

Transforming Child Welfare: Prioritizing Prevention, Racial Equity, and Advancing Child and Family Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

The child welfare system is overdue for substantial transformation. Families and communities of color have experienced the brunt of the failings and limitations present in current policy and practice. A transformed approach is needed that prioritizes maltreatment prevention, racial equity, and child and family well-being. The Family First Prevention Services Act is an important step in this effort, although its scope falls short of the significant changes that are needed to effectively serve children and families. Transformation requires intentional efforts to disentangle poverty and child neglect, and investments in communities to build robust, accessible continua of prevention services.

After decades of moderate reforms,¹ the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First) represents a significant, but limited shift toward maltreatment prevention. Child welfare leaders, advocates, and policymakers are well positioned to leverage Family First and extend it to create new child- and family-serving systems that prioritize maltreatment prevention and racial

equity, and also improve and sustain child and family well-being.

Since the establishment of states' formalized child protection systems, most child welfare resources have been directed toward investigations and out-of-home care expenditures. In 2016, only 15% of the \$30 billion invested nationally was directed toward prevention services.²

Strengthening and supporting families and communities in order to reduce risk and build protective capacity has not been the primary focus or resource investment; annually more than 260,000 children and their families experience separation and removal.³

The failings of child welfare strategies are especially important during the

TALKING POINTS

- A substantial transformation of the child welfare system is needed that prioritizes prevention of child maltreatment, racial equity, and improves and sustains child and family well-being.
- The Family First Prevention and Services Act is an important first step toward greater investment in child maltreatment prevention, support to kin caregivers, and proper placements for children and youth needing temporary foster care.
- Institutionalized racism and inherent bias in child welfare policy, practice, and decision making contribute to families and communities of color disproportionately experiencing the failings of the current child welfare system.
- Different child welfare response options are needed, especially for families with neglect-only allegations.
- Authentic partnerships among human service agencies, community agencies, and families are critical for creating responsive and flexible primary prevention service arrays.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. **Mandatory reporting system.** Consider reconceptualizing the mandatory reporting system and the child welfare “front door,” particularly for neglect-only cases. Explore alternative options and training mechanisms that would enable mandatory reporters to pursue other avenues for connecting families observed to need support with resources (e.g., help line, linkages to community resource centers) without defaulting to a child maltreatment report.⁷
2. **Primary prevention.** Expand the available array of primary prevention programs to families within their communities and make them easily accessible long before families are at serious risk of experiencing maltreatment.³⁶ Foster leadership within community-based organizations to promote the amplification of youth and family voice, particularly from communities of color, in the design and implementation of prevention programs and strategies.
3. **Race equity.** Acknowledge and address the institutionalized racism that is reflected in the policies that guide child welfare programs and the ways they are implemented. Prioritize and provide resources for the hard work needed for child welfare leaders, staff, partners, and stakeholders to examine, confront, and dismantle racist policies and programs, and partner with communities of color to design and implement a child and family well-being system that values, respects, and equitably serves all families.³⁷
4. **Evidence-based interventions.** Continue to invest in the development and testing of interventions to grow the evidence base for child welfare. Specifically prioritize the development of interventions that are designed with and for communities of color. Consider evaluation designs and methodologies that do not marginalize or devalue community-grown interventions that may be more difficult to assess using traditional evaluation frameworks.²³
5. **Kinship care.** Make financial resources and supports available to kinship caregivers that are equal to what is available to nonrelative foster parents.³⁵ Ensure that kinship caregivers are not prevented from being considered temporary or permanent placement resources for children because of non-safety-related concerns, such as insufficient bedrooms available or past nonviolent criminal convictions. Please see the full brief for a complete list of policymaker recommendations and references. References are available upon request.

present challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Families living in poverty or facing economic insecurity have disproportionately felt the stressors of stay-at-home orders, school and child care closures, unemployment uncertainty, and diminished social connectedness and support.⁴ Yet during these times, a prevailing narrative has been concern about states receiving a decreased number of child maltreatment reports, a result of lack of surveillance by mandated school and child-care reporters,⁵ rather than a coordinated human services response to increase outreach and preventive support to families.

Concerns about decreasing reports of child maltreatment are understandable; however, it is important to note that there are no national training standards for mandated reporters.⁶ Moreover, reports by schools, child-care providers, and mental health personnel represent the lowest percentage of substantiated child victims despite accounting for the greatest percentage of screened-in reports.⁷ Substantial numbers of families experience a child maltreatment investigation without a corresponding determination of abuse or neglect. This phenomenon suggests an opportunity to think about new proactive and adaptive strategies to help families meet their needs and keep children safe.

Please see the full brief for a complete set of references and more information about the authors.



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