Community as a Pathway to Prevention

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Family First Prevention Services Act was established, in part, to prevent foster care entries by offering evidence-based treatment in the community with minimal child welfare involvement. This funding is available to support the development of infrastructure and provide direct client services. One opportunity this legislation offers is a community pathway to support families that seek help from community agencies. Families of color are drastically overrepresented in the foster care system. This ability to seek help early by a trusted community agency, and potentially circumvent the child welfare system, can help reduce the racial disparity seen throughout California and prevent child abuse and neglect.

San Francisco Family Service Agency has implemented a pilot program to address calls of concern that do not yet meet the level of abuse and neglect. Their robust service array through this FFPSA Prevention Pathway allows families to receive services through agencies they trust, that know the community's needs and offer culturally relevant resources. Sonoma County is poised to pilot a similar program with no additional fiscal impact and has significant potential for a positive impact on families in the community.

Introduction

Recently, there has been a shift in the child welfare system, which aims to support families in a new and innovative way by diverting child welfare involvement through prevention. This paradigm shift comes at a time when California is looking for ways to reduce racial disparity in the child welfare system and may, in fact, be an avenue to do so. In the California Comprehensive Prevention Plan approved in 2023, it was stated that Native American and African American children in California were four times more likely to enter foster care than their white counterparts (California Department of Social Services, 2023). With the implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, families will soon have access to free services from local and trusted community-based organizations, which know and understand the community's needs, without going through the child welfare system. The hope is that families will get culturally relevant and local support to mitigate risk factors for child abuse and neglect and reduce racial disparity in the child welfare system.

The Family First Prevention Services Act

President Trump signed the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) into law in 2018. Historically, child welfare has been a reactive system, getting involved only after a child has experienced abuse or neglect. This new legislation alters the course of child welfare, creating a new era of prevention. FFPSA has two components: (1) allowing additional federal funds to support the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and (2) limited funding and increased regulations for congregate care. For the purposes of this case study, the focus will be on the former.

Prior to FFPSA, federal funds were mainly used to cover the costs incurred after a child was placed in foster care. This means that the child had already suffered trauma and had been separated from their parents' custody. The fiscal change resulting from this legislation was preceded by many decades of advocacy for prevention services, keeping families together, supporting parents, and allowing children to remain home and in their community. For the first time, the federal government acknowledged the importance of prevention and supported the idea through an entitlement drawdown funding source. To be eligible for these federal funds, states had to create a comprehensive prevention plan outlining how to utilize them to address the needs specific to the families they serve. California opted into FFPSA and, in 2023, had its Comprehensive Prevention Plan (CPP) approved.

In California, fifty-one counties and two Title IV-E Tribes opted into FFPSA and submitted a CPP. The CPP for Sonoma County was created in 2023. The FFPSA funding received by Counties and Title IV-E Tribes includes a one-time state block grant to support the development of prevention infrastructure. In addition, funding will be made available to provide prevention services through ten evidence-based programs (EBP) that address mental health, substance abuse, and parenting education. The price for each session of the EBPs, along with some administrative costs related to assessing the family's eligibility, will be covered by a 50% match from the state. Twelve candidacy groups, all of which have been identified as being at risk of entering foster care, are eligible for these services. The focus of the California CPP is to reduce the racial

disparity in the child welfare system and to include the active involvement of those with lived experience in the child welfare system in creating and implementing the plans.

Community Pathways

Community pathways are a way to further this upstream investment. A community pathway is an avenue that families can use to access prevention services in their communities without child welfare involvement. This would allow parents who need additional support to go to a local community-based organization and request help. In addition, it would offer the necessary support to move from a culture of 'mandated reporting' to 'community supporting' by making mandated reporters aware of resources to refer families to when the area of concern is poverty-related neglect.

A typical mandated reporter works in a school system. Often, teachers and support staff are overworked and expected not only to teach, but to ensure physical safety on school campuses and address the unmet mental and emotional needs of children and youth. It is no wonder, then, that when a teacher sees signs of poverty-related neglect, their primary solution is to call the child abuse hotline and make a report. This well-intended act frequently leads to the racial disparities seen in child welfare throughout California, as families of color often experience income disparities, leading to additional stress and basic needs potentially going unmet.

