



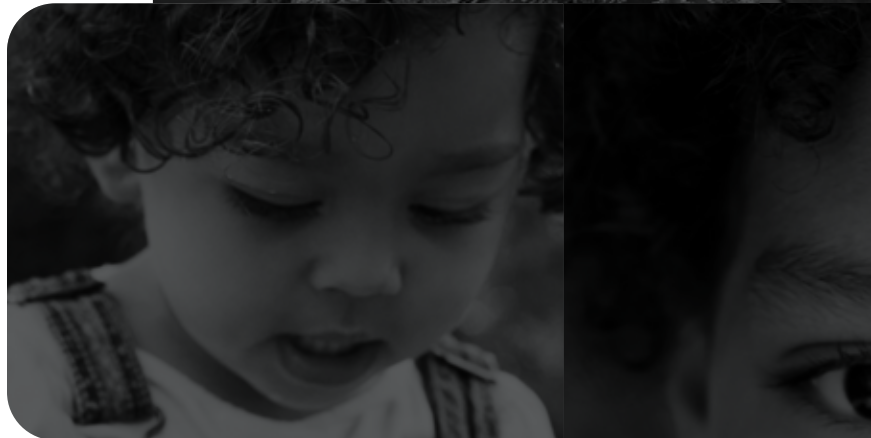
# THRIVING FAMILIES SAFER CHILDREN SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITIES

*investing in children and families*



“We know that  
our dreams  
and plans  
won't get very  
far unless we  
have the  
right people  
to make  
them  
realities.

-JIM CASEY







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DR. WALTER HOWARD SMITH, JR.  
CHAIR, BOARD OF TRUSTEES

As each of us works to build hope in our communities, **let's make sure we invite the help and cooperation of families,** who are the experts in their lives.



## Building hope with help and cooperation

When we need to solve a challenging problem, we often seek out advice from experts, those with special knowledge or skills derived from experience.

Communities across our country, looking to provide families and children with the opportunities they need to thrive, are doing just that. They are consulting with youth, families and kinship caregivers who have experienced, and often struggled with, the child welfare system to learn what would have helped them as they worked to make their families whole.

That expertise is informing how our communities and systems can and should support families so they never experience the child protection system in the first place. They are building Communities of Hope where families have what they need to raise safe, happy and healthy children.

Five years after the passage of the landmark Family First Prevention Services Act, states and tribes are making progress in how they support families, investing resources to move upstream to help families in crisis.

As each of us works to build hope in our communities, let's make sure we invite the help and cooperation of families, who are the experts in their lives. By doing so, we will, indeed, see thriving families, safer children and supportive communities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Walter Howard Smith, Jr.".

Walter Howard Smith, Jr., Ph.D.




DR. WILLIAM C. BELL  
PRESIDENT AND CEO

Hope means we all have a role  
to play in ensuring that all children  
in America grow up safely in thriving  
families and supportive communities.



# Hopeful progress toward thriving families



At Casey Family Programs, our vision is that one day, all of our children will experience the reality that in this nation, all children grow up in supportive communities that nurture their safety, ensure their success and instill the action of hope in their lives. We believe that when this happens, all children will grow up in safe, loving families, will live in strong communities and will thrive and grow into all that their dreams can hold for them.

We believe that hope is an action word. Hope is being able to intuitively act on the deeply held belief that tomorrow can be better than today because we know the love, support and belonging of being surrounded by our family and other caring adults in our lives. Hope is the belief by a family that despite the challenges they face, the strength and support of neighbors and others in their community will allow them to overcome and thrive. Hope is the heart of a community where leaders from all five sectors — government, business, nonprofit and faith-based, philanthropic and the community members themselves — work in common cause to ensure that every family and child can be safe, feel safe and have the foundation to reach their full potential.

Hope means we all have a role to play in ensuring that all children in America grow up safely in thriving families and supportive communities.

When we look at the landscape of child welfare today, we see reasons to have hope. Since 2005, the number of children under age 18 in foster care has declined 23%, from 487,000 to 377,000 in 2021. This significant and measurable progress means that fewer children are in foster care and more children are safely staying with their families, connected to their communities and their culture.

Our systems across this country are working with children, families and communities to build pathways to hope. But there is still much work that needs to be done. There are still too many of our children that encounter our child welfare systems for issues that could be better addressed by services to their families in their communities. There are still too many calls to child protection hotlines for issues based on poverty and insufficient income that could be better addressed by meeting the needs of families before challenges turn into a concern for safety.

As I write this letter, the U.S. Supreme Court is weighing the fate of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). ICWA became law in 1978 because advocates and tribal leaders worked to help Congress understand the destructive impact that the mass removal of Native children from their families and their tribes was having on the children, their families and their tribal nations.



By passing the Indian Child Welfare Act, Congress took the unprecedented step to establish the required child welfare practices that have become the gold standard that is central to our ability to live out the belief that children are best served by preserving and strengthening their ties to their families, their communities and their culture whenever possible.

If we are going to ensure that this gold standard of ensuring child and family well-being is to be extended to all children and families in America, then we must all embrace the reality that the impoverished conditions that have been allowed to be the daily reality for children and families in certain ZIP codes while children and families in other ZIP codes thrive and flourish must be changed. In a just society and in the most powerful nation in the world, poverty and insufficient income can no longer be used as a reason for removing children from their families, their communities and their opportunity to thrive.

The Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act was passed in 1980. But in 2023, Black, Indigenous and other children of color are still being removed from their families and communities at much higher rates than other children in the United States of America. The majority of these children are living with families in communities that are overwhelmingly impacted by poverty and insufficient income. In a just society and in the most powerful nation in the world, poverty and insufficient income alone can no longer be the reason we use for removing children from their families, their communities and their opportunity to thrive.





Despite the persistence of these challenges, there are leaders at the federal, tribal, state and local levels who are taking actions that give us hope that all children in America can thrive and can grow up in thriving families and supportive communities. We see the evidence that progress is being made in many communities across this country.

In February the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services recognized the five-year anniversary of the passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First). Family First was enacted to provide assistance for families to help children remain at home safely, reduce the unnecessary use of congregate care and build the capacity of communities to support children and families. This legislation has opened new pathways to hope for many of our nation's children at risk of entering foster care and their families, allowing communities across America to employ the tools and strategies children and families need to help them secure their well-being.

Since its passing, Casey Family Programs has partnered with states and tribes to develop and implement their Family First plans. So far, Family First plans have been approved in at least 36 states, the District of Columbia and three tribes, and another eight states, Puerto Rico and one tribe are awaiting the approval of their plans.

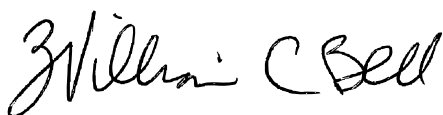
Another hopeful sign of progress is the increasing role that people who have experienced the child welfare system are being invited to play to inform, improve and transform those systems. Many child welfare system leaders are realizing that true reform can't happen without the authentic engagement of the families who have been impacted by those systems. This shift, combined with increasing investments in services that support families before they are overloaded with stressors, moves us away from a reactive child protection system and toward a child and family well-being system.

All of these changes together contribute to community conditions where children are safe and families can thrive. These changes are creating the opportunity for all of us to be intentional about identifying and taking responsibility for our role in building Communities of Hope for every child in America.

At Casey, we believe that hope is an action word and that every one of us from each of the five sectors of community must play our role in building Communities of Hope. We are grateful for the many partners who have committed to continuing this work alongside their communities and families. In a just society and in the most powerful nation in the world, poverty and insufficient income alone can no longer be the reason we use for removing children from their families, their communities and their opportunity to thrive.

I invite you to explore the stories in this report, be inspired to learn more and continue to have hope — a hope we not only hold, but a hope we can build together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "William C Bell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "William" being more prominent than the last name "Bell".

**William C. Bell, Ph.D.**



## Widening the lens of well-being


Today in America, some 377,000 children are living in foster care, each child removed from their home, family and the network of caregivers, educators and other caring adults in their lives.<sup>1</sup> This staggering number is also a measure of how we as a nation are faring in our responsibility to ensure that every child in every community has the opportunity to grow up in their own family connected to the people, places and cultures that will help them thrive.

As a country, we all benefit when children can grow up safe, supported and able to achieve their full potential. We also know that local communities can create the safe and stable conditions that all families need. But in some communities, chronic underinvestment has made access to good jobs, affordable homes, adequate mental and physical health care, good nutrition, strong education systems, enrichment activities and a host of other opportunities difficult, if not impossible. In such conditions, any family would struggle under the weight of the chronic stresses involved in just getting by.

Data and research tell us that these kinds of chronic stresses increase the risks for child neglect, which is the leading reason that children come to the attention of child protection systems in the first place. The good news is that a growing body of evidence and experience is helping communities equip more children and families to succeed.

Historically, society has tasked child protection agencies with the incredibly important role of responding to reports of child maltreatment and making recommendations on how to ensure the safety of children in ways that can have profound, lifelong effects on their health and well-being. This is a tremendous responsibility. Yet it is only one piece of ensuring that every child is safe and can thrive.

At Casey Family Programs, our goal is to support children and families, child welfare leaders, policymakers and a wide range of partners in safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope where families have what they need so children can reach their full potential.



More and more, the voices of young adults who experienced foster care and the parents and families who overcame challenges and obstacles to stay connected to and raise their children are not only being heard in the discussion, **they are being valued.**

Over the 57 years that Casey Family Programs has worked directly with children in the foster care system — and the many partners who support them — we have come to understand that the best way to ensure that children are safe, and *feel safe*, is to work with their families in the communities where they live to address the underlying societal challenges and stress that can lead to maltreatment.

While the safety of children is a shared goal of every healthy society, it cannot be our collective end point. A well-functioning child protection agency can do much to intervene when truly necessary to help families and children in crisis to heal. But a much broader effort is needed to create the conditions in each and every community where families and children can prosper, live healthy and happy lives, and ultimately achieve their dreams.

Broadening our lens from a focus solely on child protection to one of child and family well-being will require more than just improving our current approach to investigating and addressing maltreatment. It will require designing and building a new approach, one that draws on the commitment and talents of people across all five sectors of society: government, business, philanthropic, nonprofit and faith-based, and, critically, the families and children themselves.

The voices of those children and families, especially those whose lives have been shaped by their involvement with the child welfare system, have too often been left out of the discussions about how communities can improve, and ultimately transform, their approach to child and family well-being. That is beginning to change.

More and more, the voices of young adults who experienced foster care and the parents and families who overcame challenges and obstacles to stay connected to and raise their children are not only being heard in the discussion, they are being valued. They are moving into leadership positions to help other children and families draw on resilience, hope and support to heal and move forward toward a better future.

This report shares examples of how communities are actively partnering with families to build the foundations of a better approach, how they are using new tools and approaches to better address the needs of families and children, and how they are investing effectively to ensure thriving families, safer children and supportive communities.





*lived  
experien*





Engaging effectively  
with **lived experience**

*ce*



## The growing movement of Thriving Families, Safer Children

Heather Hanson deeply understands true engagement with people who have experienced the child protection system — and when it isn't authentic. Hanson is one of the family voice representatives working with Illuminate Colorado and the Colorado Partnership for Thriving Families to help inform how the system could better serve families.

