



Seizing the Opportunity

Ten Ways to Advance Equity and Promote Well-Being through the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA)

The [Family First Prevention Services Act \(FFPSA\)](#)¹ marks a substantial movement toward child welfare reform by finally bringing child welfare financing into alignment with what research tells us is best for children and families—keeping children in their homes whenever safe and possible—and when children have to be placed in foster care—ensuring they are in the most family-like, least restrictive setting that will meet their needs. As is evidenced by the data, systems have long struggled to serve all children and families well. Children and families of color and children and youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) experience both disproportionate involvement with child welfare, and once involved, disparate outcomes including placement instability and longer stays in foster care.

A significant element driving challenges within child welfare practice has been a result of the misalignment between federal financing and what research tells us about what children, youth, and families need to thrive. Now, through FFPSA, there is a significant opportunity for child welfare systems to reimagine their work and implement a new vision in support of equity and in service of children and families. Core strategies for implementation should focus on maximizing the potential impact of FFPSA for children and families of color, LGBTQ youth, and those families that often face the most significant barriers to timely permanency and optimal well-being. Successful implementation of these strategies will in turn support state efforts in achieving an equitable child welfare system with better outcomes for all children and families involved with child welfare.

The following strategies highlight 10 opportunities for states to leverage FFPSA to both advance equity and promote better outcomes for children and families. While this list is not exhaustive and there are many other strategies for advancing equity, the 10 opportunities below represent concrete strategies states can pursue to achieve an equitable child welfare system.

1. Engage the broader community including other public agencies, private partners, and community stakeholders in developing a comprehensive Prevention Plan.

Through FFPSA, states have the opportunity to invest new resources in prevention services. In developing their Prevention Plan child welfare systems should include partner agencies and community stakeholders to gain multiple perspectives about the needs of children and families and information on the perspective services that would prevent removals and placement into foster care. A shared investment in developing the plan will also lead to shared accountability—ensuring that quality services are effectively implemented in the community and are able to meet the needs of children and families.

2. Develop a continuum of prevention services that meet the needs of children and families who are not currently being well served.

Child welfare systems must analyze their data and engage community members to understand the needs of children and families who

are candidates for foster care and to develop a broad range of prevention services that can meet the unique needs of these families. Specifically, states must analyze their data—including disaggregating their data by race and ethnicity—to assess which groups of families are not being served well. Current research shows that families of color are less likely to receive family preservation services and LGBTQ youth are more likely to be removed from their homes due to conflicts with their caregivers. Given these trends, states must assess gaps in their current service continuum and implement prevention services to meet the need. Additionally, states should consider promising and innovative approaches as a part of a broad range of prevention services to ensure solutions have a strong fit with the experiences of children and families. This should include services that are specifically targeted to serving pregnant and parenting youth and post-reunification, guardianship, and adoption services to support and prevent families from coming back to the attention of child welfare.

3. **Identify local interventions that work to achieve positive outcomes for children and families and invest in growing the evidence about effectiveness.** Many states and communities have community-based prevention services that they know work through outcome data, including qualitative measures. However, these interventions may not currently be deemed “evidence-based” if no formal evaluation has been conducted. States should work to identify these interventions and invest in growing the evidence so that in the future, children and families can benefit from these programs at a larger scale and states can receive title IV-E reimbursement.
4. **Implement foster parent recruitment and retention strategies particularly for youth who are over-represented in congregate care.** As states work to ensure appropriate placements for children and youth in family-based settings, states will have to increase their foster parent recruitment and retention strategies. Specifically, states should implement targeted strategies for foster parents who are able to provide safe, stable, and affirming homes to children and youth who are disproportionately placed in congregate care settings including LGBTQ youth, teenagers, youth with behavioral health needs, and those who are expectant² and parenting. Given the unique needs of these youth, states will need to implement targeted recruitment and retention strategies and explore opportunities to better support foster parents in carrying for these children and youth.
5. **Develop guidance and implement policy and practice to reduce unintended consequences including the placement of youth in more restrictive settings than necessary.** States must implement policies and procedures to ensure an accurate assessment of youth needs and to reduce inappropriate placements in congregate care settings, including those that are excluded from the Qualified Residential Treatment Program requirements. Research has highlighted that girls of color are more likely to be identified and deemed to be at-risk of experiencing commercial and sexual exploitation. States must ensure appropriate assessments of all youth in care to ensure safety while preventing bias from influencing placement decisions.
6. **Provide a continuum of supports and services for pregnant and parenting youth in foster care that are informed by research on optimal development.** To best support pregnant and parenting youth in foster care and their children, states must ensure there are supports and services that incorporate the research on optimal development and promote a young person’s health and development both as an adolescent and parent. Additionally, states should implement protections to ensure that while these services are offered and made available to youth, if a youth determines that they do not want a service—and there are no safety concerns about their child—this decision is not used in a punitive matter against them.
7. **Utilize maintenance of effort dollars (MOE) to support innovation.** MOE dollars provide a unique opportunity for states to invest in innovation to better serve children and families and promote keeping families together whenever safe and possible. These dollars can be used in a variety of ways including to build the evidence for new, innovative prevention programs, fund interventions that are not yet evidence-based, or as concrete supports to promote family stability.
8. **Implement services that are responsive to families who have experienced domestic violence.** Many families involved with child welfare may also have experienced domestic violence. Child welfare systems should integrate a framework that recognizes the co-occurrence of domestic violence and mental health and/or substance use and ensure prevention services are able to support families at the intersection of these co-occurring issues. By taking this approach, prevention services will be better able to serve families, promote safety, and address underlying needs.
9. **Identify strategies through title IV-B that maximize the health, well-being, and permanency of young children.** Young children are more likely to come to the attention of child welfare services and represent the largest population of children in foster care. These early years are also critical years in a child’s development. States should implement targeted strategies to support the health, well-being, and permanency of these children as an effective strategy for both promoting future healthy development and well-being and also preventing the removal of children whenever safe and possible.
10. **Promote effective engagement of kinship throughout a child and family’s involvement with child welfare.** Children and youth do best when they are with family and able to stay connected to their home, community, and school. States have the opportunity through FFP-SA to promote kinship engagement through multiple strategies including: implementing kinship navigator programs; integrating case practice expectations and strategies to promote engagement with family; using performance-based contracting to promote engagement of families and kinship for children and youth placed in QRTPs; and implementing model foster parent licensing standards that waive non-safety elements in order to license kinship relatives as caregivers.

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¹<https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Family-First-Prevention-Services-Act-of-2018.pdf>

²We use “expectant” here to be inclusive of both young mothers and fathers who are expecting a child. Below we use “pregnant” as it refers to technical language in the bill.