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How do helplines support children and families?

Helplines provide referrals to community and government resources that support parents and other caregivers in raising their children safely and successfully. By connecting children and families to upstream services, helplines can be an effective strategy in efforts to **prevent child welfare system involvement**.¹

Creating the right path to provide support

Child welfare systems currently rely on mandated and voluntary reporters to share suspicions of child maltreatment through calls to a child protection hotline. Many jurisdictions, however, are [examining their hotline data](#) and [re-examining their mandated reporting procedures](#) in order to reduce reports to the hotline when situations do not warrant child welfare assessment, investigation, or involvement. Helplines can provide solutions for families at risk of child welfare involvement, including those experiencing economic stress.

Helplines are intended to be proactive, providing immediate upstream support to families experiencing a crisis or an unmet need, therefore preventing potential child maltreatment down the road. Jurisdictions describe helplines as part of their broader efforts to “narrow the front door” to the child welfare system and offer “no wrong door” for assistance, while at the same time strengthening child and family protective factors.

“We want to narrow the front door so that when calls are coming into the hotline, they really are about maltreatment, and when there is a need for services and supports, families can take a different path.”

— Gail Geohagen-Pratt, Deputy Commissioner, New York State Office of Children and Family Services

Helplines typically are designed to serve all people in a specific geographic area, and therefore can be a universal child maltreatment prevention strategy. For families struggling with food, clothing, housing, or childcare, for example, a referral to services through a helpline may be sufficient to maintain or improve child safety in the home. [Research](#) shows that talking to someone on a parenting helpline also can improve callers' emotional states.

This brief focuses on helplines intended to prevent child welfare system involvement, however some helplines are designed specifically to provide targeted support to families and older youth already involved in the child welfare system.²

Key Resources

The federal Administration on Children and Families (ACF) initiated a [Quality Improvement Center on Helplines and Hotlines](#), administered by [Evident Change](#), the [Children's Trust Fund Alliance](#), and [Social Current](#). The center is designed to help mandated reporters and CPS staff better distinguish between family poverty and child neglect, and more effectively connect families to support. The center will partner with communities already piloting helplines.

The [Bloom Works](#) Prevention Learning Collaborative team summarized research into warmlines in the report: [Understanding warmlines: key features and lessons learned](#).

Impacts of unwarranted calls to the child protection hotline

In FY2023, about [4.4 million reports were made to child protection hotlines](#) (involving approximately 7.8 million children), with just under half of those reports (48%) screened in for further investigation or assessment. Among the children reported to the hotline, an estimated 93% were either screened out for no further action or were investigated but unsubstantiated as victims of child abuse or neglect.³

Child protection hotlines are neither equipped nor designed to effectively deal with the overwhelming number and variety of family conditions presented in the reports they receive. As a result, child protection agencies develop [investigation backlogs](#) and may overextend their scarce resources on screening and investigating reports that do not involve safety issues and ultimately did not warrant CPS intervention. This distracts agencies from their mandate to keep children at high risk of maltreatment safe from harm and those already victims of maltreatment safe from further harm.

Research shows that being the subject of a CPS investigation is [traumatic for children and families](#) and [disproportionately affects families of certain racial and ethnic identities](#).

"We want the warmline to be used as a proactive prevention tool. We want folks to feel brave and not ashamed when they have needs. We want folks to really get in front of their needs, concerns, and issues."

— Sharafdeen Ibraheem, Deputy Director, District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency

Changing the culture around asking for help

Given that [all families experience stress](#) or periods of crisis, helplines can be marketed broadly as relevant for an entire community, increasing their utility as a community strategy for promoting child safety and well-being. A well-crafted marketing strategy can help reduce the stigma and change the culture around seeking family assistance. **New York City** manages a Support Line through its Administration for Children's Services (ACS), the city's child protection agency. "What makes us unique is that families and

community partners are calling ACS not just regarding child welfare investigations, they are calling to get connected to services and resources,” said Maureen Peters, ACS Support Line director.

