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**Government of the District of Columbia**



**Department of Human Services**

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Testimony of  
**David A. Berns**  
Acting Director

**PR 19-0219,**  
**"Director of the Department of Human Services,**  
**David A. Berns, Confirmation Resolution of 2011"**

Committee on Human Services  
Jim Graham, Chair  
Council of the District of Columbia

Friday, June 24, 2011

John A. Wilson Building  
Room 120  
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W  
Washington, DC 20004  
2:00 P.M.

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Good afternoon Chairman Graham and members of the Committee on Human Services. I am David Berns, Acting Director of the Department of Human Services. I am honored to be nominated for this position and look forward to the opportunity to work with this Administration, the City Council, staff, partners and our clients to improve the economic security of our most vulnerable residents.

I started my career as a worker in Michigan determining eligibility for the Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) program 41 years ago. It is a privilege to return to my roots working for an agency committed to eliminating poverty, one individual or one family at a time. I would like to describe some of the lessons I have learned thus far in my career.

As a caseworker and employment counselor, it became clear that individuals rarely found a job solely through formal programs and training. Often, the issues that prevented our clients from getting a job were much more complex. Many had issues of child care, housing, literacy, work experience, transportation, appropriate clothing or even an alarm clock. Some had issues of substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health and developmental disability concerns or involvement with child welfare. Others had barriers of language, criminal justice histories or physical conditions that caused problems with an employer's workman's compensation rates – Unless all of these issues were considered, my plans to get them a job and keep it were like whistling in the wind.

On the other hand, some of the individuals whom I assessed as virtually unemployable were among the first to get a job. There is not always a clear answer or path but the client knows what will and does work best for them, given the opportunity to express it. I learned never to give up on anyone, but always to trust that they knew the most about the challenges they faced and the strengths they held. This led me to conclude that the best employment plan is the one designed and implemented by the client. It was my job to help them consider all their issues and to provide resources and supports to assist them in reaching their goals.

When I became a supervisor and eventually a county social services director, I no longer worked directly with all the individuals and families that needed our assistance. I had to learn to provide

resources and support to our staff, and then supervisors, to enable them to assist individuals and families. In short, my greatest success has come by cheering on others as committed to the work as I am. Ultimately, none of us would be successful without following the lead of those struggling to get out of poverty.

The approach of delegating to staff and the community led to a new way of operating our welfare programs, first in my county and a few other pioneer counties and eventually throughout the state of Michigan. We became much more community oriented, used natural supports such as adult education programs at local school districts, instituted partnerships with the faith-based community and foremost, **trusted our customers to know their own needs and supported them in their efforts to escape poverty.** The results were impressive. At one point, Wilbur Cohen, architect of the New Deal with Franklin Delano Roosevelt visited our office and said what we were doing exemplified what he had in mind when he first wrote the Social Security Act.

From Marquette County, Michigan, I was asked to become the state Director of the Office of Children's Services and also briefly managed the State's Juvenile Justice System. Although child welfare was my main focus, I remained committed to dealing with issues of poverty. I learned that families living in poverty were 22 times as likely to be in the child welfare program as families who were not poor and that by dealing with the economic issues, we often could prevent the need for involvement of child welfare, juvenile justice and even the criminal justice systems. The main lesson here was that economic supports such as AFDC or Food Stamps could become a prevention program for other deep end and very costly systems. I learned that we could reduce the cost to the state by investing in the right strategies. The problem with our budget was not a lack of resources but rather investing in the wrong things. Weak outcomes for our families in the long run were much more expensive than good outcomes. When I started as Michigan's Child Welfare Director, my foster care budget was \$200M. When I left seven (7) years later the budget was still \$200M despite inflation and greatly expanded services. We had reduced our youth in foster care from about 17,000 to 13,000, increased our adoptions from about 900 per year to over 2,000 and almost eliminated our youth in costly out-of-state placements. We invested the savings in lower case loads, more services to those who remained, higher payments to foster parents and a huge investment in home services. The lesson learned

here was that we cannot approach our work from a perspective of scarcity and insufficient resources. We must invest our limited public funds in the right approaches and in getting better outcomes. **It is the difference between doing things right and doing the right thing.** As an example, you may run the best out-of-state institutional program in the country but it is the wrong thing to do. It is much more effective to keep the kids at home and provide for their safety by strengthening the entire family whenever possible. Our models in Michigan for family preservation are still seen today as the best documented and most effective in the nation.