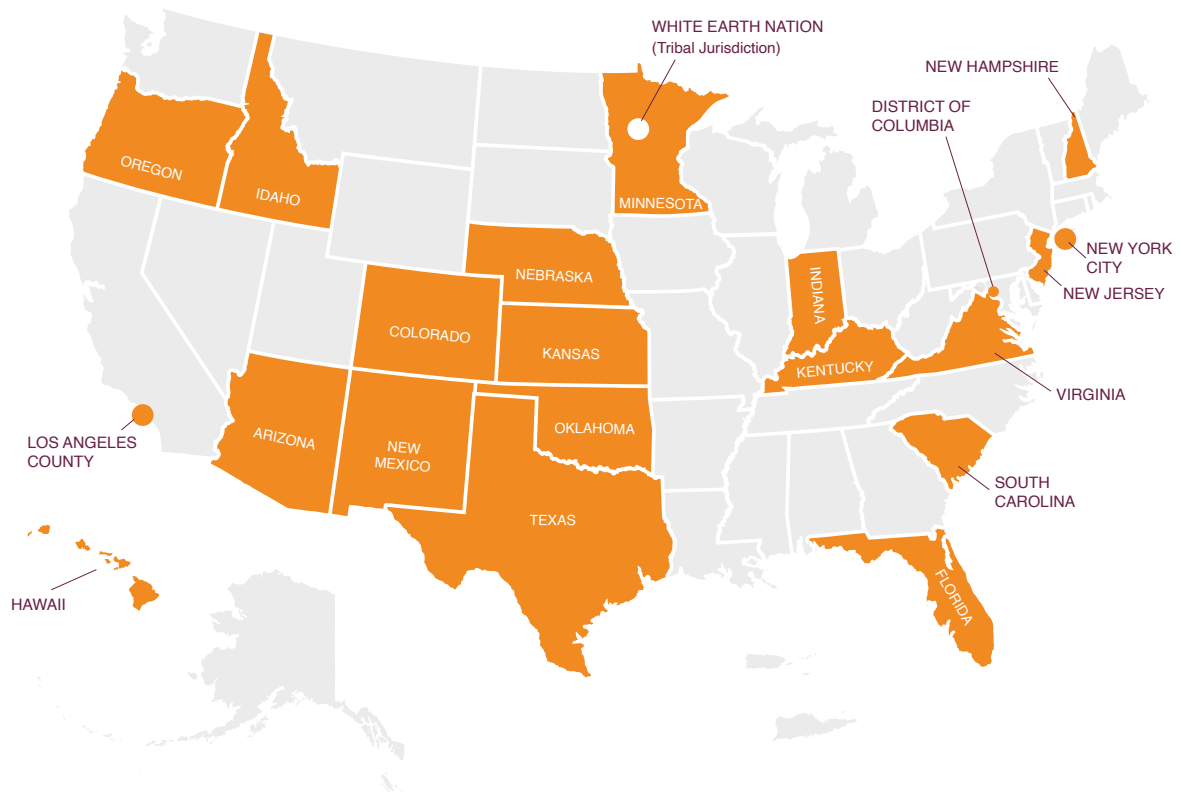
"I have worked in various spaces similar to the Colorado Partnership for Thriving Families," says Hanson, who experienced the child welfare system as a birth parent. "I have been the parent that professionals have refused to listen to. I have been that parent that professionals look in the face and nod their heads, then do nothing .... So to come from that, and walk into a space where Illuminate has opened their arms and hearts to not only hear what we have to say, but to boldly act upon what we have to say — it is a beautiful thing."

This work in Colorado is under the national umbrella of *Thriving Families, Safer Children*, a first-of-its-kind national collaboration across public, private and philanthropic sectors. It is rooted in the belief that youth and families with lived experience in the child welfare system are best positioned to reimagine and then create communities that support families. *Thriving Families, Safer Children* believes that strong families are the greatest asset in keeping children safe. The initiative partners with systems players, community leaders and those with lived experience to promote families' health, well-being and economic stability by promoting strong social support networks, uplifting alternatives to the traumatizing practice of family separation, and inspiring transformational change.

The partnership was founded in 2020 by four national organizations: Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Prevent Child Abuse America and the United States Children's Bureau, as well as a national committee of stakeholders with lived experience. In 2022 the U.S. Centers



## Thriving Families, Safer Children Jurisdictions



for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control joined as a fifth partner. Together with more than 20 site partners across the country, including a sovereign tribal nation, *Thriving Families, Safer Children* has come together to show that it is possible to fundamentally rethink how America supports families to keep children safe and thriving.

By design, the work looks different in each site. The *Thriving Families* effort emphasizes the invaluable expertise of diverse community stakeholders — most importantly, families who have experienced the child welfare system — to help them discern and develop the supports, resources, services and approaches to meet the unique needs of their families and promote the conditions to help them prosper.

Hanson’s work in Colorado is an example of effectively engaging people with lived experiences in the child welfare system. Illuminate Colorado serves as the “backbone” of *Thriving Families* work in that state by organizing and supporting the Colorado Partnership for Thriving Families. They hire family voice representatives like Hanson as consultants to help improve systems. In fact, Illuminate Colorado looks to parents and caregivers who have been in the system as the driving force within coalitions and networks focused on transforming the system.

Hanson shares the importance of making sure family representatives are not only heard, but valued as equals in the work. Too often, earlier efforts to have her voice heard by those working in the system elsewhere left her feeling “tokenized.” For her time and expertise, she was given \$5 Starbucks gift cards.



For kinship caregivers like Gail Engel, who is raising her grandson, child welfare agencies need to shift how they view families. “Agencies just see parents and children as the family, but they need to see the whole family as connected – aunts, uncles, grandparents, too.”

Fikile Ryder, another family voice representative in Colorado, adds that representation should be baked in from the beginning of any work to show that it is valued. “Any organization asking for a grant, there should always be a line [for funding] for a family voice.”

## KINSHIP EXPERTS INFORM TRANSFORMATION

When children and parents become involved with child welfare, the impact often reaches their extended family. In America, more than 2.5 million children are being raised by relatives or close family friends in “kinship placements” without their parents in the home.<sup>2</sup> Research shows that children have better outcomes if they can remain with family, so these placements should be the priority. In many instances, however, these kinship placements are not supported by child welfare systems in the same way that non-relative placements are. Often these families receive no mental or physical health supports that the child may need, and families — frequently grandparents raising grandchildren — don’t receive financial assistance even though they are taking on additional expenses and may be on a fixed income. Even when resources are available, these families are typically left to navigate complicated processes and systems on their own.

Gail Engel found herself in this position when she agreed to raise her grandson. As the Loveland, Colorado, grandmother tried to absorb all the information about programs and supports, she realized she was far from the only person who was struggling to make sense of it all.



Engel, a 2023 Casey Excellence for Children Kinship Caregiver Award recipient, shared her early struggles.

“Oh my gosh, I was overwhelmed with, ‘You need to get APR (Allocation of Parental Responsibilities), you need to get TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). You need to do this,’” she recalls. “And I was like, ‘What is all this stuff? What is all the legal stuff?’” She began researching and sharing with other kinship families she knew to be in a similar position. From these efforts to share what she’d learned, Engel in 2015 founded Grand Family Coalition Inc., a nonprofit designed to create a community of peer support and connection to resources for grandparents and kinship care providers.

But Engel will be the first to tell you that while peer support is important, it’s not enough on its own. “Families need to have legislators listen to us, and listen to our stories, and make it better,” says Engel, who has testified at the local, state and federal level to inform policymakers.

People like Engel, people who have lived with the impacts of the systems in place, are best positioned to inform those systems on how they can better serve kinship families and the children they’re raising.

Learn more about Gail Engel and her work at [casey.org/ceca](https://casey.org/ceca).

To learn more about effectively engaging people with lived experience,  
visit [casey.org/ending-need-for-group-placements](https://casey.org/ending-need-for-group-placements).





TECORIA JONES

CASEY EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN AWARD HONOREE

“What I love about this *Thriving Families, Safer Children* work is the fact that there are government agencies and philanthropic agencies who are committed to promoting the value, promoting the importance and promoting the expertise of lived experience that have been involved in systems,” says Tecoria Jones, a lived experience national partner who served as an advisory board member for the state lead team on *Thriving Families* in South Carolina. She is also the 2023 Casey Excellence for Children Birth Mother Award recipient. “We are not just changing the way we have done things – we are doing things differently.”

*Thriving Families, Safer Children* “is taking that value of lived experience and it is giving it its true belonging, it’s giving it a place .... We build these things as agencies, we know it inside-out. But when we come to lived expertise, they know it outside-in .... If you are not considering the ‘outside in,’ 75% of what you are doing is for nothing. The other 25% is for your reports.

“We give expertise belonging, not opportunity; we give expertise belonging, and that’s what *Thriving Families, Safer Children* is promoting. They are finding people like me to make those connections and help folks see that there is nowhere else you are going to get this. There is nowhere else you’re going to get the life experiences of Tecoria Jones.”

Learn more about Tecoria Jones and her work at [casey.org/ceca](https://casey.org/ceca).

