Strengthening Families Locally (SFL):
Preliminary Report on Sensemaker Themes from Exploratory Analysis
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Executive Summary

Over the course of 2022-2023, I conducted an initial exploratory analysis of emergent themes from 1041 Sensemaker stories collected in Washington communities between February 11, 2021 and October 5, 2022. From this preliminary analysis, the following themes were evident in the stories shared by parents, youth, and caregivers:

1. **Numerous systemic barriers impede parents' efforts to care for their children**. From the stories shared, it was obvious that lack of affordable housing, childcare, and mental health services created significant hardships for families.
2. **Some respondents with marginalized identities have to navigate additional traumas caused by racism, transphobia, and domestic violence**. Though not as widespread as the systemic barriers mentioned above, hardships caused by these can also derail young people's psychological and physical safety.
3. **Shame, stigma, and benefit cliffs hinder families' ability to access resources.** Even if parents first manage to overcome their internalized shame around asking for help, they sometimes face stigmatizing and demoralizing gatekeepers who block access to important resources. And all too often, they encounter unhelpful welfare systems that have erected seemingly arbitrary barriers to resources in order to enforce income thresholds. These create gaps and perverse incentives that limit parents' options.
4. **When families do encounter child protective services, their experiences are mixed.** Despite a handful of stories where legitimate intervention was needed to protect young people from further harm, numerous parents shared stories of having to deal with unnecessary calls to CPS and judgmental social workers. While there were some positive stories of helpful CPS workers who supported family reunification, it's clear that there is still a ways to go to improve CPS interventions.
5. **Despite these barriers, relational and practical help provided by communities or individuals can make a big difference for families.** Numerous stories illustrated the impact of both tangible resources and intangible social support in helping parents navigate hard times.

After reviewing the methods and limitations of the analysis that yielded these themes, this report describes these preliminary findings in more detail and provides supporting quotes.

Methods and Limitations

Because this was a preliminary analysis, I used grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017) to familiarize myself with the data and start to identify emergent themes. Due to technical limitations with the Sensemaker interface, I wasn't able to completely segment stories by region, so this analysis includes stories from locations beyond the SFL-funded communities. I was however able to conduct a focused analysis on stories from BIPOC respondents. Since this was

merely an exploratory analysis, I have only reviewed the full dataset once. Because of this, the whole dataset hasn't been thoroughly coded with all the themes; some themes were identified later on and so stories reviewed earlier haven't had their themes fully captured. Consequently, the counts of stories mentioned in this analysis should be considered estimates, rather than accurate tallies. Despite this limitation, this exploratory analysis yields important insights about the issues that are top-of-mind for families and community members as they seek to care for their young people.

Theme 1: Systemic barriers

The most common stories shared by parents involved hardships caused by difficulties accessing secure housing, childcare, and mental health services. Whilst each of these issues has individual impacts, ultimately they are systemic barriers caused by lack of public investment in preventive solutions.

With regard to housing, families struggled to maintain stable housing because of rent increases, unemployment and layoffs causing evictions or foreclosures, landlords deciding to sell, and housefires. While families who were experiencing homelessness referenced waitlists and shelters, few resources seemed to support families *maintaining* their housing, either through rent or mortgage assistance if they hit hard times. The 88 stories shared indicated that disruptions in housing cause significant upheaval for kids, uprooting their sense of security and sometimes necessitating a move to a new school. For families who do experience homelessness, this can also put them at greater risk of CPS involvement. Losing housing also puts you at the mercy of an increasingly unaffordable and scarce rental market. In this environment, families are just one unfortunate event away from ending up sleeping in their car. The story below illustrates the immense pressures parents face as they struggle to maintain safe shelter for their kids:

> "I am a single dad of 5. My whole life I have worked. I own my own landscaping business. 6 months ago I was moving rounds from a tree we had cut down. I slipped in the ditch and it shattered the discs in my back. I cant stand up straight and I have had multiple surgeries to put pins in. I have multiple to still have too. I have worked since I was younger and never thought it was going to be this difficult to get help when I couldn't. We are behind on our mortgage and we are going to be selling our home to cover medical expenses and find something we can afford. I am lost. I applied for SSI but have been denied once and I am appealing it. Currently we do qualify for food stamps and the kids get free meals at school. Medical just started on the 1st of this month but I still have all back bills. **My back is broken, my heart is broken that I can not provide for my kids. The system is broken**."