While serving as Michigan's Child Welfare Director, great changes were happening on the national level. In 1994, Congress decided to design a new national approach to welfare. The President of the Senate, Bob Dole, and Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, asked states what had successfully improved their approach to welfare under federal waivers to take the lead in drafting the new Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) legislation. Michigan, under Governor John Engler and Wisconsin, under Governor Tommy Thompson, each formed committees of their key staff to work on this legislation. Due to my background in both welfare and children services, I was a member of the group of eight (8) individuals in Michigan to work on this project.

Some proposals were very dogmatic and mean spirited. However, I also saw opportunities for moving our system from eligibility and cash assistance to one that promoted self determination and economic security. Portions of both approaches found their way into the final legislation. Fortunately, states were given the authority to tailor their systems to the approaches that worked best for them. Wisconsin emphasized employment and accountability. Michigan opted for individualized services and supports. **From what I understand, Washington, DC, selected neither option but instead continued most of the old AFDC system using local funds. As a result, we have continued to support and manage the individuals and families living in poverty but with little success in lifting them out of poverty. It was done for all the right reasons but the net effect is that thousands of our families remain on welfare with little hope for a better life.**

Shortly after implementing the new TANF program in Michigan, I had the opportunity to take an early retirement. That was my opportunity to take what I had learned and to help another

jurisdiction to serve their families even better than we did in Michigan. I accepted an offer in Colorado Springs, Colorado, to lead their new child welfare and welfare reform initiatives. Rather than running two (2) major reform efforts simultaneously, I decided to combine them by making TANF our primary prevention program for child welfare. The stars seemed to align just right because within about five (5) months we implemented about 70 new strategies based on the philosophies described earlier. Some strategies most relevant to TANF involved diversion where we started to ask; “How did you make it this long without us? What is different now?” Based on their answers staff was empowered to work on the crisis issues and to divert 50 percent (50%) of the otherwise eligible families from ever having to come on TANF. As an aside, similar, diversion strategies are in our laws here in DC but are seldom if ever used. We intend to resurrect these strategies in the near future.

Another strategy includes the use of a graduated sanction policy that falls in line with the TANF Redesign program model. This model provides a consistent message of personal responsibility and collaboration, allowing for the agency and program providers to assist clients with moving toward self-sufficiency while holding them accountable. Under this model, TANF customers will have a more active role in developing their self-sufficiency plan and be encouraged to renegotiate their plan if it doesn't meet their needs or goals. We will make every effort to ensure that clients have the resources they need to succeed. However, clients who habitually fail to meet the requirements of their personally negotiated individual responsibility plan will be subject to the graduated sanction policy. The first sanction will remove the needs of the head of household, while a client who fails to meet or renegotiate the requirements of their plan for a second time will receive a full family sanction and will be terminated from the TANF cash assistance program for a period of six (6) months. Client outreach will be earnestly conducted by the agency and vendors before a client receives such a sanction. In Colorado we had a similar sanction policy but found that it was almost never necessary to use it. It is my belief that any time a person is sanctioned off TANF it is a mutual shortcoming for both us and the client. If we negotiate the right plan, they will succeed.

While in Colorado Springs I learned that I cannot even list seventy (70) different strategies being implemented simultaneously let alone design and lead them. Our staff needs the flexibility to do

their jobs in a way that meets the unique needs of our individuals and families. We need a process involving champions: people who are passionate about a particular aspect who take the lead and keep their portion going. Some people love computer systems, some are interested in our process for intake; others like to look at financial incentives and disincentives. These passionate people can accomplish miracles. My job is to keep all of us moving generally in the same direction but not all at the same speed. A new computer system may take five (5) years. A new way to interview customers may take ten (10) days. That's okay as long as both have a common vision.

Planning does not necessarily involve years of work resulting in a white paper that sits on a shelf next to volumes of plans never implemented. If necessary, we can make changes incrementally and learn as we go.

