



WE ARE WORTH IT

Recommendations

for Implementation of the

Family First Prevention Services Act

Developed by Transition-Age Youth of California



ABOUT VOICES

Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (VOICES), a nonprofit dedicated to supporting and empowering foster youth in their transition to independence, was founded in Napa County in 2005 as a one-stop community and resource center. Soon after, the model was replicated in Sonoma and Solano Counties, and since then, VOICES programs have expanded to the greater Bay Area in Alameda, Contra Costa, Monterey, San Francisco, and Santa Clara Counties.

VOICES is committed to authentic youth engagement and providing youth with the support necessary for achieving successful outcomes. VOICES utilizes an innovative youth engagement model focused on empowering each youth, integrating resources and services, and working with the entire community to address the barriers youth face as they leave various systems of care. The youth of VOICES are not only recipients of social services, they are active leaders in supporting their peers, guiding the evolving vision of program delivery, and conducting trainings to enable social service agencies to become "youth-friendly." They also advocate for the community at large to listen and respond to youth voices.

At VOICES, foster youth, with assistance from their peers and other VOICES staff, can access a comprehensive service system to meet their health and wellness, employment, education, and housing needs. As a youth-led organization providing leadership opportunities, VOICES has reached out to, and engaged with, thousands of young people throughout the Bay Area.



MEET THE AUTHOR

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Erica serves as the Policy Director for VOICES focusing on foster care, juvenile justice, youth homelessness, and mental health. Her advocacy started in 2012 at age 15 when she entered foster care and realized she had the potential to transform the foster care system through collective youth voice and influencing legislation. Erica has supported a variety of legislative pieces including extending services for parenting and pregnant foster youth, maintaining sibling connections in foster care, and the most recent advocacy efforts to support vulnerable young people during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Erica earned her B.A. in Political Science–Public Service from UC Davis. During her time in school, she worked as a Youth Peer Advocate and Policy Director for VOICES. She became interested in Family First once she noticed the potential it could have for young people if it were strengthened by youth input. Her continued efforts to bring about systemic change have been strengthened by her understanding and practicing authentic youth engagement in her work through VOICES. With her degree and work and life experience, Erica will pursue her law degree to further her advocacy on behalf of young people.



“Ensuring that there is authentic, genuine youth leadership in every project is not easy. It requires that we as older adults learn how to share power with young adults and step out of the way when they are ready to lead. As there are more and more conversations about the importance of elevating youth voice in policy decisions, VOICES is proud to be a part of this dialogue. It is essential that as these conversations move forward, they are held in a way that truly values the contributions of young adults, allows them to feel safe and secure in sharing their perspectives, and results in tangible results based on their input. It is our hope that this report is read with the recognition that youth have important perspectives and that we, as older adults, can effectively partner with youth to implement a system that will truly work for them.”

—AMBER TWITCHELL, VOICES PROGRAM DIRECTOR

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Executive Summary

California has been at the forefront of a series of reforms designed to strengthen support for children, youth, and families involved with the child welfare system. Beginning with the implementation of the state's extension of foster care services (AB12), on through the implementation of the Continuum of Care Reform (CCR), and continuing through the upcoming implementation of the federal Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA or Family First), California's child welfare system has had to navigate a series of regulations and mandates in adapting to an evolving system vision from state and federal policymakers.

Knowing that the voices of young people with lived experience are critical to ensuring the success of these reforms, Voice Our Independent Choices for Emancipation Support (VOICES) gathered young people from around California to share their perspectives and suggestions for ensuring a successful implementation of the Family First Act.

Youth across the state learned about Family First during the focus groups and shared their thoughts about key supports they would like to see as part of Family First. Then, based on what they learned and their personal experiences, they created policy recommendations designed to expand accessibility to identified supports for young people receiving Family First-funded services.

These discussions with youth clearly demonstrated that additional policies and practices must be added to California's implementation of Family First to ensure



"...how do we get to react to this instead of having it just happen to us?"