Here, the challenge is clearly systemic, with families having to confront a system that doesn't invest resources in preventive solutions. Similar issues limit the availability of childcare for working families. At least 46 parents shared stories of their difficulties accessing affordable childcare, which directly influences parents' ability to work. In many cases, affording childcare is just out of reach, making not working the better financial option. The following story illustrates this dilemma:

> "I am a disabled mom. I have kids with disabilities as well. We have lots of appointments between all of us. I also wanted to go back to school. With the pandemic you are not allowed to bring other kids with you to clinics. It is just the patient and 1 care giver. **I called to see if I could qualify for childcare. I surely thought I would as I am low income. I was told NO. I am disabled and receive SSI and so automatically disqualify. I said Well what about x,y,z and they said you are disabled you just sit around your house all day collecting money from the government. I am shocked and hurt that anyone would even say those things but it is their policy.** I never chose to be disabled. Life just doesn't go your way sometimes."

Due to restrictive income requirements, many families are cut off from accessing childcare that could enable them to get jobs or pursue additional education that can help them to get ahead. Not only would more accessible childcare support children's brain development at a critical time (Adams & Rohacek, 2002), but it would also enable parents to secure or maintain their employment. This is another example of a systemic issue governments can invest in to support families' futures.

Lastly, some parents described struggles with accessing mental health resources, either for themselves or – more commonly – for their children. 44 families shared stories about finding themselves facing a range of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, PTSD, and more. However, significant barriers prevent them from accessing help to address these issues. According to the stories shared, these barriers exist in the form of long wait times for mental health professionals, turnover within agencies, challenges with scheduling appointments around work obligations, and obstacles to making it to appointments, whether virtual or physical. As indicated by the following story, access to mental health resources is also harder for BIPOC communities, because they face stereotypes that minimize, misdiagnose, or criminalize their symptoms.

> "I want to share about my family's experience with the mental health system here in King County. We are a family of 6 and all 4 of my children have speical needs including autism, sensory processing disorder, speech apraxia, anxiety, and oppositional defiance disorder. I (mom) have PTSD and am bipolar. **We have been on waitlists for over a year and bounced around through telehealth visits and in person providers who always end in a referral to someone else and another waitlist**. **I finally find a caseworker or an employee at a center that I connect with and try to get to help us and before I know it they have moved onto a new job and we are back to square one. It is very hard and feels like you never can make any progress**. I worry about my sons as theyre getting older and stronger and the world is not very kind to black boys anyway, but **black boys with special needs are even more at risk for violence at the hands of someone who just doesn't understand. It is very hard and I wish there were more supports available**."

According to these stories, there is a need to provide more equitable access to mental health resources. Systemic interventions can provide funding and credentialing to increase the availability and affordability of mental health professionals. Similar to the stories that cited systemic barriers to accessing housing and childcare, the problem of inaccessible mental health services has structural roots.

Theme 2: Additional traumas affecting communities with marginalized identities

For some community members with marginalized identities, in addition to facing the structural barriers noted above, they also have to contend with traumas caused by racism, transphobia, and/or misogyny.

While racism occurs in every context, BIPOC children in particular face discrimination in the school system. This is of particular relevance to child welfare, because biased reports against BIPOC children can place them at higher risk for CPS intervention. As evidenced by the story below, racism from generations past still affects how communities of color are treated today:

> "When my daughter was in school she was struggling in every subject **I would be told she's just lazy or she talks too much. Never was it about the educational system or the teachers always about my daughter.** I decided to have her tested at the Native Clinic, she was diagnosed with ADHD, has trauma from generations past. This i feel is passed down from my Grandma being put into Boarding Schools.I was frustrated and decided to teach my daughter every part of her IEP, teach her rights and let her know her voice does matter. She matters."

Such biases result in fewer resources for BIPOC children and punitive interventions rooted in highly stereotyped and racialized perceptions of their behavior. Explicit racism also causes psychological harm, robbing BIPOC kids of their sense of belonging and worth:

> "My son is multiracial and has dark skin. He attends a school that is mostly white. He said he was playing outside at school at recess and some of the other children told him he had brown skin because he was dirty. **My son came home from school in tears and said he wished he didn't have brown skin.** It was heartbreaking for me as his parent to hear him say that."