For the community to move towards a 'community supporting' approach, mandated reporters need additional training and to be informed of community resources to connect the family. Filling this gap and addressing this need is one of the goals of the FFPSA. A community pathway provides children, youth, parents, and kin access to culturally relevant and local prevention services without involvement in the child welfare system. FFPSA allows child welfare to act as a pass-through to fund these services. This theoretical concept requires a shared database to allow for communication between child welfare workers and community-based organizations in which service requests and eligibility approval can be submitted. Currently, the state is building a new database, California Automated Response and Engagement System (CARES), to allow this process. The CARES database is expected to be available for child welfare agencies to submit requests to the state to draw down FFPSA funds in October 2026. It is not until 2028 that CARES will have the ability to allow community-based organizations access to request services from Child Welfare for FFPSA eligible families.

County of San Francisco Prevention Services

Although federal funding is new to prevention, counties have prioritized prevention services through alternative financing for over a decade. Prioritizing prevention services before the FFPSA has allowed many counties to create an infrastructure that can be built on as the funding becomes available. San Francisco is one such county where prevention is not a new concept or practice, but has been embedded into the system to prevent family separation since 2005. The CPP created by San Francisco was approved by the state in 2023.

A brief synopsis of the child welfare system is necessary to support understanding of this structure. When a child abuse or neglect report is called into the hotline, the situation is

screened using an evidence-based tool, referred to as “Structured Decision Making” (SDM), to determine if it meets the criteria for investigation, and a referral is generated (Evident Change, 2025). If the information provided does not meet the requirements for an in-person investigation, it is referred to as being 'evaluated out.' This means the child welfare system will not be engaging with the family, but the information will be retained in the database.

For those requiring an in-person investigation, an Emergency Response Social Worker investigates the allegations of child abuse and/or neglect. When safety issues are found that cannot be mitigated, the referral may turn into a child welfare case. In San Francisco, when the social worker determines that the safety issue can be mitigated with prevention services, they refer the family to Differential Response.

San Francisco has implemented Differential Response (DR) for the past twenty years. The DR voluntary community-based service array is to help address the issues identified during the child welfare emergency response investigation. Currently, the community-based organization Instituto Familiar de la Raza, Inc. (IFR) is the provider that receives DR referrals. IFR is part of a larger network of Family Resource Centers. This collaborative has locations throughout San Francisco, allowing for various culturally relevant services geographically close to the families being served. When a referral is received by IFR, a family assessment is completed. IFR refers the family to the Family Resource Center in their area, which can provide the needed services and supports. Families meet with their case manager weekly for 3-9 months to monitor progress towards their case plan goals while receiving targeted services. Oftentimes, the decision to refer a family to DR is made by the Review, Evaluate, and Direct Team.

The Review, Evaluate, and Direct (RED) Team is a group decision structure within a Differential Response system. Families are reviewed by the RED team if:

- The family situation is assessed as ‘very high’ risk and there are no active safety threats,
- The family has had an open case in the past three years, or
- The family has had substantiated sexual abuse, physical abuse, severe neglect, or emotional abuse allegations at any time.

The benefits of having a group discussion and decision are a reduction in implicit bias, an increase in cultural considerations, and a more holistic approach overall. The referrals staffed at the RED Team have three potential outcomes: Conduct a Child and Family Team meeting with the family and their support system to discuss the concerns and create a plan, referral to Differential Response (DR), and opening a non-court family maintenance case.

In preparation for FFPSA, San Francisco developed an FFPSA Prevention Pathway that allows families to get services with minimal child welfare system involvement. This expands prevention services beyond just DR. When a referral is evaluated out and it meets the following requirements, it is eligible for the FFPSA Prevention Pathway:

- There have been two prior referrals in the past 12 months, and

- There has been one investigated referral that was not promoted to a case in the past 6 months, and
- The final score on the SDM Risk Assessment tool was “high” or “very high” from the last Investigation Narrative.

Note: This is different than DR, as DR requires an investigation to be completed, an evaluated-out referral does not have an investigation.