Variations in helpline approaches

All helplines refer families to services and share a general commitment to prevent child welfare involvement, but they vary in many ways. Some emphasize providing emotional support to families in the moment, while others emphasize equipping mandated reporters with alternatives to a hotline in cases where child safety is not an imminent concern. There also is variation in terms of how helplines are positioned in relationship to a child protection agency, with some operated through the agency (such as in New York City) and others by an independent community entity. Helplines also vary in terms of staffing, technology, and marketing strategies.

Below are brief descriptions of several different helplines, organized by their primary purpose.⁴ For detailed information about the helplines in Washington, D.C., and New York City, see the companion brief: [What are examples of helplines operated by child protection agencies?](#)

Entry point to prevention services and other resources

Washington, D.C.

[211 Warmline](#) began as part of the city’s [Thriving Families, Safer Children](#) initiative. All callers receive service navigation and referral. People who need more intensive assistance receive in-person case management through the city’s Department of Behavioral Health [Community Response Team](#).

New York City

The Administration for Children’s Services staffs a [Support Line](#) for families seeking assistance with issues such as food, housing, childcare, and mental health, connecting families to supports inside and outside the agency.

New York

[HEARS \(Help, Empower, Advocate, Reassure, and Support\) Family Line](#), operated through the state’s Office of Children and Family Services, connects callers to resources throughout New York.

Idaho

[2-1-1 Idaho CareLine](#), housed within the state Department of Health and Welfare, is a statewide community information and referral service that has been developing a **special focus on supporting kinship caregivers** by training two staff members to be experts on kinship care.

Connecticut

The [Community Pathways warm line](#) provides resource and referral support to families with children who are impacted by mental health and substance use disorder concerns. The warmline is part of the state’s [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) (Family First) plan.

Ohio

In 12 counties, callers to 211 or the crisis hotline may be referred to the [Family Success Network](#), which provides family coaches to assist with connections to community services, including financial assistance, money management, parenting support, and family success planning.

Focus on emotional support and well-being

San Francisco

[Safe & Sound TALK Line](#) pairs volunteers with parents for peer support, serving as a front door for service referrals, including intensive case management.

Washington

[Parent Trust Family Help Line](#) is a place for parents in the state of Washington who need someone to listen to them. The helpline provides service referrals and follow-up as needed.

Larimer County, Colo.

[Supported Families, Stronger Community](#), a project initially funded by a five-year federal ACF grant, is now integrated into the county's human services department. Community navigators provide emotional support to families and help connect them to services.

Focus on redirecting hotline callers

Colorado

A [new three-county pilot](#) provides a recorded message to hotline callers, describing child maltreatment and directing callers to 211 to help families access services if the caller's concerns do not meet the criteria for maltreatment.

Hennepin County, Minn.

CPS helps callers determine whether a suspected maltreatment report is warranted. If not, callers have the [option to transfer to a consultation line](#), which provides information about community services for families.

Key considerations and lessons learned

Officials from the preceding helplines shared their thoughts on a range of key considerations and lessons learned in planning and implementing a helpline.

Engagement of lived experts

Several jurisdictions noted the critical importance of involving lived experts in exploration, design, and implementation. In **Washington, D.C.**, members of the [Office of Thriving Families](#)' LEX (Lived Experience) Advisory Council chair each of the citywide steering committee's subcommittees (impact/evaluation; belonging; and warmline community response) and provide outreach.

The idea for warmline pilot in **Colorado** came from lived experts participating on the [Reimagining Colorado Child Welfare](#) steering committee. In **Larimer County**, lived experience was a priority qualification for hiring community navigators and seen as critical to building trust with families and connecting them to services. Thad Paul, the county's human services division manager, said staff with lived experience were essential, even if that sometimes meant spending extra time building administrative and case management skills. "Lived experience is a foundation," he said. "Our system had to do a pivot when we hired. We're really good at hiring people with degrees. We had to get out of that mindset."