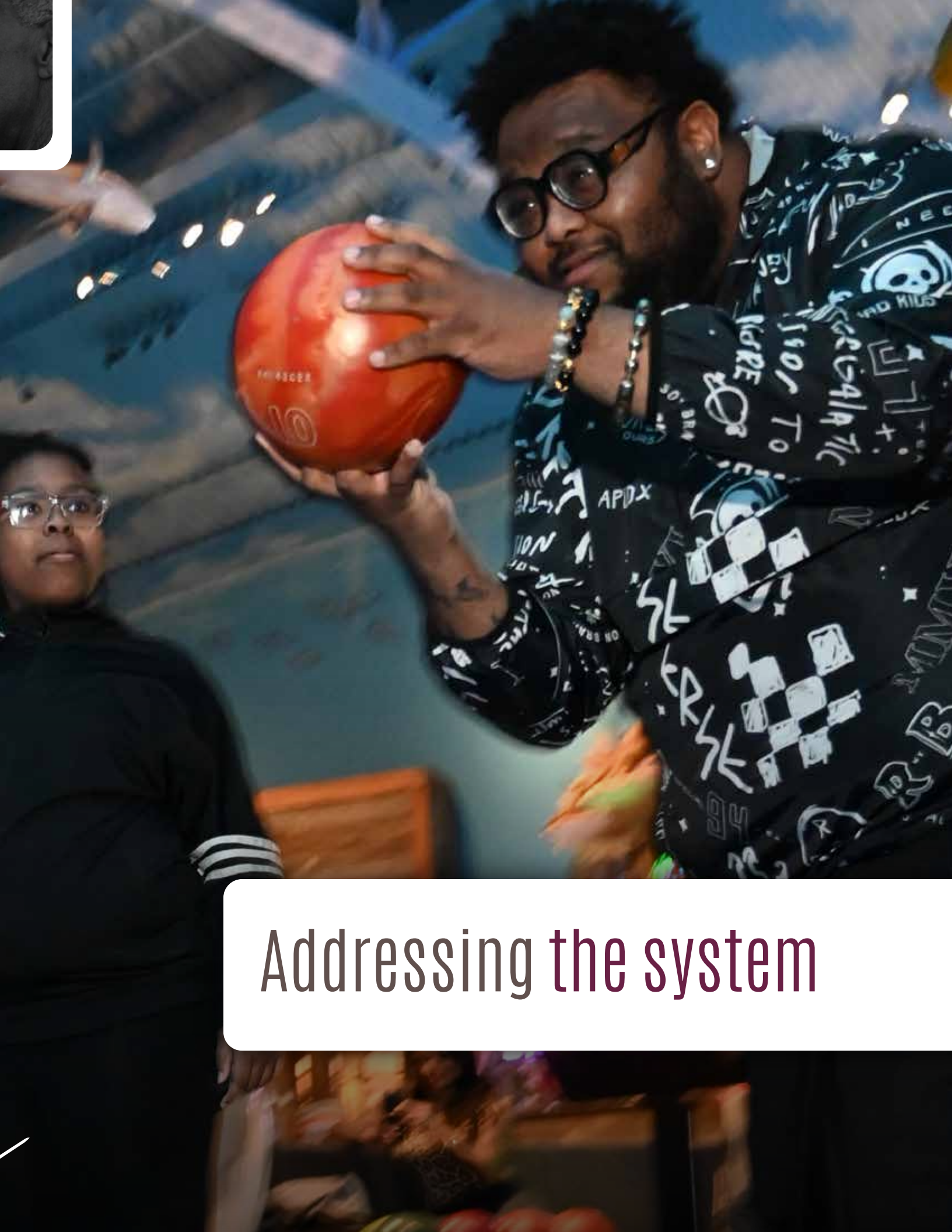
*Voices  
of hope*





*family  
supports*





# Addressing the system

# Ensuring children and families get the support they need

People who have experienced the child protection system will tell us what they and their communities need, if we are willing to listen. Once we have heard them, how do we use the knowledge we've gained to improve or transform how systems respond to families experiencing an overload of stress? In one California community, people are working to meet the needs of families and children by creating new pathways for community support before a child protection agency ever gets involved.

## SUPPORTING STABILITY THROUGH SCHOOLS

The Chula Vista Elementary School District (CVESD) lies along the California border with Mexico and is the largest K-6 school district in the state. About 30,000 students are enrolled in Chula Vista's 50 schools, with an increasing number enrolled in the border community of South Bay. The district serves both U.S. and non-U.S. residents, which presents unique needs and challenges culturally, linguistically and socioeconomically.

Nearly three-quarters of the students are Latino. About 45% of students receive free and reduced-price lunch, and 65% are non-native English speakers. A large percentage are in families experiencing homelessness and qualify to be designated under the federal McKinney-Vento Act, which provides rights and services that ensure these youth have a full and equal opportunity to succeed in school.

Leticia Enriquez, former lead district social worker for Chula Vista, was in search of best practices to integrate a trauma-informed lens to support students and their families who have experienced adversity. This trauma-informed approach recognized that all school staff, not just social workers,



Chula Vista Elementary School District's work to support children and families is rooted in efforts to provide trauma-informed counseling services. Now, in addition to providing counseling, the district has a team of social workers that can refer families to appropriate resources or offer necessities such as clothes, food and school supplies.







needed to consider what was going on in students' lives that might impact their school attendance, behavior and academic achievement, among other issues. Enriquez connected with Casey Family Programs' education liaison to build and grow this work.

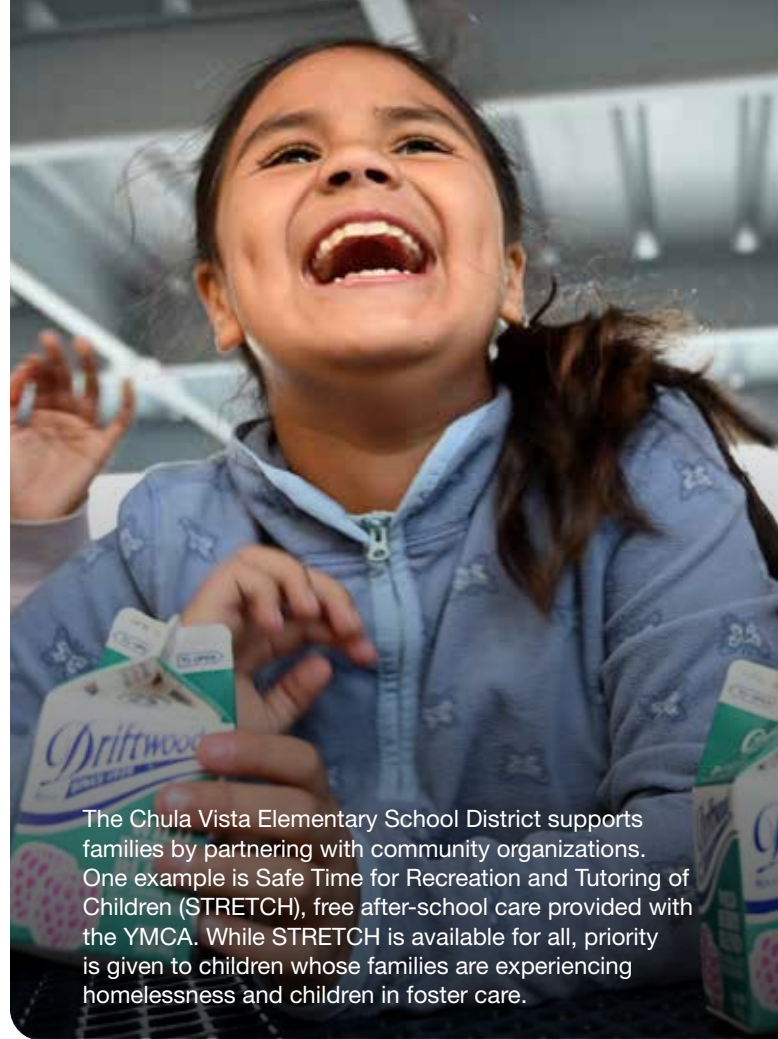
This trauma and healing practice partnership was established between Casey's San Diego Field Office and the Chula Vista Elementary School District to develop a more trauma-informed support staff, personalized engagement with families in collaboration with community stakeholders, as well as to create a teaching and learning environment that is responsive to the unique needs of all students, specifically those whose lives have been impacted by foster care.

Initially, their work focused on students in foster care. But in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic their programming expanded.

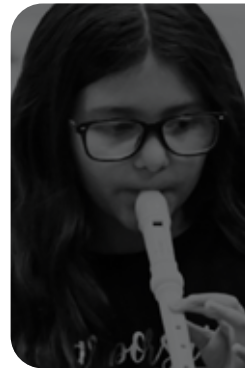
"During the pandemic, what we found was that many of our students experiencing homelessness were nowhere to be found. We were essentially losing them," Enriquez says.

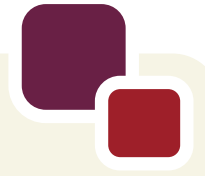
So they adjusted to this new need, broadening their efforts to include McKinney-Vento designated families, doing what they could to help keep those students from entering foster care in the first place – by opening doors to supports and services that build on the resilience that all families possess.

Chula Vista asked parents what they needed, then gathered additional resources and expanded partnerships with community-based organizations so families can better access after-school care, tutoring, school supplies, food gift cards, hotel vouchers, a safe place to stay and much more.



The Chula Vista Elementary School District supports families by partnering with community organizations. One example is Safe Time for Recreation and Tutoring of Children (STRETCH), free after-school care provided with the YMCA. While STRETCH is available for all, priority is given to children whose families are experiencing homelessness and children in foster care.





We were able to make really cool connections. It was another touch point to follow up with parents and say, ‘We’ve got programming that supports families based on the input you gave us.’

LETICIA ENRIQUEZ  
FORMER LEAD DISTRICT SOCIAL WORKER  
CHULA VISTA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DISTRICT

“We were able to make really cool connections,” Enriquez says. “It was another touch point to follow up with parents and say, ‘We’ve got programming that supports families based on the input you gave us.’”

Stable housing is one of the greatest needs of CVESD’s families. To help meet that need, the district partnered with the San Diego County Office of Education in a program called Project Rest, which provides temporary housing.

“If a student says, ‘I don’t have anywhere to stay tonight,’ or ‘It’s not safe for me to stay where I am at,’ we’re able to get them a few nights in a hotel nearby the schools. That’s been essential,” Enriquez says.

Another way CVESD responds to families’ needs is through programming such as child care offerings outside of school hours. Along with after-school care, the district hosts “camps” during spring and summer breaks so that parents can be assured their children are safe and engaged while they work, look for a job or handle other responsibilities.

The district is seeing change: more students stay in school, fewer experience disciplinary actions, and students demonstrate higher academic achievement across the district.

This partnership continues to expand and involves the community. In late 2022, the district applied for and received a California Community Schools Implementation Grant to improve student outcomes. The vision is to build a community





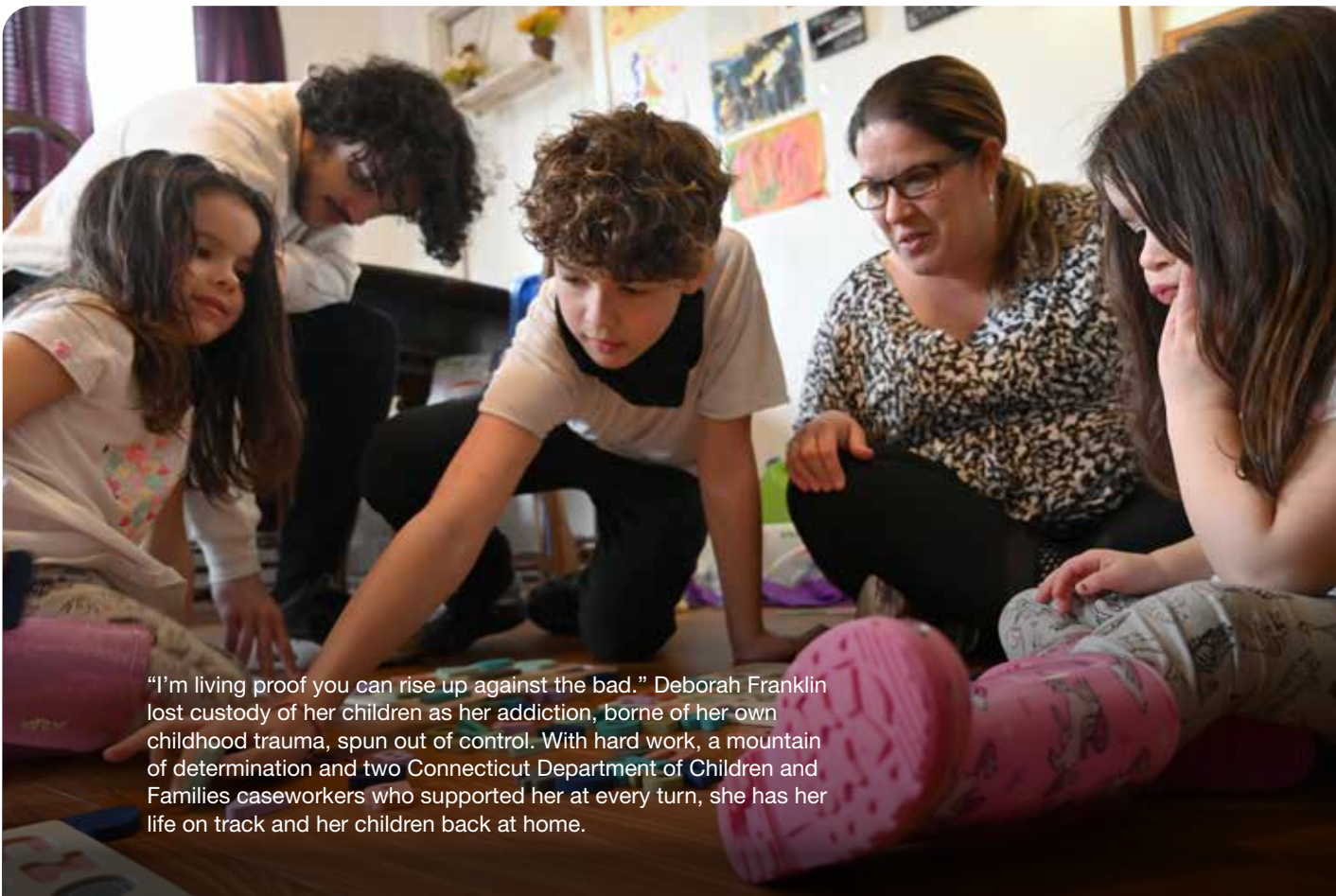
hub to serve the two designated schools with the highest foster care and McKinney-Vento population. This hub would be an additional safe and trauma-informed place where families can gather to experience culturally responsive, needs-driven programming and services that support family wellness and student success.