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

transition-age youth are not left behind during this historic process.

In focus groups led by VOICES with over 100 current and former foster youth throughout the state, youth identified the following factors as pivotal to their success—factors that are critical to maintain for youth in families receiving Family First services:

- ✓ Peer-to-peer support
- ✓ Updating the Structured Decision Making (SDM) Risk and Safety Assessment Tool
- ✓ Maintaining sibling connections
- ✓ Access to Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) and extended foster care eligibility (AB12)

Utilizing this input, VOICES created policy recommendations designed to fill gaps and strengthen supports for transition-age youth in families receiving Family First-funded services:

- ✓ Create a funding source for every county to contract with local service providers to hire, train, and support youth advocates.
- ✓ Prioritize the maintenance of sibling connections during a family's participation in Family First services.
- ✓ Expand eligibility for ILSP services to youth receiving Family First prevention services. Ensure access to extended foster care (AB12) services to youth ages 16 and older receiving Family First-funded prevention services.
- ✓ Update SDM Risk and Safety Assessment tools to accurately reflect older youth perspective/insight.
- ✓ Addressing these potential pitfalls prior to implementing Family First will strengthen the legislation's purpose while investing in the futures of our young people.

Introduction and Background

STATEMENT ON FAMILY FIRST

Family First represents a complete overhaul of the current child welfare system in America that focuses on delivering preventative services intended to promote family preservation prior to removing children from their homes and placing them into foster care. This legislation provides federal reimbursement for a limited set of preventative programs vetted by the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and listed on the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse in the categories of mental health, substance abuse, and parenting skills training. This reform aims to limit the need for foster care by offering services to families in crisis in hopes of preventing the removal of children.

WHY SHOULD WE BE WORRIED?

Through Family First, Title IV-E funds are now available to support families in certain circumstances while children are living with their parents or relatives, whereas previously IV-E funds were generally restricted to use only after a child has entered foster care. The shift towards focusing efforts on keeping a family together can easily be agreed upon by most. However, there is an underlying concern that young people and their needs might be overshadowed by the prioritization to preserve families.

Family First is a strong start in the direction of family preservation. However, as youth have expressed, the child welfare system needs to go further to ensure safety for all children despite their age.

Transition-age youth living with their families are at a stage in their lives during which they need comprehensive and continuous support in order to confidently navigate the challenges of establishing an independent and self-sufficient adulthood. The reality for some young people is that they may not find support amongst their family or may not feel comfortable staying with or returning to family. If foster care is the better option, it should be considered and prioritized to ensure the youth's safety and well-being.

Young people face complex barriers when struggling to establish independence during their transition into adulthood. This transitional period is when youth most

need access to crucial services and support on their way to independence. Family First fails to identify new core services and practices that can best serve the highly vulnerable population of transition-age youth.

POTENTIAL NEGATIVE IMPACTS

Unless tailored specifically to meet the individualized needs of each youth during this transition, Family First prevention services may unintentionally result in an increase in youth running away and/or choosing to leave their home without any identified support structure. The lack of investment in the success of young people may result in an increase in youth homelessness that will further strain the state's already under-resourced youth homelessness programs. Externalizing these costs to other systems not only has a lasting negative impact on the young people involved, but also on the institutions that are ill-equipped to provide a higher volume of services.

CIRCUMVENTING POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

The recommendations provided in this report were created by young people for young people to ensure other youth are provided adequate services and resources to become successful individuals when transitioning into adulthood. Leveraging their lived experience, these young people are serving as key informants providing policymakers with information necessary to effectively implement Family First.

It is important to acknowledge the gaps in the law that may lead to a lack of resources and services needed to provide stability for young people.

Embedding these recommendations in California's implementation of Family First will proactively circumvent many potential problem areas.

