Pivoting to the ballot initiatives when popular proposals won't pass in the legislature

WAGES Cohort Learning Model

Over the four years of the grant, WAGES brought together DS and PA grantees for 22 convenings to share strategies and innovate, learn from one another, and collaborate. Overwhelmingly, grantees discussed that it was valuable and that they benefited from being part of a statewide cohort learning community with diverse organizations that have similar visions, missions, and initiatives to advance women's economic security. The WAGES Cohort Learning Model had an innovative and iterative framework that included:

- **Creating opportunities for relationship building and cross-learning** by bringing together DS and PA organizations. Grantees were able to interact with organizations they may not have had very much opportunity to otherwise, as well as deepen existing relationships. Both DS and PA grantees reported utilizing input and knowledge from other grantees and program participants to inform programming and to grow knowledge of key system and policy issues (e.g., equity issues within the workforce training and post-secondary ecosystem in Colorado).
- **Centering gender, racial, and economic equity** learnings and discussions to drive services and strategies, increase internal capacity, and effectively engage diverse stakeholder groups.
- **Supporting each other to navigate the effects of COVID-19**, such as swiftly adapting services and strategies to respond to the immediate needs caused by the pandemic (e.g., emergency cash assistance, utility assistance, food pantries, information dissemination, etc.) and discussing and implementing strategies for needed intermediate and long-term solutions.
- **Becoming increasingly flexible** by first meeting in-person (pre-pandemic) and virtually (beginning in grant year 3). Flexibility continued to be centered over time such that many of the convenings became optional to grantees and were offered to provide support and resource exchanges around specific issues affecting WAGES participants and grantee organizations. Before the pandemic, it was required that at least one staff member from each WAGES organization participate in the convenings. After March 2020, WFCO allowed for convenings to be optional.
- **Encouraging self-care** and welcoming children and babies to be part of the WAGES Cohort meetings, modeling family-centered workforce participation.

"I like to hear how other organizations are working to take ideas back to my work."

"We have connected with [another DS grantee] several times to share learnings about programming and education, talk through best practices, and think about a referral pipeline to best support all the participants we have."

"I think having both sectors in the room really helps us be more knowledgeable about the why behind the issues and how policy is impacting the issues, and I feel like this approach is win-win for both sides, direct service and policy. Policy needs to hear directly from folks who are living the reality, and we need to hear from policy how they're approaching resolution to the problems from a policy standpoint."

“So often grant makers ask grantees to go do the work, but with this cohort, it was essential to have WFCO as a partner as well. Bringing in the institutional voice of a foundation is helpful in passing big policy.”

Conclusion

This report presents final learning and evaluation findings of the WAGES program that was funded by The Women’s Foundation of Colorado from 2017 to 2021. Over this time, 23 diverse WAGES grantees from across the state shared learnings, deepened relationships, centered equity in all efforts, worked towards policies that dismantle structural barriers to achieving women’s full potential, and supported women to overcome the challenges on their paths towards achieving greater economic security. A total of 1,226 participants and their 2,830 family members were supported by direct services grantees and hundreds made progress around their employment and educational goals. Further, policy advocacy grantees advanced and helped pass various bills over the past four years that benefit Colorado women and their families. Notably, as the report highlighted, much progress has been made around making the tax code more equitable for all Coloradans, and there have been many wins for early education and child care solutions in Colorado.

While working on their goals, participants overcame many challenges and barriers like financial stressors; housing, transportation, and child care challenges; and a lack of social support. COVID-19 also exacerbated challenges, as participants and/or their families dealt with illness, job loss, and/or child care closures. However, participants persevered and came up with innovative solutions for overcoming challenges and barriers, such as creating new systems of social support, engaging in entrepreneurial endeavors, seeking co/multi-family housing solutions to cut financial costs, and investing in self-care and self-reflection to heal past trauma and to support their mental health.

One of the key learnings from WAGES is the need to provide financial supports to low-income women as they work on their goals around economic security. Whether this support comes in the form of cash assistance, paid pre-apprenticeship/apprenticeship programs, stipends, small business grants, and/or scholarships, financial investments in women help stabilize their situations so they can advance their goals. Both types of WAGES grantees worked to secure financial supports to women whether through direct services programs and/or policy levers (e.g., WAGES grantees worked on bills such as the Employment Support Job Retention Services Program to provide emergency employment support and job retention services to eligible, low-income individuals).

What’s Next?

WFCO’s next strategic grantmaking program WINcome builds on learning from the WAGES cohort. WINcome is an evolution of WAGES that will continue to invest in partnerships with both direct services and policy advocacy grantees to continue fostering cross-learning and collaboration. Further, to demonstrate that individuals can advance economically when they are trusted to make their own decisions about what they and their families need, WINcome grants will support Colorado women who participate in programs offered by grantee partners with direct cash assistance to supplement, not replace, their income and other benefits they may receive through public and nonprofit programs. WINcome grants will also advance systemic changes that support gender, racial, & economic equity for Colorado women and families.