## CREATING COMMUNITY PATHWAYS

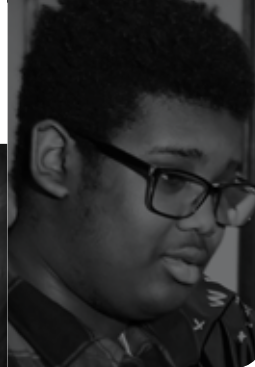
In Connecticut, the state has taken a comprehensive approach to safely reducing the need for foster care. It has created “community pathways” to redirect families struggling under the weight of financial, health and other external stresses away from the child protection system and toward concrete supports that strengthen families and keep them together. The large volume of reports to child protection hotlines each year that are screened out, unsubstantiated or include only allegations of neglect suggests that many families may benefit from supports that don’t involve the formal child protection system. Subjecting families to unnecessary investigations is traumatic for children and families, inappropriately utilizes public resources and disproportionately affects families of color.<sup>3</sup>

Community pathways can prevent much of this trauma. Connecticut’s “no wrong door” approach coordinates with an array of providers, aiming to help families get the services they need regardless of funding source.

Safely reducing the number of children coming into care is not only a function of increasing supports for families and communities. Sometimes the policies or practices of an agency also must be addressed.



“I’m living proof you can rise up against the bad.” Deborah Franklin lost custody of her children as her addiction, borne of her own childhood trauma, spun out of control. With hard work, a mountain of determination and two Connecticut Department of Children and Families caseworkers who supported her at every turn, she has her life on track and her children back at home.



As Tai Thergood worked to reunify with his children, a key to success was the Family Re-Entry Fatherhood Program, an in-home, DCF-funded service to strengthen father-child bonds. He also was given tools that taught him to be his own advocate: “I was given the opportunity to showcase myself.”


Connecticut’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) realized that as well. DCF recently exited from a decades-long consent decree after reshaping and refocusing their systems. A large part of that improvement was in addressing the overrepresentation of children of color, something that pervades many child welfare systems across the nation.

Commissioner Vannessa Dorantes initiated a number of moves to tackle this issue. Among them was to challenge leaders across the agency to address the issues leading to overrepresentation and other systemic barriers that families face without trying to “boil the ocean,” as Dorantes puts it. This encourages leaders in developing strategies within their sphere of influence, because no one idea will single-handedly mitigate inequality.

“How do you work within the system that you’re currently in, at the same time that you’re trying to evolve it? I think it has to be intentional, and it has to be strategic, and it has to be data-driven,” Dorantes says.

One agency leader suggested disaggregating its “considered removal” data. Connecticut DCF schedules meetings to determine actions on child welfare cases where they consider removing a child from a home. What they found when examining their data had a big impact:

- Overall, DCF avoided removal roughly 40% of the time because they were able to use that meeting to mitigate the safety factors that sparked the investigation.
- However, disaggregating the data showed them that some Black families were less likely to have their “considered removal” meeting before the child was removed. Thus, the agency identified additional interventions it needed to put in place to ensure that all families were treated the same.



Families can really build momentum, and can build passion, and can use their own personal experiences, and where we feel like there's a lot of magic is our ability to bring those together.

JADE WOODARD  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
ILLUMINATE COLORADO

## DATA SHARPENS FOCUS

Similar to Connecticut's DCF, Illuminate Colorado also used data to learn where to focus its prevention efforts to reduce the number of children coming into foster care.

"We've done a lot of data in Colorado around, 'Where do we see our biggest involvement in child welfare? Where do we see our biggest child fatalities?'" said Jade Woodard, executive director for Illuminate Colorado. "And it is far and away the 0- to 1-year-old timeframe." With this information, they knew they wanted to prevent tragic outcomes related to abuse and neglect, and they wanted to shift how families with babies interacted with the child welfare system.

So the organization partnered with Family Connects International to create a Colorado chapter, Family Connects Colorado. This free service, available to all families in the two counties where it launched in fall 2022, provides a registered nurse to visit families three weeks after the birth of a child.

While a checkup for Baby and safe sleep tips are great to help families start off on the right foot, the visits offer much more. Family Connects provides services for the entire family, including health checks for parents, family planning advice, scheduling doctor's appointments and information about childcare options. The support is holistic and intentionally designed to give families tools to experience well-being. Two more Family Connects chapters were scheduled to launch in spring 2023.

Just like in their other work, Illuminate Colorado included the perspective of families with lived experience. "Families can really build momentum, and can build passion, and can use their own personal experiences, and where we feel like there's a lot of magic is our ability to bring those together," Woodard said.



# What the data tells us

## A GROWING RETURN ON OUR INVESTMENT

At Casey Family Programs, we believe that it is important to use data at all levels to inform our understanding of how families and children are doing and to highlight the most promising areas for improving outcomes today and into the future.

The most recent national child welfare data tells an encouraging story of progress in how far communities have come since 2005 in safely reducing the need for foster care. It also highlights the continued need to address the systemic barriers that have hindered American Indian/Alaska Native families and other families of color.

About 110,000 fewer children were living in foster care in 2021 than in 2005, the year that Casey Family Programs released its call-to-action report, *2020: A Strategy for America's Children*. That is a nearly 23% safe decrease in the need for foster care.

As our 2022 report, *Investing in Equity: Sustaining Hope for Children and Families*, highlighted, progress has been made in addressing the overrepresentation of Black families in child welfare, but more work is needed.

American Indian/Alaska Native children continue to be significantly overrepresented in the foster care system.

Meanwhile, the landmark Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 is being considered by the U.S. Supreme Court at the time of this writing, a decision that could impact the lives of countless Native American children and families. The act's focus on the importance of keeping children connected to their families, communities and culture — and the efforts required to do so — represents what has come to be seen as the gold standard of care for all children and families.



## CHILDREN IN CARE NATIONALLY

Under age 18 on 09/30 of each fiscal year, rounded to the nearest 1,000

# 110,000

more children have  
remained safely at home  
in 2021 compared to 2005

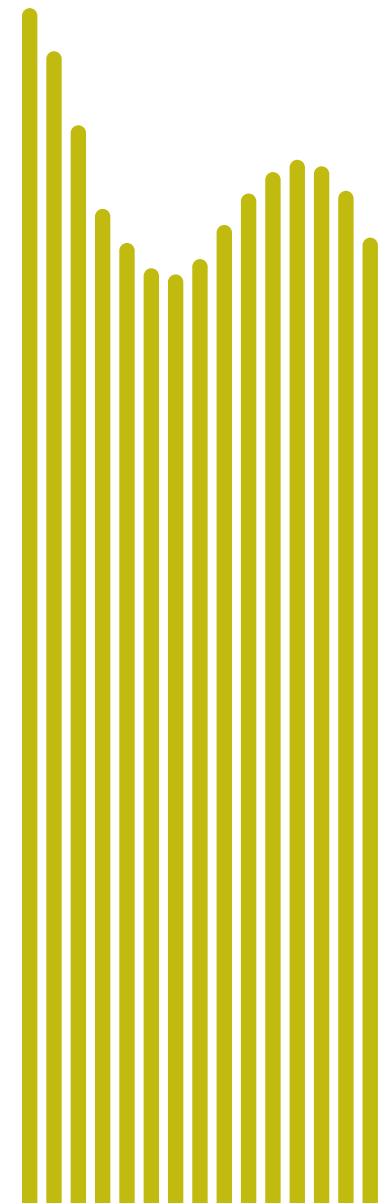
2005

487,000

Since 2005 there has  
been a **23% decrease**  
of children in out-of-home  
care nationally