"Warmlines should be staffed by people who have experience using similar systems. Then you are calling a safe place where people are more likely to understand you, where staff lead with grace rather than accusation."

—Gabriel Foley, Former Youth in Care, Illinois

Role of the child protection agency

The involvement of child protection agencies in helpline implementation varies significantly. In some cases, the agency and the helpline are completely separate. In others, the agency is the lead operator, and in some cases, it also is a funder. Housing a helpline within a child protection agency offers potential benefits, such as highly trained staff and streamlined access to agency resources. Some families, however, may not feel safe reaching out to the child protection agency for assistance, so building trust is paramount.

Child protection agencies in **Washington, D.C.**, and **New York City** [operate their helplines directly](#). This is both beneficial and challenging, said Sharafdeen Ibraheem, deputy director of the Office of Thriving

Families, DC Child and Family Services Agency. “There are concerns that the warmline could operate as a surveillance tool,” he said. “We have to continue building confidence within the public that this is a totally separate endeavor and not a back door to the hotline.”

The Parent Trust Family Help Line in the state of **Washington** and the Safe & Sound TALK Line in **San Francisco** both operate outside of the child protection agencies. Officials there view that separation as helpful to their ability to connect with families.

Focus on mandated reporters

Ensuring that mandated reporters know how to access helplines is critical in the goal to decrease unwarranted calls to the child protection hotline. Educating mandated reporters about the definition of child maltreatment — in particular, being able to distinguish between family poverty and criminal child neglect — also is essential. The helplines in **Hennepin County, Minn.**, and **Colorado** are designed explicitly for mandated reporters. Most, however, consider mandated reporters an important but secondary audience, after families.

In **New York City**, the Administration for Children’s Services has made strong efforts to educate mandated reporters about its Support Line, especially in schools and health care settings. “We want to make sure there is a clear understanding of ACS’s evolving focus — moving away from unnecessary reporting and toward family-centered support,” said Lisa Bolling, assistant commissioner. “The Support Line is a key pathway for helping families get the resources they need.”

Most callers to the Community Pathways warm line in **Connecticut** come from families seeking support, but the helpline’s operator, Carelon Behavioral Health, wants more mandated reporters to call for non-emergencies. Carelon staff can do a safety assessment, based on a call, and refer to the state’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) if needed. If a mandated reporter calls the child protection hotline and the report does not warrant investigation, DCF responds with a letter explaining why it did not meet the requirements, along with a document listing contacts for various family services.

Strategic partnerships

Helplines rely on partnerships with community and government agencies to which callers can be referred. This means keeping in contact with providers so they know about the helpline and ensuring provider information is current. Given the pervasive need for housing assistance and the complexity of housing programs, it is particularly helpful to have good relationships with housing experts.

New York City Support Line staff participate regularly in community partnership meetings to create a reciprocal relationship. “We conduct presentations for various community partners on the Support Line and services and, in turn, they present their programs,” said Maureen Peters, Support Line director. “We try to make connections and establish relationships so we have a point person for the referral process.”

Good relationships with community partners lead to better outcomes. “We always talk about relationships as the best way to support families,” said Paul, of Larimer County. “The best way to support families is when you’re in relationship with your community partners. That triangle matters. Because we have built amazing partnerships with community partners, they hold families with the same care that we hold them with internally.”

Coordination and alignment

Child protection agencies need to consider what other helplines exist in their jurisdiction and how to help callers distinguish among them. “From a structural perspective, how many lines are too many?” asked Ken Mysogland, bureau chief of external affairs for the Connecticut Department of Children and Families. “We talk about ‘no wrong door,’ but there are a lot of doors to this house.” The [Help Network of Northeast Ohio](#) is an example of a coordinated, one-stop hub for help and crisis lines in a region.