Once the referral is assessed as eligible for this pathway, it is sent to a social worker who then reaches out and engages the family, utilizing a predetermined script. This initial call is very important, as the engagement skills of the social worker have the potential to either get a family to enroll or decline. If the family declines the services, the referral is closed. If the family accepts the free services, the referral is sent to Safe and Sound, a local community-based organization. Safe and Sound offers the following services to parents/caregivers:

- Supportive Family Services (SFS) includes access to concrete supports and assistance with specific short-term tasks
- Integrated Family Services (IFS) includes a case manager, development of a service/treatment plan, and home visits for up to two years
- Recurring community events to support families in engaging in activities to build relationships and memories
- Referrals to appropriate services, based on the assessed needs of the family

In addition, Safe and Sound offers daily parent drop-in services, with childcare available, where they teach parents about the child welfare system and child abuse and neglect laws. They have technology that parents can utilize to complete things such as job applications. In addition, they support the family in meeting their children’s needs, including attendance at an IEP meeting. This FFPSA Prevention Pathway contract costs approximately $400,000 a year, some of which will be eligible for a 50% match when the FFPSA funding becomes available. The target goal of the program is to have 65%-75% of families show improvement in the protective factors of: Parental Resilience, Knowledge of Parenting & Child Development, Social Connections, Concrete Support, and Social & Emotional Competence of Children.

County of Sonoma Prevention Services

Family, Youth and Children Services (FY&C), the child welfare agency in the County of Sonoma, has offered Child Abuse Prevention Services (CAPS) for over ten years, connecting hundreds of families to potentially life-changing services. The current prevention array uses approximately $900,000 of federal, state, and local funding annually. To be eligible for these free services, a family had to have a child welfare emergency response investigation, with an SDM Risk Assessment level of moderate, high, or very high. This is the same program as DR in San Francisco. Families are eligible to receive up to four months of the following services:

- In-home parent education
- In-home behavior support
- Intensive case management using motivational interviewing (FFPSA eligible)
- Functional Family Therapy (FFPSA eligible)
- Therapy for victims of domestic violence
- Therapy for offenders of domestic violence

Sonoma County opted into FFPSA, and in 2023, the Comprehensive Prevention Plan (CPP) was approved by the state. The goal of the CPP is to reduce disparity and disproportionality of child abuse and neglect in Sonoma County. Sonoma County struggles with racial disparity in the child welfare system, as identified in the Child Abuse Prevention Annual Report for 2023, which states that African American Youth are five times more likely to enter foster care than their white counterparts, and Native American youth are eight times more likely to enter foster care than their white counterparts (Sonoma County FY&C, 2023). There are many costs associated with this disparity. The most significant impact is the harm and trauma it causes to families of color, permanently impacting their lives. This also leads to communities' distrust of the child welfare system. In addition, the cost of foster care placements far exceeds the cost of prevention services. Sonoma County has worked diligently to reduce these disparities.

Sonoma County's CPP has three objectives that were developed to support the goal. The objectives are as follows:

- Reform the structures within the social service system that perpetuate inequity
- Improve the service system to better address the mental health and substance use disorder needs of families
- Strengthen the network of family support services and resources to be more accessible and culturally responsive

When looking at ways to offer prevention services and support families of color, consideration should be given to the harm the child welfare system has caused these families and the effect it has on their relationship with child welfare. Because of the harm done, many communities of color do not trust governmental systems, but often do have trust in their neighborhood organizations, making a Community Pathway approach more likely to be successful in serving them. In addition, these local organizations are aware of the community's needs and often have culturally relevant services. This community approach aligns with the FFPSA Community Pathway, as described above.

Recommendation: Proposal for a Prevention Pathway in Sonoma County

The Human Services Department of Sonoma County released the 2025-2027 strategic roadmap report outlining the vision, mission, values, and commitment to racial equity. Some areas of focus include:

- Investment in data collection and reporting systems to drive change
- Tailor service models to address the distinct needs of local communities
- Develop stronger partnerships with community-based organizations
- Utilizing prevention strategies to the greatest extent possible

This proposal aligns with the above focus areas and is described in detail below.

The Vision

These values and goals align with connecting families to community agencies with minimal child welfare involvement. The Community Pathway, as described in the FFPSA, allows parents who need additional support to go to a local community-based organization and request help through risk-reducing services. Engagement and service completion levels will be much higher among participants using this self-identified avenue. However, this option is not available until 2026, once the CARES database allows community-based organizations to request services.

This proposal supports the paradigm and practice shift towards prevention in preparation for the Community Pathway. Please note that the proposed program differs from the Sonoma County CAPS program in that an emergency investigation has not been completed. It mirrors San Francisco's FFPSA Prevention Pathway. According to Casey Family Programs, similar programs in other states, such as Indiana and Connecticut, have reduced the number of families of color entering the child welfare system, reduced the cost of foster care placements, and increased a sense of purpose and positive impact on child welfare workers.