2021

377,000



2006 - 2020

AS MUCH AS

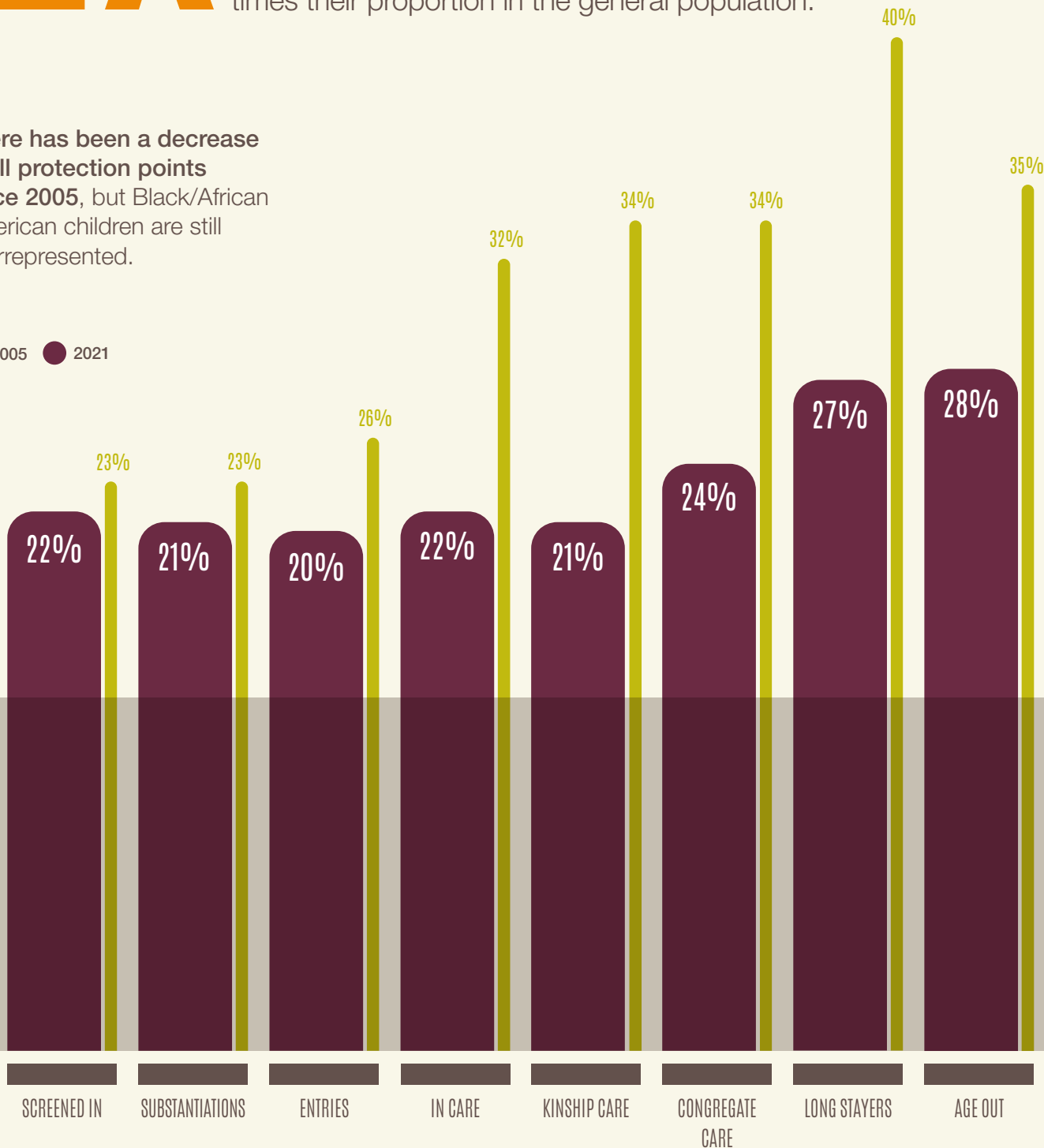
2X MORE

There was an overrepresentation of **Black/African American children** at every protection point in the child welfare system ranging from 1.4 times to 2.0 times their proportion in the general population.

There has been a decrease in all protection points since 2005, but Black/African American children are still overrepresented.

2005 2021

GENERAL  
POPULATION  
14%



# What is the rate of **children in care?**

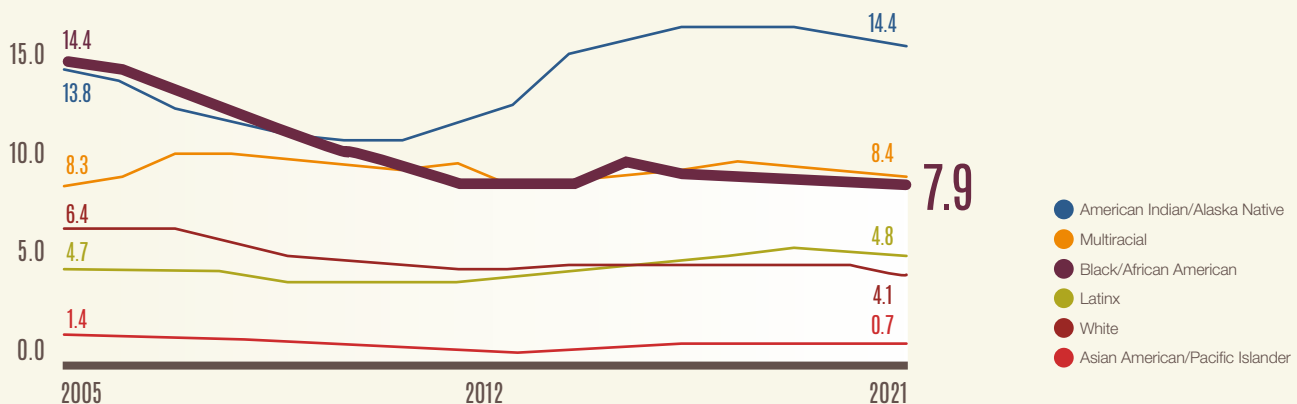
2005  
14.4

1 out of every 125 children  
who identify as **Black/African  
American** are in foster care at  
any given point in time.

2021  
7.9

## How do they compare with other ethnicities

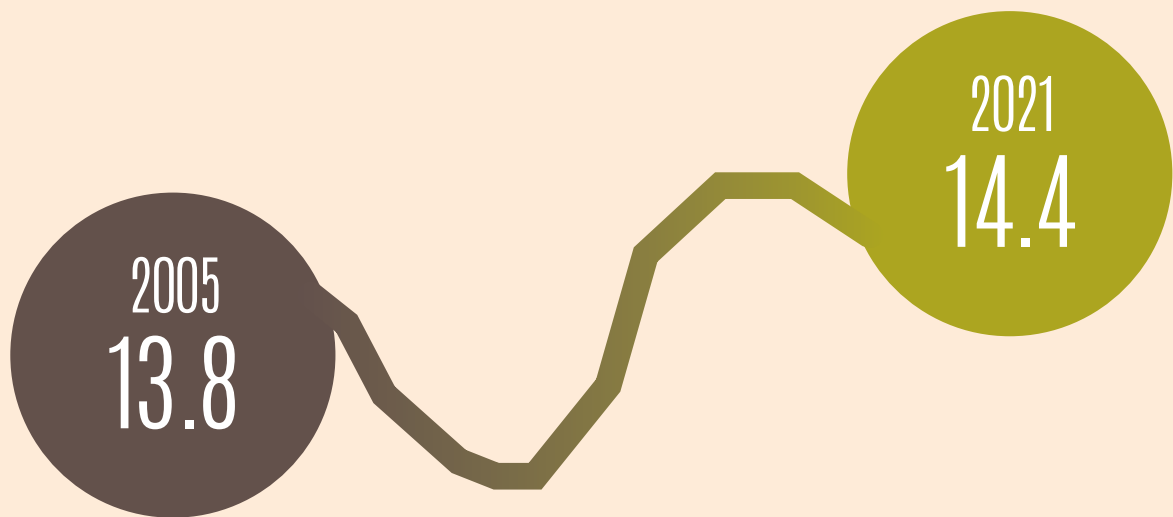
(ages < 18; per 1,000 children in population; unknown race/ethnicity excluded)





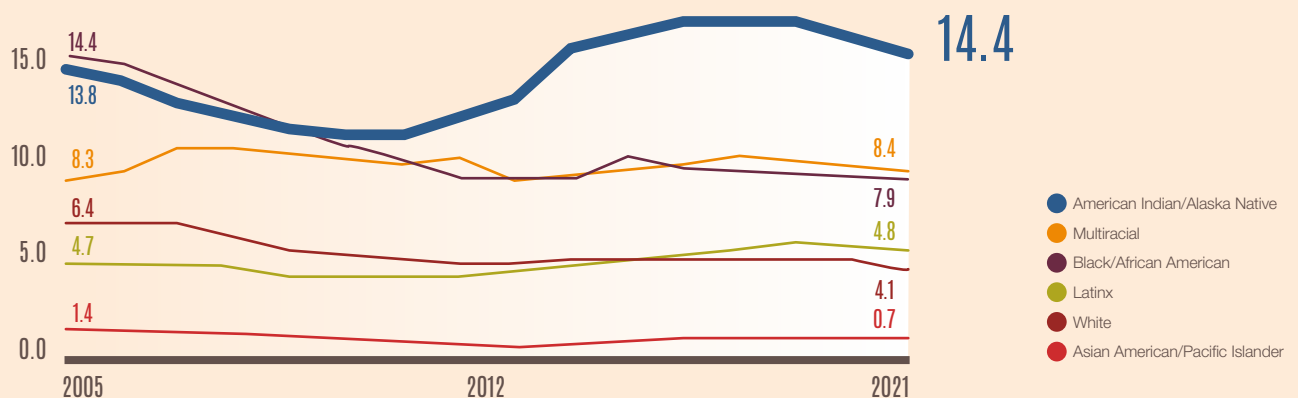
# What is the rate of **children** in care?

7 out of every 500 children who identify as **American Indian/Alaska Native** are in foster care at any given point in time.



## How do they compare with other ethnicities

(ages < 18; per 1,000 children in population; unknown race/ethnicity excluded)