Funding

While some helplines have only one source of funding, many jurisdictions rely on a range of public and private resources, which can help them withstand the loss of time-limited sources such as grants. **Idaho** has been able to use a federal kinship navigation grant to support costs specific to enhancing helpline resources related to kinship. The Community Pathways warm line in **Connecticut** is supported with state child protection agency funds and federal Title IV-E dollars through Family First. **Washington, D.C.**, is exploring how the use of motivational interviewing as a service navigation tool for warmline staff could be funded through Family First. In **Larimer County**, a modified version of a warmline initially developed through a five-year federal grant has been sustained through a combination of county and Community Services Block Grant funds.

Other implementation considerations

Jurisdictions starting anew or upgrading existing helplines also may want to consider various approaches to technical infrastructure, staffing, capacity building and support, marketing, and data collection.

Technical infrastructure

Numerous helplines are affiliated with the confidential information and service referral line, 211. Many also use [FindHelp](#) (a database of resources searchable by ZIP code). In addition to phone calls, helplines may offer services via text or email, and most helplines have access to language interpretation services. [Inform USA](#), which provides trainings and certifications, has developed a set of [standards](#) for helplines.

Staffing

Staff qualifications vary widely among helplines, from high school diplomas to masters in social work degrees. Several helplines emphasized the importance of hiring staff who can ensure that every caller's customer service experience with the helpline is positive. Sharafdeen Ibraheem noted, "The number one expectation for everyone is being able to provide gold standard customer service."

Most helplines use paid workers, though the Safe & Sound TALK Line in **San Francisco** is primarily staffed by volunteers. The Parent Trust helpline in **Washington** used to be staffed by volunteers but now has five paid staff. "We found that volunteers needed to have MSWs or have excellent training and lived experience," said Linda McDaniels, Parent Trust for Washington Children executive director.

Capacity building and support

All helplines featured in this brief provide in-depth training and onboarding for staff and volunteers. Training topics include motivational interviewing, escalated caller training, [Strengthening Families Protective Factors](#), intentional peer support, and mental health first aid. Several helplines maintain an active team chat for quick questions and answers.

Supervisors play a key role in supporting helplines. They can help identify specific resources and guide staff on whether a call needs to be escalated to a CPS report. Peters, director of the Support Line in **New York City**, says she is involved in promoting self-care and addressing call fatigue. "We recognize some of the calls can be triggering," she said. "We want to make sure that staff are supported."

Marketing

Helplines can succeed only if people know about them. Jurisdictions reported using social media, billboards, bus signage, word of mouth, local parenthood magazines, local newspapers, flyers in libraries and at community events, conferences, and letters to local departments of social services. In some jurisdictions, the helpline number is featured on the child protection agency's website.

Helpline officials spoke about the importance of messaging and awareness building. "We may have had awareness with one entity, but that changed because the players changed," said Gail Geohagen-Pratt,

deputy commissioner of the New York State Office of Children and Family Services. “So how do we make sure that we’re continuously bringing visibility to the resource?” In **New York City**, ACS staff regularly present to schools and other partners throughout the community to raise awareness about the Support Line and available prevention services.

Data collection

Helplines need to balance collecting enough information without overburdening families, callers, or staff.

Data for identifying service needs

By collecting data on the needs of callers, communities can better direct resources to meet core areas of need — such as food, housing, and utilities — and can identify ways to improve helpline protocols and practices. When a lack of resources is identified, information can be shared to advocate for funding to fill the service gap. “If we provide you with all the available community resources and you’ve tried them all, you have an unmet need,” said Amy Story, director of 211, United Way of Greater Cincinnati. “We use unmet needs information to inform our advocacy efforts.”

Data for coaching

Colorado has begun tracking information about the types of mandated reporters who file a report and what services they typically seek. This information will be used to coach mandated reporters on having supportive conversations with families in advance of — or in lieu of — reporting. “We hope that mandated reporters start learning about all of these resources and services that families can access so that they don’t have to call the hotline anymore,” said Angela Lytle, Colorado site director for Foster America. “They can just start having conversations at the community level.”