Traumas caused by racial biases therefore impact both the systemic opportunities available to BIPOC youth, as well as their sense of security.

Youth who identify as LGBTQ+ also face traumas from discrimination against their identities. Several parents shared stories of their children experiencing bullying, discrimination, and transphobia at school. One young person shared:

> "**This week in school I was spit on, called names, pushed, teased punched and so much more**. I dont even want to go to school. **It is acceptable for some people to be gender fluid but not even my own family accepts me. They say mean and hateful things and treat me like I am garbage.** They tell me I shouldnt exist and I should off myself. I know when I am older i can leave and go somewhere more accepting but for now I just bare it. The school staff don't listen either. But they didnt listen before I found myself."

These youth face higher risks of family rejection, destabilizing their living situations and sometimes leading to physical abuse and/or neglect. Even families who accept their children's identities can still struggle to find welcoming communities at schools, neighborhoods, and churches, especially in rural areas.

Gender discrimination is also commonly experienced by people who identify as women, particularly mothers. The Sensemaker data contained 43 stories describing domestic violence, which is often (but not always) experienced by women. As evidenced by the story below,

domestic violence has cascading effects that undermine children's sense of physical and psychological safety, frequently resulting in housing instability and sometimes causing homelessness.

> "My eldest daughter and I were escaping an abusive home and essentially couch surfing in family members homes. At that time, I was employed full time (making a few dollars over minimum wage). Escaping an abusive relationship is difficult. Especially when you have nothing except for the clothes you've packed and each other…I did not know where to go to try to find assistance outside of food stamps, which I qualified for but at the minimum amount… I eventually went back to that abusive household after leaving. **Choosing between your own mental health and your child being able to sleep in her own bed, in the only home she'd known since birth and misses - is a tough choice. While it was solely my decision to return, I look back and wish there was more information available regarding resources in the community provided to me when I was at [a mental health] facility.** Because I had a couch to stay on at my grandmothers, was employed full time and employed at a little bit over minimum wage **it was difficult to get assistance at the places I knew. I didn't know where to turn."**

Overall, it's apparent from the Sensemaker stories that people who identify as BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and/or women face added hardships that stem from discrimination, bias, or abuse because of their marginalized identity. These cause additional traumas that negatively impact young people's wellbeing.

Theme 3: Shame, stigma, and benefits cliffs

When families do need help, they first have to overcome their internalized sense of shame from an individualistic society that discourages asking for assistance. As one parent shared:

> "When your a single parent going through life is just to survive anymore….Every day is a struggle and doing everything on your own is hard…**I feel the lack or resources or the social stigma makes it hard to ask for help. I don't have family to help me nor friends. It's hard and would be nice to know about more sources and not feeling judged when asking for them**."

When seeking help, parents battle against social stigmas that make them feel undeserving of help. In addition to this being the dominant social narrative, these social stigmas separating the 'deserving' from the supposedly 'undeserving' poor are baked into the U.S.' social welfare system (Katz, 2013), which uses income-testing to restrict access to benefits based on outdated poverty line levels.

When parents do manage to overcome the stigma of asking for help or seeking resources, they have to contend with these systems that simply aren't designed to help them get ahead. For people pursuing additional education as a means to better their careers, full-time student status can cause ineligibility for services like SNAP food assistance and childcare. For others who are trying to move up in the workforce, the number of resources they are able to access often drops off sharply after marginal increases in income. This extensively researched phenomenon is called the benefits cliff (Anderson et al, 2022). Essentially, it puts people living with low-incomes in a double bind: make slightly more money in an effort to move out of poverty and lose access to essential public resources they can't yet afford, or keep their incomes artificially low to retain those essential resources.

In the case of parents who shared their stories, encountering this paradox caused them significant frustration, leading them to wonder how they could get ahead when the system works against them doing so. Below are two stories that illustrate this dilemma:

> "I work as a family support specialist for ECEAP. Our program is very small and we have a very limited number of spots. I was working with a family who earned $22 too much per month to qualify for the program. The family is not able to afford to pay for preschool for their children, which runs well over $1,000 a month and many child cares in our area are full with waiting lists. **When I spoke with Mom to let her know that they did not meet the eligibility requirements, mom expressed a lot of frustration and broke down, stating that she had found a new job in a field that she enjoyed that would help lift their family out of the struggles they were currently facing, but because of the income requirements and the cost of preschool, she was going to have to rescind her acceptance of the job**. It was devastating to see a young woman working so hard to improve her family's life and hitting barriers in every direction. Our state needs to offer and guarantee high quality child care for every child, regardless of income, if we want the young parents in our state to better themselves through education and work opportunities."