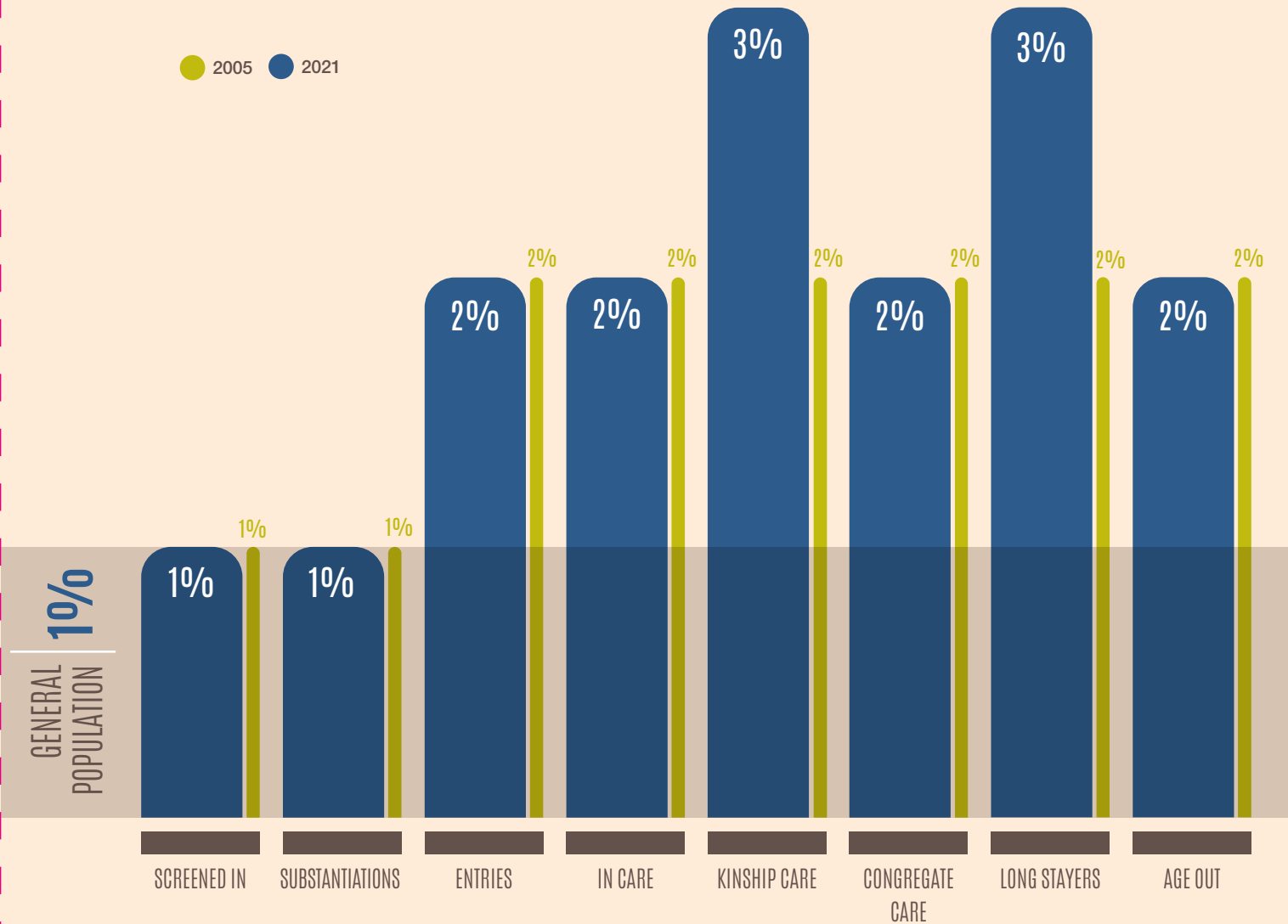
AS MUCH AS

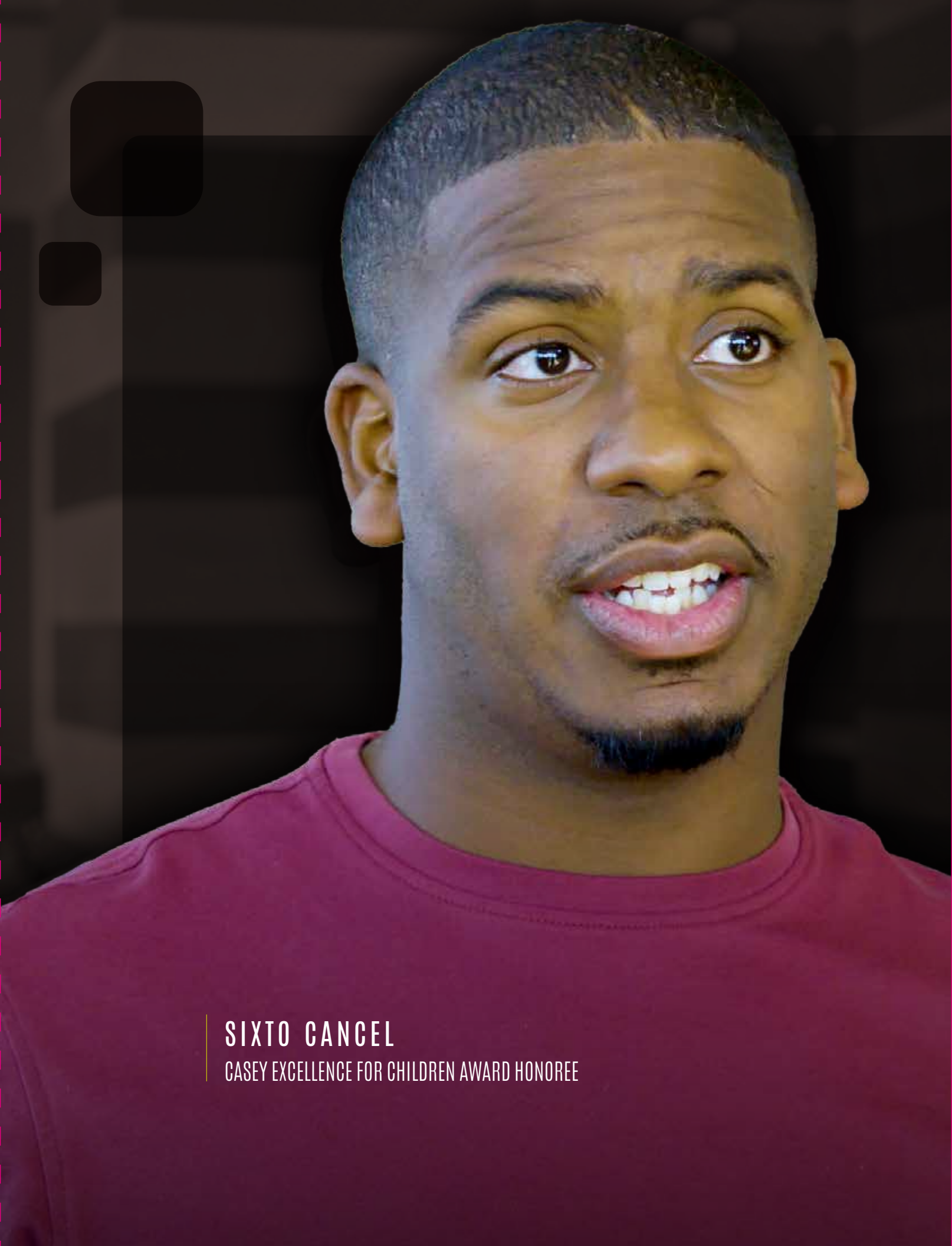
3X MORE

There was an overrepresentation of **American Indian/Alaska Native children** at crucial protection points in the child welfare system ranging from 1.2 times to 3.0 times their proportion in the general population.

There has been no significant decrease in crucial protection points since 2005 and American Indian/Alaska Native children continue to be overrepresented.

● 2005 ● 2021





**SIXTO CANCEL**

CASEY EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN AWARD HONOREE



“One person frames your life before a court, and a couple of people decide where you live,” says Sixto Cancel, an alumni of the foster care system and recipient of a 2023 Casey Excellence for Children Award. Cancel’s own experiences of just how little say he had in his own future — and how that made him feel — have made him one of the leading voices in the movement to include and authentically engage with those with lived experience when working on efforts to reform or improve the foster care system.

Cancel, founder and CEO of Think of Us, entered foster care when he was 11 months old, and after a failed adoption, reentered the system at age 15. Based in Washington, D.C., Think of Us is a nonprofit research and design lab with a goal to fundamentally change how the child welfare system works. They work with government agencies, lawmakers, service providers, advocates and foundations to drive novel, scalable solutions at the federal, state and local levels.

Several years after aging out of the system, Cancel attended a family reunion and discovered that four of his aunts and uncles were foster and adoptive parents. He shared in a New York Times article: “I pulled out my phone and searched the distance between my aunt’s home and where I grew up: 58 miles .... But the system never thought to find my family.”

Cancel is a strong, national voice for change speaking on behalf of those with lived experience in the child welfare system.

Learn more about Sixto Cancel and his work at [casey.org/ceca](https://casey.org/ceca).

# Voices of hope




family  
well-being





Investing in families





Building on work that they were already doing to support families and keep children safely at home, Washington, D.C.'s Child and Family Services Agency leveraged funds from the Family First Prevention Services Act to expand community-driven supportive services and resources.

## Leveraging Family First for systems transformation

February 9, 2023, marked the five-year anniversary of the Family First Prevention Services Act. In 2018, Family First was enacted with the goal of enhancing support services for families — mental health services, substance abuse treatment, in-home parenting training and family therapy — and of building the capacity of communities to support children and families to ensure that children grow up safely with their families. Among other things, Family First made Title IV-E funds available for child welfare systems to use on an array of approved prevention-focused activities.

In the years since passage, a number of states and jurisdictions have figured out how to draw on those funds for programs that have helped keep children safe and families together without the trauma and disruption of a foster care placement.

### MILESTONES IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

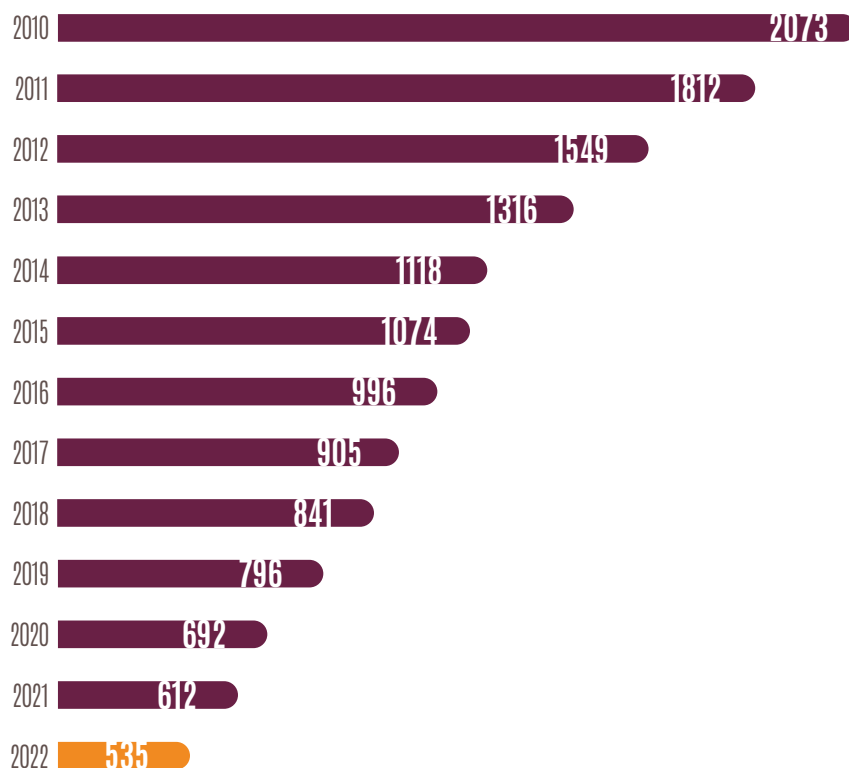
#### **FROM A WAIVER TO *THRIVING FAMILIES, SAFER CHILDREN***

In little more than a decade, the District of Columbia's Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) has safely reduced the number of children in foster care by an impressive 74%, from 2,073 in 2010 to 535 in 2022. While Washington, D.C.'s population has grown 15% in that same timeframe (to 689,545 in 2020), CFSA has worked with community partners, sibling health and human services agencies, and lived experience experts on a holistic and coordinated prevention strategy that has yielded consistent reduction in the number of children in care.

74%  
reduction  
in the  
number of  
children  
and youth  
in foster  
care

## CHILDREN IN DISTRICT OUT-OF-HOME CARE

Point in time: October 1 of each year



Source: District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency

The passage of Family First allowed the District of Columbia to expand work long underway to transform the Child and Family Services Agency, moving away from a focus primarily on foster care to one that draws on the natural resilience of families with effective supports and services.<sup>4</sup> Dating back to 2014, CFSA had a Title IV-E waiver demonstration project in place, which allowed it to use federal dollars more flexibly to enhance services and supports to children and families at various levels of involvement with the child welfare system, and to test its theory that these supports would allow more children to remain safely and stably in their homes. Evaluations showed that families did better in these waiver programs, but they served a small set of families and didn't reach their enrollment targets. Under Family First, CFSA launched a Family First Prevention Work Group with a cross-sector of government and community members. The charge was clear: develop a citywide strategy to strengthen and stabilize families.



Leaders need to allocate the time to put this work first. Be on the ground and present from the start. You can't just show up when it's done and say, 'Hooray' when it's finished. **In order for everyone to be invested in it and for it to be successful, they need to see that you've bought in from the beginning.**

ROBERT L. MATTHEWS  
DIRECTOR, DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES AGENCY

The District of Columbia municipal government, led by Mayor Muriel Bowser, embraced this family-strengthening vision and enhanced it with a companion initiative: Families First DC, including a \$4.75 million budget allocation for Family Success Centers in 2020. These centers offer families services and support, such as clothing, diapers, food, after-school programs and education.