In Colorado Springs, we had good success in helping individuals and families to become financially secure. But these were not my accomplishments. They came about because of the tremendous partnerships with our clients, our community, political leaders and staff – the main lesson I learned was that more was accomplished by delegating power than by using it directly. Every time I stopped trying to impede and instead motivated others, initiatives and work increased. I monitored and stepped in when needed but it truly was a group effort.

Central to this model is that the role of clients is greatly expanded. We started out enlisting their input on their own plans but soon learned that they could and must take the lead and ownership of their own destiny. We also learned that current recipients often had great ideas for changing our systems. Many became trainers for our staff and the community. Some even helped to write and publish materials useful in other jurisdictions. The lesson learned was that we should not do it alone. There is a place for everyone as we make our communities stronger and more responsive.

After nearly seven (7) years in Colorado, I accepted the challenge to lead change efforts in Arizona as the Director of the Department of Economic Security. This was a huge organization with 10,000 employees and a \$2.7B budget. The same philosophies were applied but new

challenges were encountered. One additional duty included serving as the Co-Chair of the Governor's Council on Homelessness. This was an eye opening experience. While the concept of Housing First was just coming to the forefront nationally, I learned in greater detail the importance of housing as a precondition to addressing many other issues. Staff and clients described in detail the challenges of getting a job, caring for children, going to school or getting proper medical treatment when you do not have a safe and stable place to live. I also saw that we were spending the most money on shelter and other emergency responses and getting the worst results. It became clear to me that investment in permanent, affordable housing was not only cheaper but resulted in better outcomes for individuals and families.

This lesson became ingrained in my soul when the Mayor of Phoenix and the Director of Arizona's Homeless Services asked me to experience their shelters first-hand. They made arrangements for me to enter the shelter on a Wednesday afternoon and to stay until Friday evening as a homeless person. I experienced the intake process, the time consuming nature of getting to various meal sites, the difficulty of getting services without appropriate identification, and the disorganization of support services including those provided by my own agency. After those three (3) days and two (2) nights we made adjustments in our services and processes. However, the experience made it even clearer that shelter was not the long term answer.

In Arizona, I also learned a lot more about budgeting in silos. I saw how agencies guarded their own funds and managed to the narrow mandates of their own programs. Little thought was given to what families needed but rather what agencies offered. However we also found opportunities to break down the silos. We found that the overall system could function very well with the resources already available if we invested them wisely. The challenge was that it often took an investment in one agency to realize savings in another. I pledged to never balance our budget on the backs of the poor or at the expense of our partners. When we saw a way to reduce costs in one area such as child welfare or Medicaid through a strategic investment in TANF or housing, we fought to get the funds to the right place and document the savings in another. Mayor Gray's new initiative in Right Focus is a perfect example of how this lesson is also being learned in Washington, DC. I am excited by this opportunity to use my experience in other jurisdictions to help support this effort.

After three (3) years in Arizona, I accepted an offer in the private sector that I expected to be my swan song; my chance to take my lessons learned in particular jurisdictions and to spread them nationally. As Executive Vice President for Casey Family Programs, I led their direct operation for Child and Family Services. Operating in many states through our own offices or through contractors, we demonstrated the best practices in foster care, youth in transition to adulthood and in kinship care.

The work reinforced the importance of a measurable, unifying goal or vision. Our mission, stated and measured continuously was and remains to help states to reduce the number of children in foster care from the 518,000 in 2005 to half that number by 2020. Further, we believed that the savings should be reinvested into better services and supports to those who remain as well as to those who no longer needed to come into the foster care system. The reduction nationally has already dropped to less than 400,000 youth in foster care. The lesson I learned was the importance of setting a goal, developing or identifying the best approaches for reaching the goal, assisting through training, data and peer-to-peer consultation and continuously improving our approaches. It is my goal to use similar techniques as we move our system in DC forward especially in the area of TANF reform and long term approaches to homelessness.

Finally, one last lesson I learned in my life is articulated by the Serenity Prayer, used by many 12 step programs. The prayer asks: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. A while back a management consultant noted to me that regardless of our position in an organization ranging from clerical, to front-line staff, supervisor or Director, 85 percent (85%) of what we do on the job is not within our control. Even as the Director of an agency, I am constrained by budget, laws and directives from the Mayor or City Council. But I do have control of 15 percent (15%) of my job and it is that 15 percent (15%) that makes coming to work fun and rewarding. For all of us it includes our attitudes, our creativity, the way we work and treat others and our willingness to always go the extra mile to help others to succeed.