This report is meant to help guide the state in developing and regulating programs and services related to Family First. The goal is to bring attention to the supports and interventions needed at a statewide level.

Overview of Process

Understanding the possibility that Family First could compound the struggles currently faced by transition-age youth, VOICES conducted a series of focus groups that stretched across California. Beginning in 2019 and ending in the early months of 2020, over 100 current and former foster youth between the ages of 16 to 24 were engaged through VOICES' Family First focus groups. The focus groups were designed and conducted following VOICES' authentic youth-led model to ensure participants felt heard and respected while circumventing the opportunity for tokenization.

Two phases of focus groups were conducted:

PHASE I

Participants received a breakdown of Family First, followed by questions:

- 1 What's working in foster care?
- 2 What needs improving?
- 3 What factors in foster care helped you become successful?
- 4 What concerns do you have about Family First?

During the first phase of focus groups, participants were asked what about foster care was working and what needed improvement. After voicing their opinions, participants identified what services in care contributed to their success. They were then asked if they had any concerns about Family First and what could be done to address those concerns. Policy recommendations were then developed to address the concerns and ideas shared by participants.



PHASE II

Participants in Phase II also received a breakdown of Family First, and then were informed of recommendations brought forth by participants in previous focus groups. They were then asked to provide feedback on the recommendations to strengthen them and/or create additional recommendations. During this process, the recommendations put forth in this report began to take shape.

VOICES reviewed the focus group input and identified overarching themes regarding necessary supportive services for youth, accountability, and relationships. These themes were included in the development of the final policy recommendations.

Policy Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1: YOUTH ADVOCATE

Recommendation

Establish peer-advocate programs in every county that partner transition-age youth in families receiving Family First services with a youth advocate that is empowered to support and advocate on behalf of young people. Youth advocates should be peers with lived experience in systems of care with training in trauma-informed practices. Advocates should be required to create monthly court reports regarding the young person's overall well-being and home life during the time the youth's family is receiving Family First services and six months after closure of services. The courts should consider these reports in assessing risk and safety to continue staying with family or entering into foster care.

Relevance

In all focus groups, young people expressed the want and need for peer-to-peer support. Those who had the experience of working with a youth advocate identified them as their strongest ally and someone they trust to share and connect with specifically because of their similar age and lived experience in systems. Youth expressed that the advocate was someone who helped them learn how to effectively advocate for themselves.

Steps for Implementation

- ✓ The legislature should mandate and fund the creation of peer-advocate programs in each county.
- ✓ CDSS should identify and partner with entities that have demonstrated authentic youth engagement models and that are capable of expanding youth advocate teams in their organizations. Additionally, in order to support the expansion of these services in counties that do not currently have this service, CDSS should form a coalition of authentic youth engagement providers. This coalition would be responsible for working with county child welfare services to identify providers that have the capacity to expand in this area.

“I feel like if it wasn’t for a lot of the mentors I do have, regardless of not having parents around, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Having people around that I can relate, talk to, and go to with my experiences that I feel comfortable with is really helpful.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

- ✓ Beginning with CDSS and extending to all counties, a culture should be created in which young people are truly equal partners in the process of advocating for the well-being of our young people.

Existing Models

VOICES—Youth Advocates Program: VOICES employs young people to provide peer-to-peer support to other transition-age youth to help address their independent living, housing, education, employment, and wellness needs. VOICES Youth Advocates support TAY to engage in leadership opportunities and advocacy, and access a comprehensive, trauma-informed service system.

Children’s Law Center (CLC) of California Peer Advocates Program—Los Angeles: CLC employs former foster youth to provide peer support to help transition-age foster youth connect with resources, develop skills, and plan for life after foster care. The peer advocates support TAY in entering and/or re-entering extended foster care, advocating for themselves during court proceedings, and accessing a range of support programs and services.