> "A woman I know has been working on getting herself back on her feet after having experienced homelessness for several years. She got an apartment and started taking a few college classes so that she can work on getting a degree as a paralegal. She decided to go up to full-time student status and was stunned when she found out she was no longer eligible for SNAP food stamp assistance since she is now a full-time student. **She feels that the system penalizes people who are trying to better their lives by getting an education**."

Out of 1041 stories analyzed, 19 referenced the benefits cliff in some way. According to these stories, although the system is designed to reserve resources for those most in need, it creates perverse incentives that make it even more difficult to move out of poverty. One respondent succinctly summed up this impossible predicament:

> "If you work, you don't qualify for services, but you can't afford basic needs. I want to work and provide for my family but the system makes it impossible to get ahead if you choose to work."

Theme 4: Mixed experiences with child welfare

When families did encounter child protective services (CPS), their experiences were mixed. Although these encounters constituted a small proportion of all stories shared (approximately only 54 out of 1041 stories mentioned CPS), there were enough shared to identify some common themes in these experiences. The stories were split fairly evenly between positive and negative experiences.

On the positive side, it was clear in several cases that CPS' goal with intervening was ultimately to support family reunification. Foster families in these cases were supportive of the birth parents, doing their best to give children a safe place to call home while their parent(s) worked towards greater stability. The story below illustrates this dynamic:

> "My husband and I are retired and we do fostering of young children. We recently had 2 little boys come to us that had not been treated well prior. Their parents were having a hard time and we were happy to help them. Well these little boys came to us and they are 4 and 6 and we spent the

summer together. We went out and do things around town like the zoo and Fort Nisqually. It was a lot for me and my husbad but the looks on the boys faces were so priceless and we all had such a nice time. they had never been to a museum or to the zoo and they just kept saying 'wow' 'wow!' and you know that you are doing right. So I feel that when you are able to step into someone's life and help them through a hard time, you do that. So we do. **The family was just trying to survive and needed a little support and they boys went back to be with their mom to start school. They are doing good and we are there to support them. Life is hard enough and when you don't have any support its darn near impossible."**

There were also several stories shared where it was evident that intervention was needed to remove children from an unsafe environment, either due to the child or parent (or both) experiencing domestic violence, often at the hands of the father. In these cases, this kind of intervention was seen as legitimate and necessary. In other cases where the situation did not necessitate removal, some parents shared stories of helpful CPS social workers who supported them in finding additional resources that would enable them to keep their children. CPS workers who offered reassurance that early intervention was key to preventing escalated actions were viewed positively by parents, who were understandably fearful of losing their children.

On the negative side though, there were numerous stories where CPS was considered unhelpful or even harmful to families. In one instance, a mother had a social worker at the school call CPS on her children for unclear reasons. She suspects discrimination:

"My son is in a preschool program and I am currently pregnant. I was told by another mom that the school can help with things. Putting in an order for baby stuff, extra food all that. I **went to the social worker at the school. She first acted like she was better than didnt want to talk to me.** Finally I was able to get her attention after sitting in the office for so long. I told her money was tight right now and any resources that she may have are super helpful. She looked at me with distaste and said "don't you get food stamps." I explained our situation and losing our income over the pandemic all that. She just looked me this mean look and said she would look into it. The next day I got a knock on our front door from cps. they were investigating for neglect. I was clueless as they went through cupboards and rooms and all that. The worker said they would be following and investigation could be open up to 6 months. **I asked the teacher why she called CPS, I was neglecting my kids. She replied with "You said you needed help" and chuckled as she walked away. I just want to cry how did I end up in this nightmare. Is it because of my income status? Color of my skin? Job? Why?"**

For this mom, her already-shame-inducing experience of needing to ask for help was worsened when she encountered a social worker with a stigma against low-income moms of color, which resulted in an unnecessary escalation to CPS. Unfortunately, this experience is all too common when poverty and racial bias are considered causes for intervention.