As a Social Worker, I believe and am committed to the premise of never accepting an unacceptable condition. As a realist, I will not beat my head against the wall trying to change the 85 percent (85%) of things outside of my control or influence. I will concentrate on the 15% that I have a chance of changing. That is all I can ask of myself and all I can ask of my staff. All too often I have seen a victim mentality in Human Service Agencies – a sense that it is useless to try to change because we lack staff, resources or support. I do not deny that we could use more, but there are many opportunities to make the best use of the resources we have available, especially ourselves. As we see and grow our abilities to move forward and develop our sense of hope, we can also instill more hope in those we serve. And with that hope and passion, we can and will make a difference.

With that, I conclude my formal remarks and welcome any questions from the Council.





# District of Columbia Department of Human Services

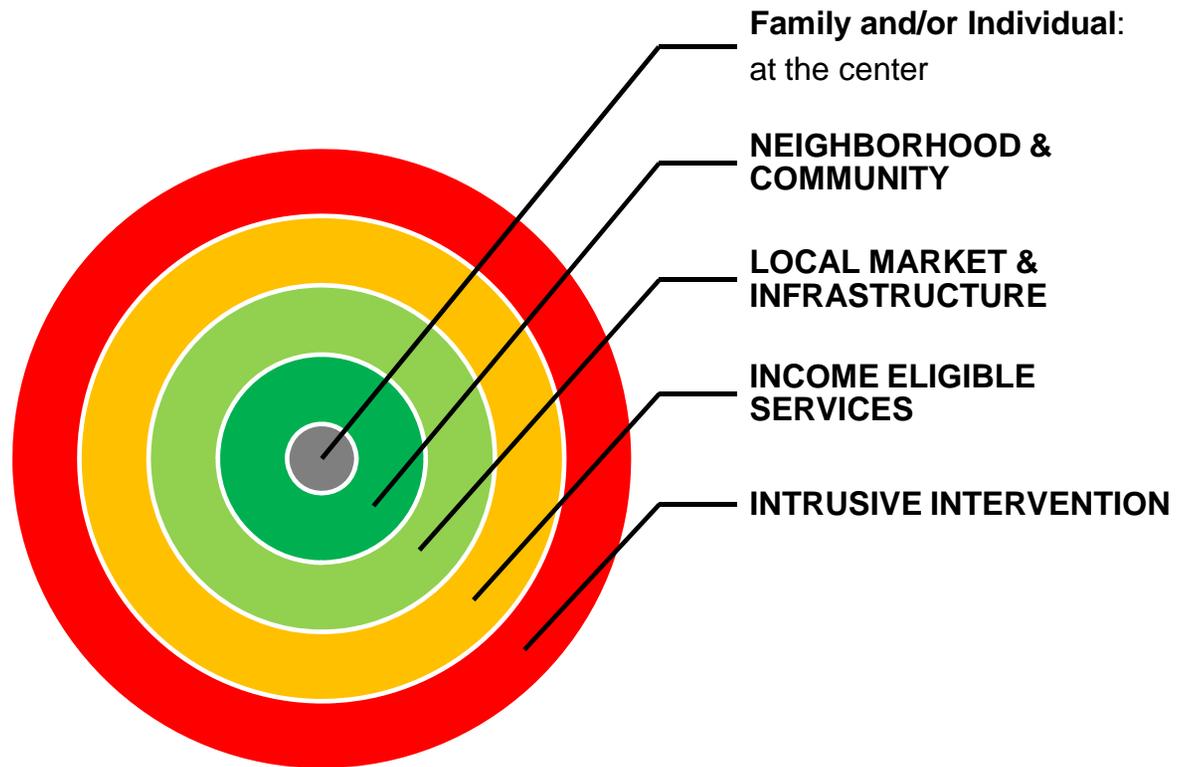
## *David Berns Testimony – Supporting Images*