Parent for Parent (P4P) Program—WA State: The P4P program trains and utilizes parents who have experience navigating the child welfare system to provide peer mentoring for adults involved with dependency court. Parent allies (PAs) help families understand the dependency court process, comply with court orders, connect to support services, and self-advocate during court proceedings.

Potential Funding Streams

Title IV-E Administration: States/counties may claim a 50% federal match for costs they have incurred that are directly related to the administration of their foster care program. This includes administrative costs associated with serving children and youth who are “candidates for foster care” — i.e. the children and youth whose families would be receiving the IV-E prevention services authorized by FFPSA. Peer-advocates working alongside social workers would qualify for this reimbursement.

2011 County Realignment Funds: Under 2011 Realignment, the State of California redirects a percentage of the sales and Vehicle License Fee tax revenues to counties for a range of functions and services. The majority of these funds are set aside for health and human services programs, including child welfare. In return, counties have significant flexibility in how this funding can be used. The cost of employing peer-advocates would be an allowable use of these funds.

The California Department of Social Services should determine the viability of accessing federal Title IV-E funds, particularly Title IV-E Training funds, to support the statewide expansion of Peer Advocate programs.

“I ran into a social worker in public, and I told him that if he sees an issue, then take away the child. I went through so much hell in my life because they kept trying to reunify my family.

I went through shelter after shelter after reunification with my mom relapsing and living on the streets. They were trying to keep our family together when my mom obviously wasn’t capable. I feel like Family First is just gonna push kids into more danger and worse situations.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



RECOMMENDATION 2: SDM RISK AND SAFETY ASSESSMENT TOOL UPDATE

Recommendation

Update the current SDM Risk and Safety Assessment tool to reflect the older youth perspective regarding what is considered maltreatment of transition-age youth.

Relevance

Assessments already differ between infants and children but lack any differentiation for older youth. This is clearly illustrated in the scoring comparison between infants and children where the same experience is scored lower for children than for an infant, strictly because of their age and area of development. For example, not having food in the home is weighted higher for infants on the risk and safety assessment than for a child. The assessment factors focus on a child's vulnerability or conditions that result in the child's inability to protect themselves. Though a teenager may be deemed more capable to take care of oneself because of their age and assumed level of development, there are other complex milestones youth struggle to advance in that should be addressed with a higher level of importance than is currently provided. Because there are many developmental differences between a child and a transition-age youth, a new level of assessment is needed.

Steps for Implementation

- ✓ The state should initiate an update of the SDM and/or other assessment tools used to assess candidacy for FFPSA-authorized prevention services to ensure that the screening tools are developmentally appropriate for older youth.
- ✓ Engage directly with a representative sample of transition-age youth to develop recommended revisions to SDM tools.

Existing Models

California Department of Social Services (CDSS)—

Level of Care Protocol: As a part of California's Continuum of Care Reform (CCR) process, CDSS led the development of the Level of Care (LOC) Protocol for assessing needs of children and youth in foster care and the resource families providing care for them. The LOC replaced the previous age-based rates for foster care with a tiered rate structure based on the assessed needs of the child or youth. LOC provides a more nuanced assessment by analyzing children and youth across multiple domains and producing a score that determines the service needs and corresponding rate.

Potential Funding Streams

Title IV-E Administration: States/counties may claim a 50% federal match for costs they have incurred that are directly related to the administration of their foster care program. This includes administrative costs associated with screening potential "candidates for foster care"—i.e. the children and youth whose families would be receiving the IV-E prevention services authorized by FFPSA. Developing tools for the assessment of candidacy would qualify for the reimbursement.

Federal Family First Transition Act (FFTA) funding: In 2019, Congress passed FFTA, which provided the State of California with approximately \$53 million in flexible federal funds that can be used to support the state's implementation of FFPSA. An adaptation of the SDM tool to ensure that it is developmentally appropriate for the candidacy screening of older youth would qualify as an allowable use of these funds.