**To learn more about Family Success Centers, visit [casey.org/fsc-community-focus](https://casey.org/fsc-community-focus).**

This transformative work naturally fed into a new milestone in 2021, when CFSA became a partner site in the *Thriving Families, Safer Children* effort. Through *Thriving Families*, CFSA is engaging families to find out what they feel a child well-being system should look like.

CFSA Director Robert L. Matthews describes the evolution from waiver project to *Thriving Families* by sharing an example of helping a parent with substance use disorder. Initially, the parent could have help tackling their addiction, while also getting support with and education on raising their child. With *Thriving Families*, that same parent should then be able to share how the child welfare system could be improved and what it should look like.

Empowering families who have experienced the system was intentional in this latest effort. In fact, these parents lead all three subcommittees that inform the work.

"We put at the forefront, not only their voice – their voice hasn't been missed at the table – but also having some leadership and decision-making ability," Matthews says.





The CFSA subcommittees cover three key areas:

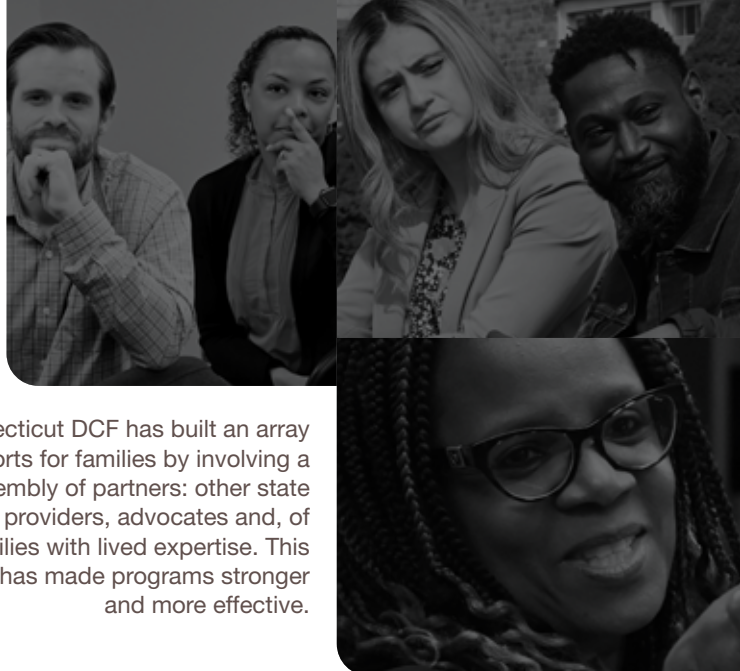
- Community response and warmline: This informs pathways of support for families experiencing overwhelming stresses – pathways that can keep them from being involved in the child protection system. For example, if a child shows up in school in the same clothes for days, asks for more snacks or falls asleep in class, a “warmline” call could steer the family to resources rather than having a hotline call result in an intrusive investigation.
- Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging: “We already know Black and brown children are overly represented in foster care,” Matthews says. “The question we have to answer is how is that related to decision points? What is our data showing?”
- Impact: As interventions from the first subcommittee are implemented, they need to be evaluated. How effective are they?

Matthews emphasizes that this work must be the highest priority and can’t be an afterthought.

“Leaders need to allocate the time to put this work first,” he says. “Be on the ground and present from the start. You can’t just show up when it’s done and say, ‘Hooray’ when it’s finished. In order for everyone to be invested in it and for it to be successful, they need to see that you’ve bought in from the beginning.”

Before becoming a minister, the Rev. John Davis says he was not always there for his children. Now, in addition to being a present father and grandfather and co-founding Keep It Moving Empowerment Ministries with his wife, Rochelle, he uses his life experiences to inform work to set up “warmlines,” a proactive pathway for families and community members to access critical support.





Connecticut DCF has built an array of supports for families by involving a diverse assembly of partners: other state agencies, providers, advocates and, of course, families with lived expertise. This approach has made programs stronger and more effective.

## PUTTING FAMILIES FIRST IN CONNECTICUT

When Connecticut DCF applied for Family First funding, they did so in partnership with other areas of state government. Indeed, Connecticut's submitted plan stated, "This prevention plan is Connecticut's plan — not solely the child welfare agency's plan — designed to enhance the lives of all of Connecticut's children, youth, and families."

Connecticut saw Family First as a tool, as part of their overall prevention strategy, to build upon an existing infrastructure and its already diverse array of services and evidence-based programs. These programs had a goal of preventing maltreatment and keeping children from entering foster care. Connecticut sought to expand its collaborative child well-being system through enhanced focus on prevention and early intervention, and to use Title IV-E funds available via Family First.

As part of its Family First Prevention Plan, Connecticut is creating a new centralized place for families to go or be referred when they need support.<sup>5</sup> This Care Management Entity (CME) will be empowered to connect families to services without any direct contact with the child welfare agency (unless the CME determines a situation may involve child maltreatment).

To develop this plan, the state tapped the expertise of more than 400 unique workgroup members that included model developers, sibling state agencies, providers, advocates, and of course, families with lived experience. They assessed services contained in Title IV-E's Prevention Services Clearinghouse — meaning they were eligible for federal reimbursement — and measured them against what families said they needed and the resources and capacity of the agencies involved. The state also plans to continue to invest in programs and services, even if they are not eligible for federal reimbursement, to meet families' needs.



## Building hope for a thriving future

More and more, families are telling us what they need to thrive, and leaders are listening. The examples of transformation in this report, spanning coast to coast, show the value of effectively engaging people with lived experience; using what they've told us they need to support families earlier; and making use of funding tools to effectively invest in families and communities.

We invite you to connect with us to learn more. Together we can ensure thriving families, safer children and supportive communities.



## ABOUT CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS

Casey Family Programs works in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations to influence long-lasting improvements to the safety and success of children, families and the communities where they live. We learn from and collaborate with communities at local, state, tribal and national levels to nurture the safety and success of every child.

### Consulting

We offer ongoing strategic consultation, technical assistance, data analysis and independent research and evaluation at no cost to child welfare systems, policymakers, courts and tribes across America to support long-lasting improvements that safely reduce the need for foster care. We partner with communities across our nation to enhance partnerships, improve practice and policy, and ensure that these improvements will endure over time.

of effective and culturally responsive child welfare services. Strong sovereign tribal nations keep children healthy, safe and connected with their families, relatives, tribal communities and cultures. We currently have agreements with 18 tribes that honor tribal sovereignty and support nation-building efforts, help build partnerships with the broader child welfare profession and assist in compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act. We share what we have learned with state, tribal and county child welfare systems, private providers and community partners — working with them to achieve similar results.

### Direct services

Casey Family Programs' Child and Family Services team provides services — including prevention, foster care, family reunification, young adult transition, kinship and permanency work — to more than 1,000 children and families each year. We operate nine field offices in five states — Arizona, California, Idaho, Texas and Washington — and work in urban, suburban and rural communities.

We draw on evidence gained from research-informed and promising practices, as well as our five decades of front-line child welfare experience, to provide a range of multidisciplinary services to children, youth, young adults and families.

Casey Family Programs partners with tribes and American Indian/Alaska Native communities to support their development

### Public policy

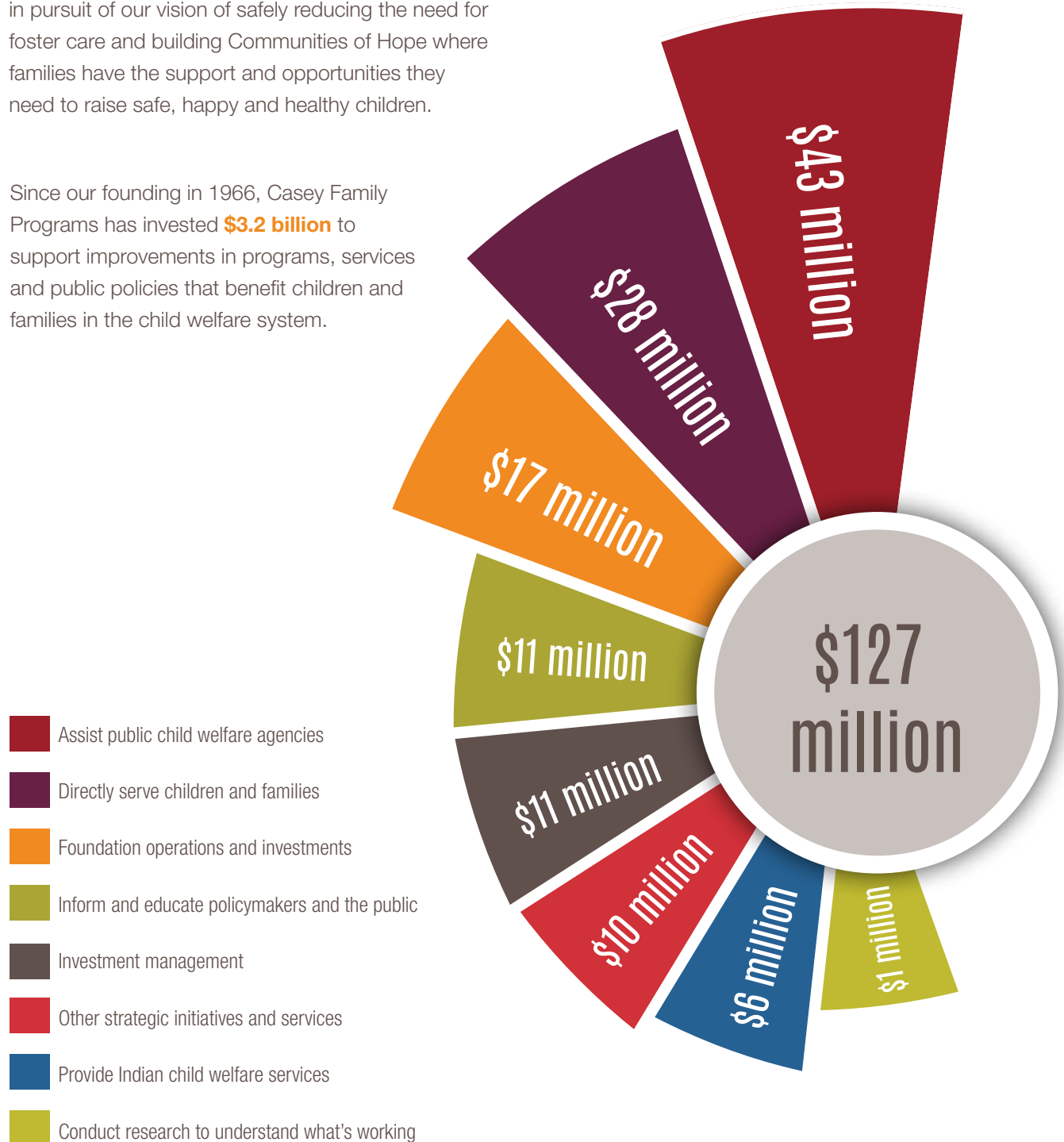
We also support federal, state, tribal and local governments by providing comprehensive, nonpartisan child welfare information and education driven by data and based on evidence of what works best to improve the lives of children and families. We draw on our direct services and consulting work to help align and improve state and federal child welfare policies, allowing communities to focus on preventing abuse and neglect and improving outcomes for children in foster care.