Another mom recounted a stigmatizing encounter with CPS. Not only did this worker denigrate her hard-won efforts to secure housing, but she introduced a sense of instability:

"We had been homeless for quite a few months. our cps worker never came and checked on us, she didn't know anything that was going on with us just out of site and out of mind until we finally found our home. We have a housing voucher so the home had to pass inspection before we could move in. I remember the day we learned it passed. We went straight there and collected

keys signed the lease. It had been hot all summer with 5 kids and finally able to call a place our own. That evening the cps worker came by. She didnt offer blankets, food, nothing. We had nothing but the home. She then walked around the home and put her own two cents in. Everything is negative. Everything. She told us that she didnt approve and she didnt feel it was safe. She said she was going to write up the changes she needed to have done to make the home livable. She said we could stay there but not get to comfortable. **I didnt understand. I thought the department was supposed to help keep families together. all she did was tear us down."**

From both of these stories, it's obvious that the interpersonal skills and empathy – or, in these cases, lack thereof – of helpers in the systems matters a great deal to families. Regardless of what the system requires, people who are in roles intended to help families facing disadvantage can perpetuate stigma and bias against them, or dismantle it. As indicated by the stories in the next theme, the ones who choose to practice empathy and provide practical support stand out just as much as the ones who don't.

Theme 5: Relational & practical help

Despite all the factors working against them, a kind intervention from an empathetic helper can make a big difference in families' lives. In a system that all too often dehumanizes parents living with low incomes, helpers who show up relationally can restore their sense of dignity. Oftentimes, all it takes is for someone to slow down and truly see parents – recognize their heart and desire to improve their kids' situations – amid the struggles they're facing. These two stories give a glimpse of how impactful this kind of understanding can be:

> "I had my new baby in June and it has been really hard adjusting to having three kids. I also do not drive, so getting back and forth to doctor appointments and the grocery store with a newborn and the other kids was really hard. When we went to our first WIC appointment I was having a really hard time and everything caught up with me. **My WIC counselor was so patient and nice to me and just let me talk everything out and cry.** she connected me to some different groups that could help me meet other moms and not feel so alone**. Being a single mom is really lonely and overwhelming and I felt supported when she took the time to see me and help me and not just process my WIC and send me out."**

> "I currently have an open CPS Case. I just got supervised visits out of the office. I have been going to court and doing everything I need to do. I secured transitional housing but haven't moved in yet… My son means everything to me. I don't have a vehicle so bussing it everywhere and not too good with bus schedules or how they operate as I am new to all this. Our visitation was at McDonalds on Graham and MLK. I left 2 hours early just so I could be there before him. I was wrong. I took the 101 to downtown from skyway and then had to hop on another bus back to the southend. crazy how i couldn't find anything to connect closer. I then had to walk about 1/2 mile from the bus stop. The social worker was there. She brought him to visitation. **She was so graceful. Instead of scolding me she asked questions and helped me figure out a better system, she is going to get me an orca card and a better place to meet like a library.** She said usually there is a visitation person that will start bringing him but I can't be late and if I am going to be I need to call her. **She is getting me set up with a free phone as I dont have the money to afford one right now. She knows I am trying and she doesn't treat me less than**

like some people. She even let me get my whole visit time even though I was late. I am so thankful. I dont want my son lost in the system."

In these instances, the interpersonal demeanor of the helper matters just as much as any practical help they are able to give them. That said, even small supports – like providing a bus card or a new phone – go a long way, demonstrating both good will and a commitment to improving families' situations for the better. While the tangible resources can make a big difference in easing families' struggles, the intangible resources – like a kind word or a listening ear – counteract the negative messages of shame and stigma that families with low-incomes must endure regularly. Empowering helpers to offer both practical resources and training them on how to provide trauma-informed care would encourage these supportive encounters to become the norm, rather than the exception.

Conclusion

From the stories shared by families so far, it's clear that preventing adverse childhood experiences starts with supporting parents. To do so, significant change is needed at the systemic level to provide access to resources like housing and childcare (at minimum), and dismantle the benefits cliff that keeps too many families down. That said, although systemic interventions are necessary, they alone are insufficient to address the stigmas families face. Addressing racist, transphobic, and gendered biases that lead to traumatic encounters is also important. Promoting trauma-informed and empathetic relational practices amongst social workers – and empowering them to provide practical resources – can also have hugely positive impacts in families' lives.

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