Title IV-B, Subpart 1: The Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services Program (Title IV-B, Part 1) provides states with discretionary funds designed to keep families together and prevent foster care removals. States can utilize up to 10% of their allocations on administrative costs, which could include an update of the SDM tool.

The process of adapting decision-making tools will have short term process-related costs, which can be appropriated to CDSS by the legislature

RECOMMENDATION 3: MAINTAINING SIBLING CONNECTIONS

Recommendation

Develop an intentional process to ensure sibling connections are maintained while families are receiving Family First-funded services. This process should derive from current practices in place by Children and Family Services (i.e. SB 1060: Maintaining sibling connections post-adoption; SB 1099: Sibling visitation for separated youth).

Relevance

Young people have identified sibling connections as the most important factor in maintaining a sense of safety and stability. Most also pointed to disruptions in sibling connections as contributing to their instability and emotional and/or behavioral struggles. The way that Family First is currently set to function, there is a possibility for siblings to be set in various locations separate from one another. If this is to occur, sibling connections have the potential to be strained, leading to instability for young people and a struggle for them to effectively partake in prevention services.

Steps for Implementation

- ✓ Develop statewide policy that addresses/anticipates all possible scenarios where FFPSA-funded services lead to sibling disruption; create a binding plan.
- ✓ Issue guidance to counties on requirements for maintaining sibling connections while families are receiving FFPSA-authorized prevention services.

“Keeping siblings connected is important for their mental health because their sibling is someone they relate to and trust.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

Existing Models

Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351): The federal Fostering Connections law required states to provide reasonable efforts for the joint placement of siblings in out-of-home care in the same placement, absent any safety and well-being concerns. For siblings who were not placed together, the law clarified that siblings have the right to frequent visitation and contact unless there are overriding safety or well-being concerns.

SB 1099 (Steinberg): Signed into law in 2014, SB 1099 required county placing agencies to make diligent efforts to place dependent children together in the same placement and to develop and maintain sibling relationships, and required regular court oversight of sibling placements and connections including when reunification services have been ordered. It also established a process for children and youth in foster care to petition the juvenile court for a request for visitation with their siblings and required the court to consent to visitation absent any safety and well-being concerns.

SB 1060 (Leno): Signed into law in 2016, SB 1060 provided a pathway for adoptive families to maintain connections to a child’s siblings after they are adopted. While the decision to maintain connections is ultimately at the discretion of the adoptive family, SB 1060 required that county placing agencies facilitate a meeting of the child up for adoption, their siblings, and the prospective adoptive family to discuss the potential execution of a post-adoption sibling contact agreement. It also mandated that the juvenile court overseeing the process inquire about the status of a voluntary post-adoption sibling contract agreement.

Potential Funding Streams

Title IV-E Administration: States/counties may claim 50% federal match for costs they have incurred that are directly related to the administration of their foster care program. This includes administrative costs associated with serving children and youth who are “candidates for foster care” — i.e. the children and youth whose families would be receiving the IV-E prevention services authorized by FFPSA. Developing procedures for maintaining sibling connections in families receiving FFPSA-funded services would be a reimbursable expense.

Court Improvement Program: The federal Court Improvement Program (CIP) provides grants to state court systems to assess their laws and judicial processes and to develop and implement improvement plans. Developing procedures for maintaining sibling connections in families receiving FFPSA-funded services would be an allowable use of these funds.

2011 Realignment Funds

The goal of maintaining sibling connections for FFPSA youth can be achieved through additional guidance from CDSS to the counties, and should create minimal additional cost, which could be financed through 2011 Realignment or an appropriation by the state legislature.



RECOMMENDATION 4: EXPAND ILSP SERVICES AND EXTENDED FOSTER CARE (AB12) ACCESSIBILITY

Recommendation

Expand eligibility for Independent Living Skills Program (ILSP) services to youth receiving Family First-funded prevention services. Additionally, in the case that Family First-funded prevention services do not successfully address the needs of the youth, ensure access to AB 12 for youth ages 16 and older when it is in the best interest of the youth to enter foster care.