Data on impact

To date, evidence about the impact of helplines is limited. Tracking and researching a range of measures over time, including referrals to prevention supports, hotline screen-out rates, maltreatment substantiation rates, and safety measures such as repeat maltreatment and child fatalities, will help to deepen the understanding of impact.

That said, several jurisdictions are beginning to see a reduction in CPS reports alongside an increase in calls to their helpline. For example, since adding its consultation option, **Hennepin County** has experienced a reduction in hotline reports and an increase in calls to the consultation line. **Connecticut** is experiencing fewer hotline calls but the calls they do receive are higher severity, suggesting that less severe calls may be going to the helpline instead.

The state of **New York** and **New York City** have both seen a decrease in the number of reports to the hotline. In New York City, where the Support Line is operated through the child protection agency, data suggests that families are becoming more comfortable calling it for help. “The number of families reaching out is steadily increasing, from about 30 per month in early 2023, to now over 330 inquiries per month,” said Peters, the city’s Support Line supervisor.

¹ Helplines sometimes are referred to as warmlines, care lines, or resource lines.

² The [FURS \(Family Urgent Response System\) line](#) in California is one example. There also are helplines specifically for older youth in foster care.

³ The data source is national estimates from Child Maltreatment 2023. The 93% figure is derived by subtracting the unique number of substantiated victims of maltreatment from the total number of children reported to a child protection hotline, and dividing that by the total number of children reported to a child protection hotline. The total number of children reported to a child protection hotline is a nationally estimated number calculated by multiplying the average number of children included in a report (1.8 rounded) by the total number of referrals.

⁴ This brief is based on interviews with:

- [District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency, February 26, 2025](#)

Latoya Allen, Supervisor, 211 Warmline; Isaiah Branton, Supervisor, 211 Warmline and 211 Connects; Christian Gineste, Data Scientist; Leonora Hansford, Program Manager; Sharafdeen Ibraheem, Deputy Director; Jarvis Turner, Program Manager; Morgan Welch, Management Analyst

- New York City Administration for Children's Services, February 28, 2025
Lisa Bolling, Assistant Commissioner; Maureen Peters, Support Line Director; Crystal Pond, Senior Planning Manager
- New York State Office of Children and Family Services, March 13, 2025
Gail Geohagen-Pratt, Deputy Commissioner; Kristin Gleeson, Associate Commissioner; Randall Williams, Customer Relationships Manager
- Safe & Sound (San Francisco), March 14, 2025
Deret Musselman, Associate Director of Children and Family Services; Jenny Pearlman, Chief Policy Officer; Gagan Sandhu, Chief Program Officer
- Connecticut Department of Children & Families, March 14, 2025
Sharon Davis, Family and Community Services Director; Frank Gregory, Administrator, Children's Behavioral Health Community Services System; Ken Mysogland, Bureau Chief of External Affairs; Kris Robles, Behavioral Health Clinical Manager
- Carelon Behavioral Health (Connecticut), March 14, 2025
Andrea Goetz, Executive Director; Gabrielle Hall, Assistant Vice President; Jessica Sanner, Clinical Supervisor
- Larimer County, Colo., March 18, 2025
Thad Paul, Human Services Division Manager
- Parent Trust for Washington Children, March 25, 2025
Linda McDaniels, Executive Director
- Help Network of Northeast Ohio, March 31, 2025
Megan Pryor-Hazlett, Chief Clinical Officer
- United Way of Greater Cincinnati, April 3, 2025
Amy Story, Director of 211
- Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, April 29, 2025
Jen Haddad, Program Manager, Services Integration Bureau; AJ McWhorter, Public Information Officer; Heidi Smith, 211 Supervisor
- Foster America, May 16, 2025
Angela Lytle, Colorado Site Director
- Content of this brief also was informed through consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived expertise of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Bernadine Atchison; Gabriel Foley; Jarrod Hummer; Bob Ruble; and Melissa Zimmerman.

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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