June 24, 2011

# Figure 1: Services Integration Model

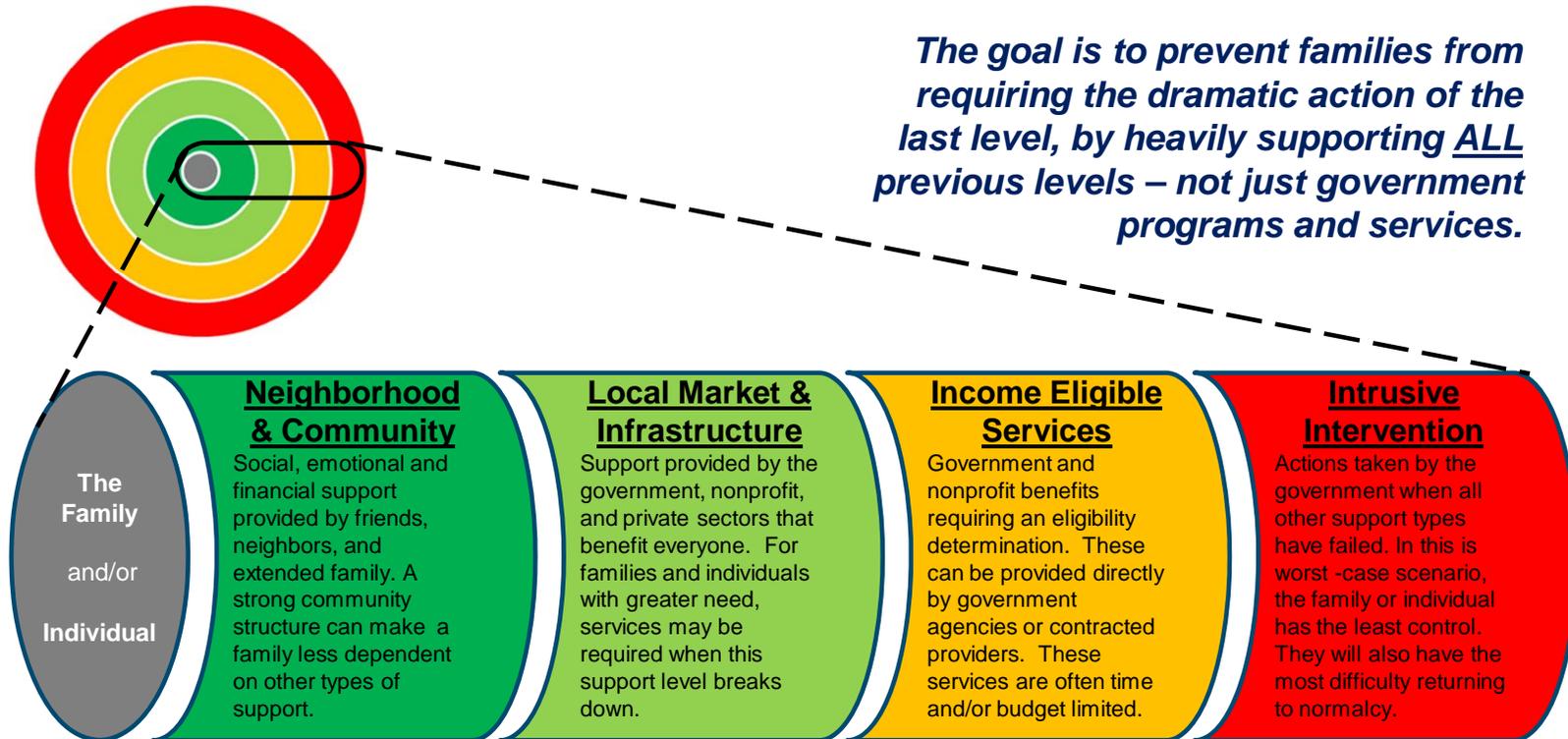
The Vision is driven by the philosophy that there are many “layers of support” in Human Services delivery – and, importantly, government services are not the ONLY provider

- This is a new way of thinking about “putting the family in the center”
- This model recognizes that government assistance is not the first (or even the best) type of human services a family or individual should utilize
- Every level must be strengthened, because it is a prevention program for the level beyond



