

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 2021-22 state budget included \$222.4 million for county prevention services and activities and language setting forth California’s statutory framework for implementing Family First. Additionally, in August 2021, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) submitted its 5-year prevention plan to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for approval. The state still must develop and issue more guidance and resources to assist counties with Family First implementation and automate systems to enable claiming of federal dollars on a per-child basis. Additionally, counties must make important local decisions related to implementation, including whether to opt into the prevention program and what services they will provide to families utilizing the new state funding. Moreover, CDSS and the Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) must continue to coordinate efforts 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.

Next Steps

Family First provides states with new opportunities to better serve families if implemented as intended. Moving forward, it will be important to ensure:

1. California implements Family First in a family-friendly manner with focused attention on reducing racial inequities and disparities in the child welfare system; authentically engages those with lived experience in implementation; and provides families with access to a broad array of prevention services, including culturally-specific programs;
2. Federal funding can be fully accessed as quickly as possible; and
3. CDSS and DHCS continue to closely collaborate and provide clear guidance on how to blend and braid funding.

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