We share what we have learned with public child welfare and tribal child welfare systems, private providers and other community partners to inform policy. We are committed to supporting federal child welfare policy changes that will provide every state with the ability to invest existing resources in the most effective strategies to safely reduce the need for foster care, strengthen families and improve the safety and success of all children.

## At the end of 2022, Casey Family Programs' assets totaled **\$2.5 billion**.

In 2022, Casey Family Programs spent \$127 million in pursuit of our vision of safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope where families have the support and opportunities they need to raise safe, happy and healthy children.

Since our founding in 1966, Casey Family Programs has invested **\$3.2 billion** to support improvements in programs, services and public policies that benefit children and families in the child welfare system.



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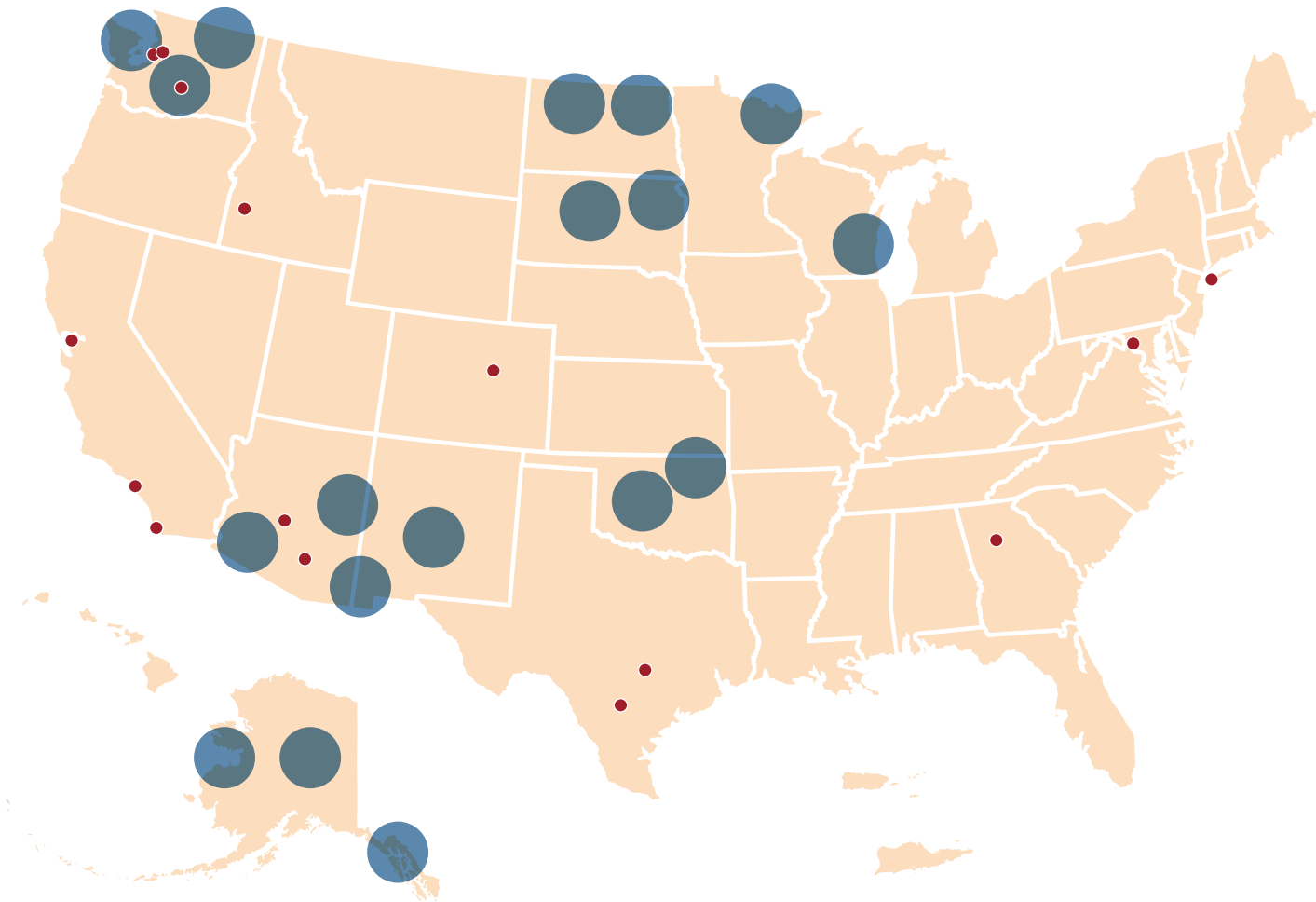


# Casey Family Programs' Influence

Office  
locations

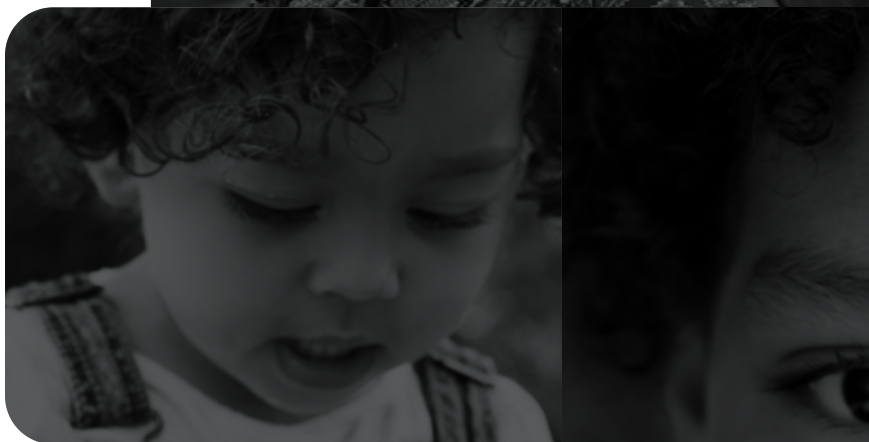
State and  
territory  
agreements

Tribal  
agreements

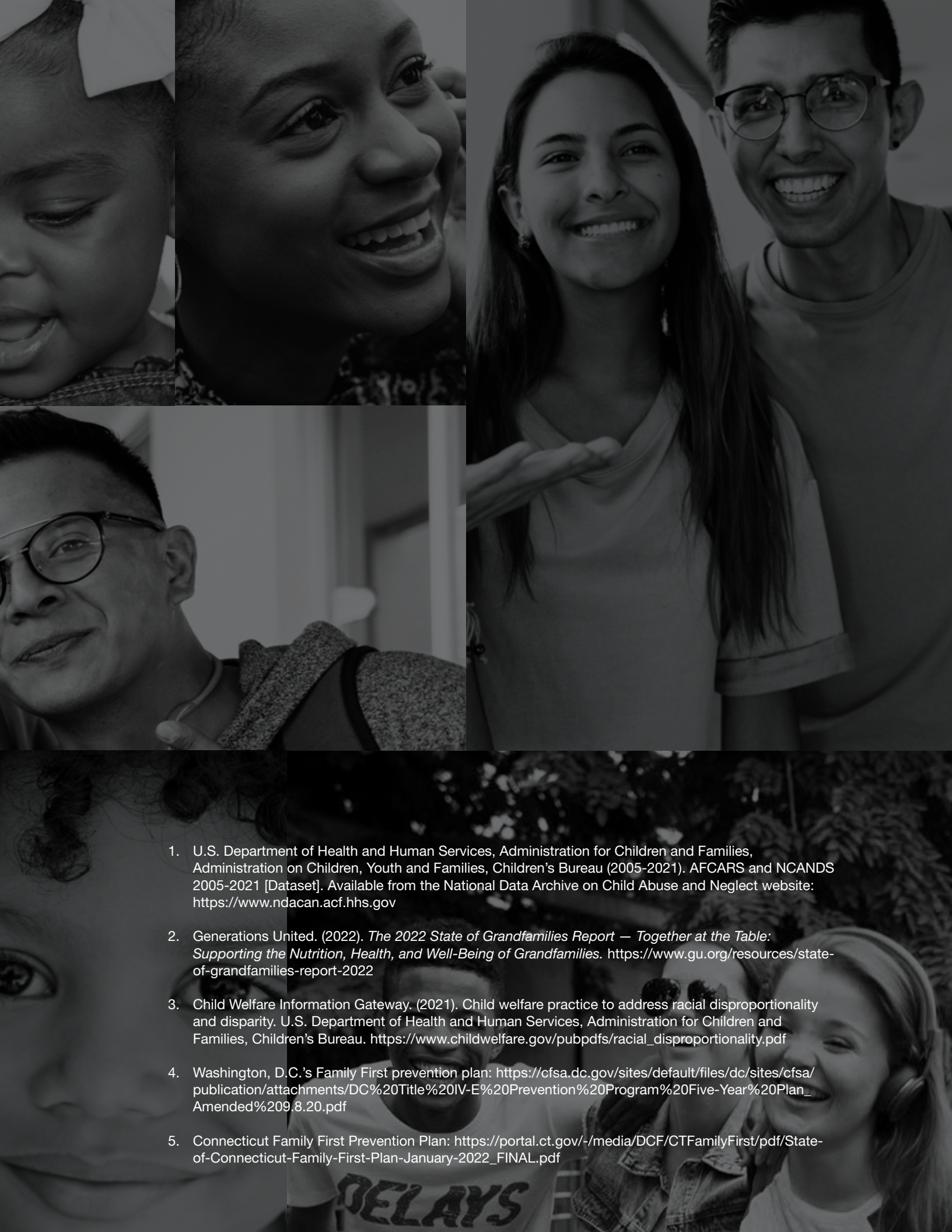


“The destiny  
of all of us  
is, to a large  
extent, in the  
keeping of  
each of us.

-JIM CASEY







1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau (2005-2021). AFCARS and NCANDS 2005-2021 [Dataset]. Available from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect website: <https://www.ndacan.acf.hhs.gov>
2. Generations United. (2022). *The 2022 State of Grandfamilies Report — Together at the Table: Supporting the Nutrition, Health, and Well-Being of Grandfamilies*. <https://www.gu.org/resources/state-of-grandfamilies-report-2022>
3. Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2021). Child welfare practice to address racial disproportionality and disparity. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/racial\\_disproportionality.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubpdfs/racial_disproportionality.pdf)
4. Washington, D.C.'s Family First prevention plan: [https://cfssa.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cfssa/publication/attachments/DC%20Title%20IV-E%20Prevention%20Program%20Five-Year%20Plan\\_Amended%209.8.20.pdf](https://cfssa.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/cfssa/publication/attachments/DC%20Title%20IV-E%20Prevention%20Program%20Five-Year%20Plan_Amended%209.8.20.pdf)
5. Connecticut Family First Prevention Plan: [https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/CTFamilyFirst/pdf/State-of-Connecticut-Family-First-Plan-January-2022\\_FINAL.pdf](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/DCF/CTFamilyFirst/pdf/State-of-Connecticut-Family-First-Plan-January-2022_FINAL.pdf)





**safe** children | **strong** families | **supportive** communities

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