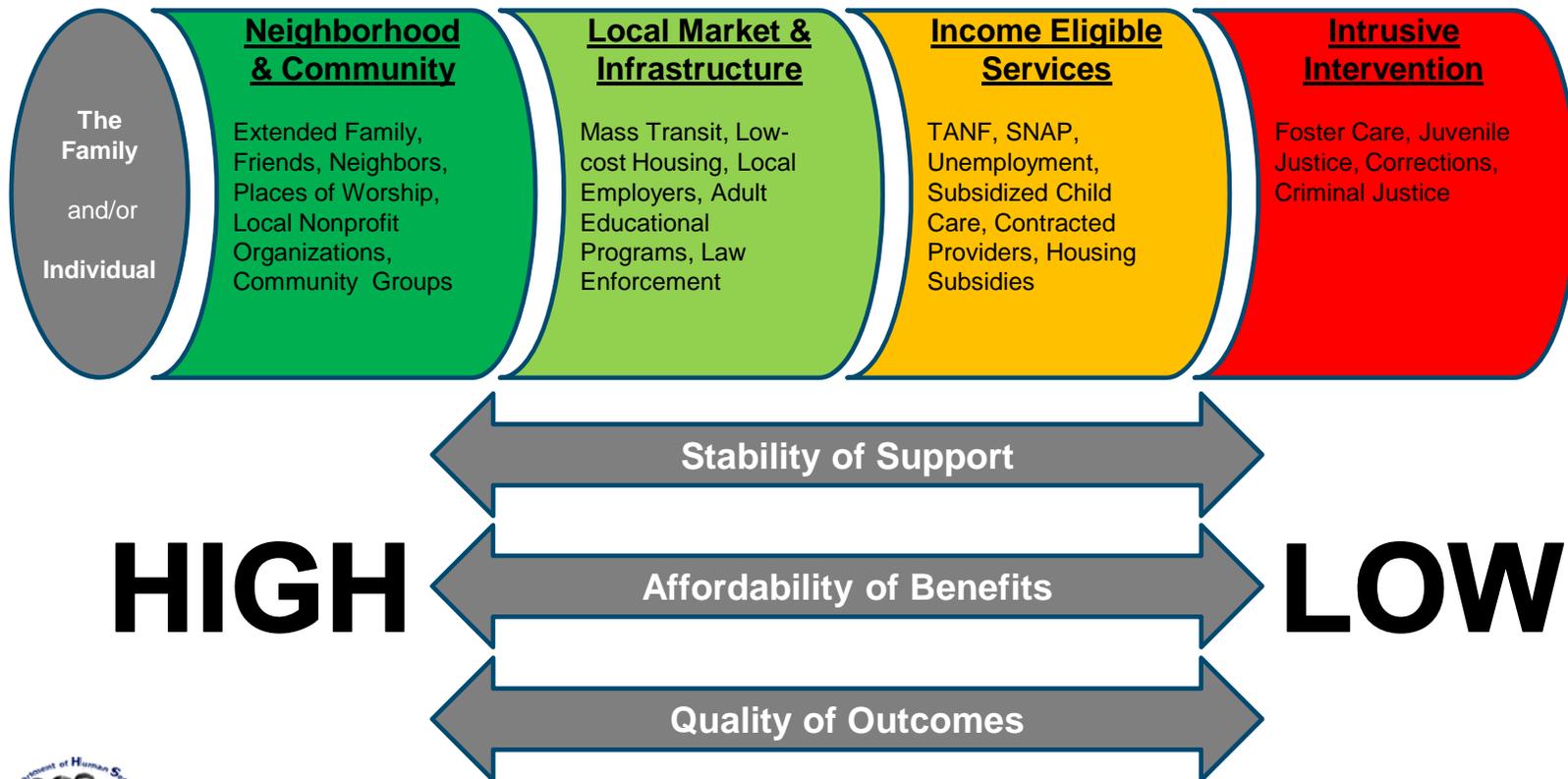
## Figure 2: “Levels of Support” Detail

Self-sufficient individuals and families only require support from the services near the “Core,” while those in need may require government assistance or intervention



