

Family First Prevention Services Act Implementation



Background

The Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), enacted by Congress in 2018, includes a wide range of reforms that have significant implications for the health and well-being of children and families in the child welfare system. Some key provisions do the following:

- Allow states to opt in to use federal child welfare funding to provide evidence-based prevention services to pregnant and parenting youth in foster care and families whose children are at imminent risk of entering foster care and who would not be able to safely remain together absent these services (“candidates for foster care”).
- Allow states to draw down federal child welfare funding (Title IV-E foster care maintenance payments) to support a child residing with a parent in a licensed residential family-based treatment facility for substance abuse.
- Seek to increase the use of family placements for foster children by placing new restrictions on congregate care.

Family First provides an opportunity to grow the field of evidence-based and trauma-informed programs and to better serve families, while keeping them together. However, as with any large-scale reform, there is potential for unintended consequences if it is not implemented thoughtfully.

The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and counties, such as Los Angeles County, have convened ongoing stakeholder workgroups to delve deeper into key Family First implementation questions and develop proposals to submit to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for approval. Key focus areas related to the prevention services provision have included: developing a “candidacy” definition; identifying an array of Family First prevention programs and services to provide to eligible families; and promoting coordination between CDSS and the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) due to overlap between the responsibilities of each system, questions about what should be covered by Medicaid versus Title IV-E child welfare funding, and complexities around blending or braiding funding streams. Additionally, in 2020, CDSS pursued statutory changes that enable implementation of the licensed residential family-based treatment provision to begin as of April 2021.

Next Steps

Family First provides states with new opportunities to better serve families if implemented as intended. Moving forward, Children Now will:

1. Elevate the importance of meaningful stakeholder input into the development of the state’s five-year Family First prevention plan, that the plan includes a robust array of services, and that the state has a coordinated plan for building the evidence-base for additional prevention programs, especially culturally relevant and responsive programs;
2. Inform implementation planning and proposed legislative proposals to ensure California moves forward with each of the Family First provisions in a family-friendly manner and authentically engages stakeholders in remaining implementation decisions; and
3. Elevate the need for CDSS and DHCS to continue to closely collaborate and provide clear guidance on how to blend and braid funding.

For more information, contact Susanna Kniffen at skniffen@childrennow.org.