



April 2024

# How does New Jersey’s child protection agency collaborate to prevent foster care and support family well-being?

This jurisdictional scan was conducted by the [Center for Health Care Strategies](#), in partnership with Casey Family Programs.

The Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS) has identified promising cross-system collaborations that support integrated prevention planning and implementation, and focus increasingly on upstream approaches. Following a document and literature review, CHCS interviewed 46 stakeholders from four states (California, Kentucky, New Jersey, and Ohio) and one tribe (Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community in Arizona), including representatives from child protection agencies, behavioral health, Medicaid, community-based organizations, youth and families with lived expertise, as well as other experts in child and family well-being. These geographically diverse jurisdictions deliver prevention services through a range of collaborative structures.

This document profiles cross-system collaboration efforts in **New Jersey**.<sup>1</sup> For detailed information on the other jurisdictions, see: [California](#), [Kentucky](#), [Ohio](#), and [Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community](#). For an overview of lessons learned across all five of these collaboration efforts, see: [How can child protection agencies collaborate to prevent foster care and support family well-being?](#)

| New Jersey   | 2017  | 2018  | 2019  | 2020  | 2021  |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Children involved in a substantiated maltreatment report | 6,614 | 6,008 | 5,132 | 3,655 | 3,188 |
| Foster care entry rate (per 1,000)                       | 1.9   | 1.8   | 1.4   | 0.9   | 0.8   |
| Children in foster care on Sept. 30                      | 5,946 | 5,526 | 4,430 | 3,788 | 3,188 |
| Children adopted   | 1,106 | 1,054 | 1,162 | 788   | 639   |

Source: <https://cwoutcomes.acf.hhs.gov/cwodatasite/pdf/new%20jersey.html>

## Background and structure

The New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF) is guided by the agency's [strategic plan](#), which aims to expand prevention services and focus on family well-being. To develop and roll out the strategic plan, DCF had steering committees facilitated by the Office of Strategic Development, which works across departmental divisions to ensure service excellence and provide a common framework for implementation.

### Key Facts

**Total child population:** 2.0 million<sup>2</sup>

**Administration by state, county, or tribe:** State

**Family First Plan status:** Submitted (2023)

Several other divisions and offices within DCF focus on services that help prevent involvement with child welfare, including:

- [Family and Community Partnerships](#), which oversees four offices: the Housing, Early Childhood Services, Family Support Services, and Family Preservation and Reunification (which administers much of the state's work on secondary and tertiary prevention, including New Jersey's Family First Plan).
- [The Office of Family Voice](#), which incorporates family and youth voice into policy and practice.
- [Children's System of Care](#), which supports youth and their families with behavioral health needs and intellectual/developmental disabilities across the state, including children and youth involved with child welfare.

DCF led the development of the state's Family First Plan, which underwent a public comment period in 2023. To develop the plan, DCF held listening sessions with hundreds of constituents to identify gaps in prevention services.

## Key initiatives and collaborations

The statutorily required Interdepartmental Planning Group convenes regularly to coordinate across early childhood initiatives serving prenatal to 5-year-old children, and their families. The group includes representatives from DCF and several other state agencies, including those over health, labor, education, human services, and Medicaid. DCF collaborates with those various departments to:

- Implement a hotline, [Connecting NJ](#), for prenatal to age 3 care (Department of Health).
- Expand home visiting through the state's [1115 Demonstration waiver](#) (Medicaid).
- Ensure new federal funding is effectively leveraged and aligned (Department of Education).
- Provide information to caregivers and families on family leave insurance (Department of Labor).

The [NJ Statewide Student Support Services](#) initiative, led by DCF, aims to expand mental health services for youth in schools. Its statewide advisory group includes key education associations, the state education and human services departments, and elected officials. Local advisory groups are encouraged to include representation from schools, families, and community-based organizations as members.

New Jersey's initiative to implement universal home visiting also is guided by an advisory group. This group includes representation from the Governor's Office, the First Lady's Office, the departments of health and human services, the education system, hospital associations, and parents. A local philanthropic foundation financed market research to guide and inform the program, which helped to identify needs and impacted populations.

Across these initiatives, the state aims to develop a clear purpose, strong teaming structures, and plans to roll out the work. The state also seeks to braid and maximize funding, especially to support primary and secondary prevention approaches that often are underfunded.

### Data sharing

DCF collaborates with Rutgers University to make data publicly available through the [NJ Child Data Hub](#). This dashboard primarily includes data and information related to child protection, permanency, and the Children's System of Care. Additionally, the state's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect creates dashboards and develops new mechanisms of sharing data. Moving forward, New Jersey aims to develop additional data capacity for prevention programs and services, including improved tracking of upstream interventions.

### Family and youth engagement

The New Jersey Youth Council, established in 2020 within the Office of Family Voice, includes 24 members. Cross-divisional subcommittees within the council meet at least weekly, and DCF leadership attends regularly. Members of the Youth Council said that DCF has created an environment that values and welcomes youth voice and choice at every level, including in decision-making processes for the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of a range of programs and services — including those related to prevention. The Youth Council was central to the creation of [EnlightenMENT](#), a peer-to-peer mentoring program for youth involved with child welfare. Throughout their two-year term, council members are compensated for their expertise through stipends, and they support recruitment of new members.

The state's Children's System of Care supports and funds Family Support Organizations, which are family run, community-based nonprofits that provide peer support, education, and advocacy to families and caregivers of children with behavioral health needs, substance use challenges, and intellectual/developmental disabilities. They also work with families with youth involved with the juvenile justice system. Each Family Support Organization also supports a youth partnership program with the goal to build leadership capacity and advocacy among youth. Family Support Organizations also provide warmline support, community support groups, and engage in community advocacy and outreach.

Primary prevention services are also provided through New Jersey's network of 59 community-based [Family Success Centers](#), located in each county. These are 'one stop' neighborhood gathering places for any New Jersey resident. Family Success Centers partner with [NJ 211](#), and provide connections to resources, advocacy, and family-friendly activities and educational workshops to strengthen families, their health and well-being.

## Financing

DCF leverages a number of funding streams outside of Family First to support families and ensure a continuum of prevention services. They include: Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting; TANF; Medicaid state plan amendments; 1115 Medicaid waiver; Mental Health Block Grant; Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention grants; federal grants; and state general funds.

DCF's five-year prevention strategy [recognizes the value of upstream approaches](#) to strengthen families, keep children safe, and prevent child welfare involvement. It states: "New Jersey manages multiple additional efforts aimed at removing family stressors, highlights of which include: specialized tax credits for families with children, a \$15 minimum wage by 2024, family leave insurance, various subsidized and supportive housing programs, child care assistance programs, the Cover All Kids Initiative, NJ Transit's 2030 strategic plan, child care assistance programs and expansion of early childhood and pre-k programming."

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<sup>1</sup> Agencies/Organizations interviewed: Department of Children and Families; Division of Family and Community Partnerships; Office of Family Preservation and Reunification; Office of Strategic Development; Youth Council; and Office of Family Voice.

<sup>2</sup> 2021 [Kids Count](#). The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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### Casey Family Programs

Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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