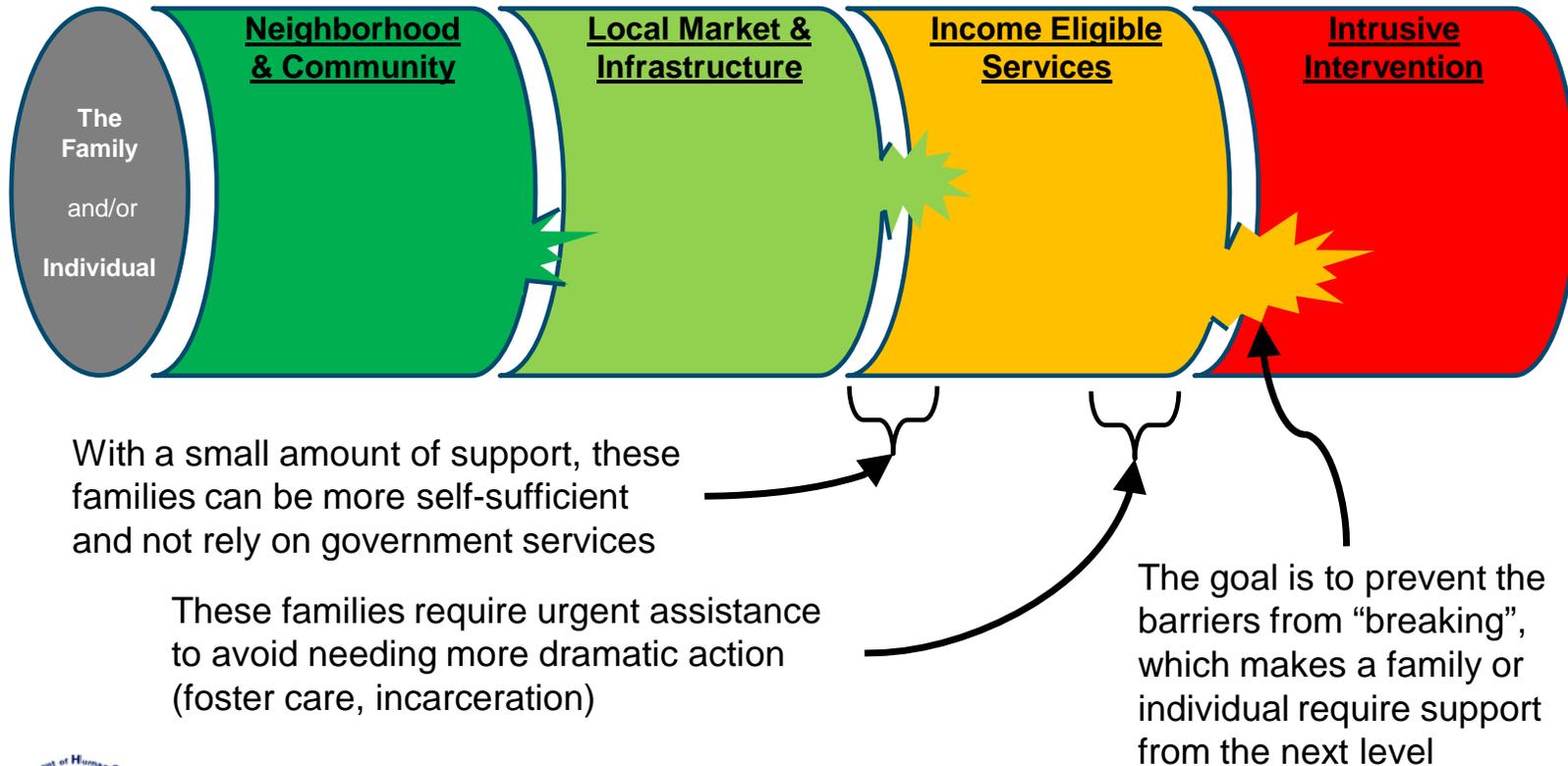
## Figure 3: “Core” vs “Periphery” Benefits

Examples of the types of institutions within each support level illustrate the dramatic improvement in benefits as families and individuals utilize the “Core” services (rather than the outer “Periphery”)



## Figure 4: Focus on the Margins

Negative events can cause an individual or family to “break through” the wall and require services at the next level – but with the proper support, they can rapidly return to their status quo



*When each support level is operating at optimum levels for the family or individual, it is also serving as a prevention program for the levels that follow*