The Need

This pilot Prevention Pathway would start at the child abuse hotline level. The Sonoma County Kids Community Report for 2024 identified that 4,724 calls to the hotline were assessed for abuse and neglect, of which 1,559 required an emergency response investigation. That means 3,165 were evaluated out, making them potentially eligible for the Prevention Pathway.

Current Practice

Currently, FY&C has a procedure in which an evaluated-out referral is eligible to be elevated to an emergency response investigation if there have been four evaluated-out referrals in the past year. To elevate a referral, the hotline social worker meets with a CPS supervisor to discuss if the prior referrals in the year were for similar concerns, if the family is open to help, and if an emergency response investigation could stabilize the situation and reduce the risk of abuse and neglect. If the decision is made to elevate the referral, it is assigned to an Emergency Response

Social Worker for an in-person investigation. This proposed Prevention Pathway would act in place of an emergency response investigation, reducing child welfare involvement with the family.

The Proposed Prevention Pathway

Suppose an evaluated-out referral meets the criteria described above, and consultation is done to determine if it should be elevated. In that case, a community referral will be offered instead of an investigation. The referral will be assigned to a Social Worker III. The Social Worker III will then reach out to the family, using a predetermined script, to inform them of the situation and offer free services in the community, without further child welfare involvement. The referral will be sent to a contracted provider if the family accepts the provided service(s). Due to current capacity, as described below, the Prevention Pathway will utilize the services in the CAPS contracts. If the family declines the services, the referral will be closed.

The Program Evaluation

To determine if the contracted services meet the clients' needs, Family, Youth, and Children Services will utilize the Anti-Racist Result-Based Accountability model. This model breaks down predetermined success markers by demographics and allows discussion of the stories behind the numbers. This data will be collected through quarterly reports reviewed between the community-based organization and a county contract manager. FY&C uses safe measures to determine recidivism rates, a pivotal data point to assess whether interventions have the desired outcome after a year. The low number of referrals to the Prevention Pathway also allows these referrals to be tracked manually so that recidivism can be evaluated after six months, in addition to one year.

The Fiscal Impact

A significant benefit of piloting this program is that it will not cost the county additional funds. Instead, it will enhance the system structure to further align with FFPSA, and in 2026, will be eligible for a 50% federal drawdown match for two of the current CAPS programs and a Social Worker III position. This pilot program would look to serve no more than 100 families a year, which breaks down to approximately two families a week that will be called, offered services, and a referral submitted.

Currently, Sonoma County’s CAPS engagement rates are approximately 35%. Because of this, contracted providers often do not meet the annual number of participants and therefore do not maximize the full amount of their contract. This allows for space in our current CAPS contracts for families through this pilot Prevention Pathway without additional cost. Therefore, additional procurements and quarterly meetings with contracted agencies will not be necessary. Contract managers for the current CAPS programs would include Prevention Pathway clients in quarterly discussions with contractors. Currently, many CAPS referrals are sent by a Social Worker III who can work with the family and provider to increase engagement. This pilot would mirror the CAPS referral process in that the Social Worker III would contact the family to engage in services and submit the referral. Because this Prevention Pathway will utilize the existing structure and

has no more than two clients a week, the anticipated impact can be absorbed into current workloads and programs. It will not require additional staff, contracts, or funding.

Conclusion

It is often said that insanity is doing the same thing repeatedly while expecting different results. This is historically how the child welfare system operated, continuing with the same system structures, despite their lack of success and their documented harm to families of color. It is often thought that more staff training and supervision will create the needed changes. But the changes necessary to keep families together and avoid unnecessary foster care placements require systemic change, as it is a systemic problem. Community Pathways supports families in getting the help and resources they need in their communities. This is a shift in the system as it does not require child welfare involvement with families. This shift can strengthen communities through resource abundance, collaboration, and community member relationships. San Francisco has started this shift through their FFPSA Prevention Pathway, which establishes infrastructure that aligns with the implementation of the FFPSA. Currently, Sonoma County has prevention infrastructure that could be modified with minimal effort to support families in their communities. These changes not only align with the County of Sonoma Human Services Department's mission, vision, and values but also work to meet the CPP goal of reducing racial disparity in foster care.

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