Relevance

Focus group participants found ILSP to be a useful tool when transitioning into adulthood and believed that it should be a resource for young people receiving Family First services. Participants also believed that youth ages 16 and older should be ensured eligibility for extended foster care (AB12) if Family First-funded services are deemed unsuccessful in meeting the needs of young people and when it is in the best interest of the youth to enter foster care. The reasoning behind this conclusion was to preserve an eligibility pathway into extended foster care for the youth in the case that the use of prevention services proved unsuccessful after the youth turned 18. This was also to avoid a young person becoming homeless and without support services if told to leave their home by their family.

Steps for Implementation

- ✓ Develop funding streams and administrative processes to ensure that any young person ages 16 and older considered a candidate for care has access to ILSP services until age 21.

Existing Models

N/A—this would be a new approach to preserve access to a support system for transition-age youth whose families are directed to FFPSA-funded prevention services.

“It’s another way to support youth who don’t have services.”

“You don’t realize how important these classes are until you’re on your own.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Potential Funding Streams

Independent Living Program: The State of California receives approximately \$15 million per year from the federal Chafee Foster Care Independence Program for the operation of independent living programs. Additional state resources are combined with the federal funds and distributed to counties who are required to operate their own independent living programs. Eligibility for these funds is currently restricted to youth who were placed in out-of-home care. However, the State of California could amend eligibility for the state-level resources committed to these programs to include youth whose families are receiving FFPSA-authorized prevention services.

AB12: California and its counties operate an extended foster care program for youth who turn 18 in foster care, giving them the option to remain in foster care as non-minor dependents (NMDs) up to the age of 21. As NMDs youth are eligible for monthly living stipends as well as a range of support services. The State of California could amend eligibility for AB12 to include youth ages 16 and older whose families are receiving FFP-authorized prevention services. At this time, federal dollars through Title IV-E could not be leveraged for this purpose without changes to the eligibility criteria for the Title IV-E Extended Foster Care Program.

2011 County Realignment Funds

Under 2011 Realignment, the State of California redirects a percentage of the sales and Vehicle License Fee tax revenues to counties for a range of functions and services. The majority of these funds are set aside for health and human services programs, including child welfare. In return, counties have significant flexibility in how this funding can be used. Providing independent living program access to youth whose families are receiving an FFPSA-authorized prevention service would be an allowable use of these funds.

Conclusion

Positive change in the foster care system cannot be accomplished without active participation by individuals who experienced foster care.

California's child welfare system must support outreach to youth who have experienced foster care and facilitate their participation in the planning, decision-making, and implementation of programs and policies affecting youth in families receiving Family First services.

There are a number of organizations and service providers that wish to see the success of Family First and to see older youth and families thrive. If the issues outlined in this report by young people are overlooked, there is a possibility they may become solidified within the new child welfare system, leaving youth without supports they need to be successful.

For any of these recommendations and the greater implementation of Family First to work, the child welfare community must conduct authentic, effective, ongoing engagement of youth to remove barriers they face. Full commitment to serving older youth in California will increase the success rates of Family First prevention services and the outcomes for transition-age youth.

All recommendations in this report are implementable, and the state has access to existing resources to implement them, as well as models for each recommendation.

Each of the recommendations can be financed through existing programs. Recommendations 1 (Peer Advocates) and 3 (Expand ILSP and AB12 Benefits to FFPSA Youth) may have significant cost, while the cost of Recommendations 2 (Sibling Connections) and 4 (Revise SDM Tools) are minimal.

There are service providers and other organizations ready and willing to support the implementation of these recommendations in order to give young people the support they need to thrive and be successful.

It is our hope that the State of California listens to and respects the recommendations provided by young people in this report and works diligently to ensure that youth are provided the supports they need to become healthy and vibrant adults.



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For more information please visit:

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