



Issue Brief: Supporting California Foster Youth

Data-Informed Best Practices, Historic Investments in Addressing Complex Needs, and Kin-First Culture

Introduction

It's no surprise that children thrive when cared for by their parents in loving, supportive homes and communities. Unfortunately, separation from a parent is sometimes necessary to ensure a child's safety. At the same time, from a child development and trauma perspective, removing a child from their family – even if necessary and for a very short time – is an invasive intervention that can have lasting, negative impacts on a child's well-being. The experience of separation, combined with other [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#), can result in a child having a complex array of needs.

Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) are important for all children to experience. In fact, PCEs are so powerful, they are proven to [mitigate the effects ACEs](#), making them critically important for foster youth to experience. This is underscored in a [recent study by The Journal of the American Medical Association](#), which found that the risk of depression/poor mental health among youth with four or more ACEs went from nearly 60 percent for those who could only recall two or fewer PCEs, to 21 percent for those who had six or more PCEs. The PCEs youth experience through stable family connections are critical to their well-being, development, and sense of self-worth.

To meet the [complex care needs](#) of individual foster youth, California's child welfare system must [partner within the system of care](#) to identify and provide evidence-informed clinical interventions that target trauma, caregiver attachment, and the child's social environment. At every step, it's critical that these supports are provided in a manner that prioritizes a child's fundamental need to remain connected to their relatives, extended family, and/or Tribe(s).

Previously, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) published an [Issue Brief](#) that discussed the positive impacts of the [Continuum of Care Reform \(CCR\)](#) and the vast amount of data on the consequences of placements in congregate care. Consistent with the original intent of the CCR, working together, the State remains committed to doing what it takes to ensure that all foster youth have the opportunity to be loved and supported in a family.

With this goal in mind, the State continues to work toward a system of care that meets the needs of each youth served by our foster care system. In this Issue Brief, we highlight the

"The data are clear: Youth who are unable to reside with their birth parents do best when they are loved by and connected to family. We will continue our work to support California's continuum of care, which must center on children's connection to family in all stages."

– **Jennifer Troia**, Director, California Department of Social Services

importance of maintaining family connections and discuss recent investments and efforts underway in California to support youth with complex care needs.

Improving the System of Care

Even while we are working to address urgent needs for safe, stable, immediate placements, we must always remain focused on understanding a child's trauma and need for connection to family. By continuing to improve the system of care, we can improve outcomes by strengthening supports for families and ensuring that stays in congregate care are rare, brief, and include a focus on attachment and connection.

To support this ultimate goal of maintaining children's connections to family, while identifying and addressing individual complex care needs, California has taken a number of recent actions. Some of these efforts and investments include:

- **Center for Excellence:** The CDSS, in partnership with the University of California, Davis, launched the [Center for Excellence in Family Finding, Engagement and Support](#). The Center provides statewide, culturally appropriate training and technical assistance to county child welfare and probation departments, behavioral health, and other child-serving stakeholders – including Tribal partners and service providers – to enhance their practices, policies, and efforts for family finding, support, and engagement.



YouTube: Center for Excellence

The Center is at the forefront of promoting kinship care and fostering a kin-first culture throughout California's child welfare jurisdictions, partner agencies, and providers. The Center is a dynamic resource and knowledge hub, serving as a collaborative space for innovation, idea generation, and the dissemination of best practices rooted in a kin-first culture, which promotes kin engagement across all facets of the child welfare system and assists families in achieving reunification.

Through the Center, the [Kin-First Accelerator Program](#) also recently launched as a collaborative effort led by the CDSS, UC Davis, Casey Family Programs, Implematix, and Think of Us. Eight counties were selected to participate, and they are developing a system for collecting and maintaining data that identify key indicators of a kin-first culture, including:

- First youth placement with kin
- Predominant youth placement with kin
- Youth placement with siblings
- Youth placement stability (fewer moves)
- Increased numbers of Black/African American and Tribal youth who remain safely at home or are placed with relatives and corresponding decreases in the

disproportionate number of Black/African American and Tribal youth separated from their parents or placed into non-relative or congregate settings.

The Center also recently launched the [Kin-first Academy](#) Series. This comprehensive training program provides the foundational knowledge and skills to successfully implement kin-first, kin-focused family finding, engagement, and support in practice. Further, to date, the Center has provided dozens of direct consultations and technical assistance calls with counties, [19 webinars](#), various [toolkits](#), and developed a [Statewide Peer Learning Collaborative](#) to further support and expand kin-first culture.

- **Crisis Continuum Pilot Program:** [Assembly Bill 153](#), signed by Governor Newsom in 2021, created the [Children's Crisis Continuum Pilot Program](#), with the goal of better integrating the continuum of care that serves foster youth in California. The pilot aims to create a seamless transition between service settings and to provide stabilization and treatment to foster youth complex care needs in the least restrictive settings possible. Eight counties, or regional collaboratives of counties, were selected to participate. For each pilot, dedicated teams are being selected to support intensive transition planning, care coordination, and case management.

Family Stories: How Kin-first Culture helps Families Thrive



YouTube: Harmony's Story



YouTube: Crystal's Story

- **Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) State Plan:** The [ICWA State Plan](#) was developed through Tribal consultation and published in November 2022. The plan was created in recognition of the State's legal obligation and mandate to improve statewide ICWA implementation, to address the well-being of Indian children and families, and reduce the disproportionality of Indian children in the child welfare system. The ICWA State Plan consists of concrete goals, strategies, and objectives to ensure ICWA compliance across all 58 counties.
- **Additional Investments:** Over the past several years, California has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in State resources to support counties in meeting the complex care needs of foster youth. Funding is being used to build the capacity of the continuum of care, with an emphasis on supporting a variety of services and supports to stabilize and maintain placements in home-based settings. These strategies emphasize the need for quality parenting training and supports for kin and non-kin caregivers, who

partner with birth families and their kin to both ensure quality care and promote permanency for youth.

- **Technical Assistance:** The CDSS continues to partner with counties to provide technical assistance to support meeting the needs of individual youth. This includes urgent assistance, supporting crisis intervention, and support in meeting emerging needs. The CDSS also provides medium- to longer-term support, such as assisting counties with foundational practice implementation improvements needed to help prevent future crises, as well as the development of innovative models of care to creatively support youth in kin and other home-based environments.

Foster Care Rate Reform

The [CCR](#) was founded upon the collective belief that all children served by the foster care system need, deserve, and have an ability to be part of a loving family, and not to grow up in a congregate setting. When CCR implementation began in 2017, an interim foster care rate structure was created. However, statute required California to establish an ongoing payment structure.



[California recently became the first state in the nation](#) to restructure foster care rates in a youth-centered way that will help support children in family settings by enabling families to receive the support and care they need to thrive. The new, permanent, [tiered rate structure](#) -- which is in the process of being implemented -- is based on the child's assessed level of need and strengths, not placement type. For example, under the interim rate structure, residential facilities are paid a higher rate than the rate available to support relative caregivers or resource families.

The new rate structure also provides funding dedicated to support a child's strength building or immediate needs. The new rate structure will provide youth the same level of funding to support care/supervision, strength building, and immediate needs at the child's assessed level of need, regardless of the placement type. These changes will allow more children to be supported by relatives and in family homes, where [research shows they do best](#).

Conclusion

All foster youth need and deserve to be safe, and to be supported in families. The State, counties, and our partners have made significant strides to increase understanding of trauma and the positive experiences that support healing and well-being. Together, we must continue improving the system of care with supports, services, and a north star that remains focused on understanding each child's specific trauma and on supporting their reunification or permanency with family.