



ISSUE BRIEF

SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

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Why should child protection agencies and faith-based organizations partner to support children and families?

“Faith-based services are more accessible than child welfare services. There’s often not a long wait time. We couldn’t get into a regular service provider for over six months, so we used faith-based support. The judge counted the program as long as we passed the drug screens.”

—Jarrod Hummer, Parent, Indiana

Faith-based organizations (FBOs)¹ are vital community assets and have a long history of caring for those most vulnerable. Given their expertise, capacity, and commitment to support families in their communities, FBOs are well positioned to [partner with child protection agencies](#) to help keep children safe and strengthen families across the child welfare continuum. Partnerships with faith-based organizations are a win-win: They can help child protection agencies meet their safety goals, while also fulfilling FBOs’ inherent mission to address the needs of their community members.

In some communities, partnerships with faith-based organizations are a key part of the support network that child protection agencies rely on to protect children and strengthen families. These organizations, which represent diverse religious and spiritual traditions including Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths, enable agencies to serve children and families in more inclusive, equitable, respectful, and culturally responsive ways. In other communities, these partnerships are untapped resources with potential to grow and flourish.

This brief outlines reasons why partnerships with faith-based organizations can help child protection agencies improve outcomes and meet the needs of children and families. It also highlights some barriers to these partnerships for both child welfare systems and FBOs, and elevates key strategies to overcoming

them. Many insights from this document were drawn directly from conversations with parents and youth with lived experience in the child welfare system.²

Benefits to working with faith-based organizations

There are a range of reasons why child protection agencies benefit from deepening their engagement and partnerships with FBOs.

FBOs are accessible and located where families live. At their core, FBOs are neighborhood-based institutions that understand the unique cultural, racial, and ethnic identities of their communities. They also understand firsthand the challenges that members of their community face. Their embedded local presence makes them ideal partners with child protection. Conversely, child protection agency offices often are located in government buildings and therefore may be more removed from the daily life of community members. Many FBOs already host a wide range of services, such as daycare centers, parenting groups, mental health counseling, respite care, and addiction support programs. These services generally have zero or minimal costs, no waiting lists, and are provided at times and in spaces that are convenient for families.

FBOs have community ties that can support families and prevent child maltreatment. FBOs are in direct contact with families and often are aware of those on the brink of crisis, allowing FBOs to intervene early to change family trajectories and avoid child welfare system involvement. FBOs can help families connect quickly to community resources at the first sign that families are struggling. FBOs also have access to community members who can provide struggling families with concrete support, such as furniture, clothing, food, or financial resources. In **Georgia**, [Promise 686](#) is a ministry that mobilizes church communities in the greater Atlanta area to care for vulnerable children by offering practical and emotional support to families in crisis with the goal of preventing the need for foster care.

FBOs have credibility in the eyes of the community. In some neighborhoods, a deeply rooted mistrust of child protection agencies exists, shaped by the belief that they primarily exist to harass communities and separate children from their families. In contrast, many FBOs have earned community trust by building genuine, sincere, long-term relationships. This positions FBOs well to serve as facilitators of trust between families and child protection agencies. Leaders of FBOs often are respected and influential figures, making them effective ambassadors to community members. They also are more likely to be perceived as approachable and non-judgmental, especially when compared to child protection agency staff.

“Trust is a big barrier. People don’t trust the child welfare system for many good reasons, but if families have an existing relationship with faith-based organizations, hopefully that trust can help when having to work with child protection agencies.”

—Lynn Urvina, Kinship Caregiver, Washington

FBOs can identify and support kinship caregivers. Leaders and members of FBOs can help child protection agencies identify those within a family’s support network who can step in during a time of crisis. FBOs can help kin understand the responsibilities of becoming a kinship caregiver and can support them in their caregiving roles. This includes providing kin with emotional support to manage the stress of caregiving, helping them navigate their relationships with parents, and helping them understand the child welfare system and the services available to them.

FBOs can be important partners in the recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive families. FBOs are in a unique position to recruit foster and adoptive parents from within their community and support their caregiving once children are placed in their home. [DC127](#) in Washington, D.C. partners with local churches to recruit and support foster families, helping to identify potential foster parents, host

information sessions, and organize volunteer teams that provide practical support such as meals, childcare, and supplies to foster and kinship families. FBOs' role in recruitment also can support more culturally responsive placements, specifically for Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children, who are overrepresented in the child welfare system. FBOs can help [recruit and retain caregivers](#) who share the same racial, ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds of the children. Additionally, FBOs can target their recruitment strategies to find foster and adoptive families for hard-to-serve populations, such as children with disabilities, sibling groups, LGBTQ+ youth, and older youth.

FBOs can support reunification. Many parents who have been separated from their children are socially isolated, and may feel overwhelmed and discouraged when trying to navigate the child welfare system to reunify with them. FBOs may be able to provide parents with emotional support, including peer networks, during the reunification process to aid them in successfully bringing their children back home safely.

FBOs can be an important source of peer support. Families report that peer support is often less judgmental, particularly if the peers have had similar experiences to the parents they are supporting. FBOs are accustomed to mobilizing volunteers with lived experience, whether to support families to prevent child removal or help them navigate the system while their child is in foster care.

FBOs can support youth who age out of foster care without a permanent family. Young people who leave foster care without a permanent family are vulnerable due to their lack of support systems to help them navigate the transition to independent living and adulthood. Many FBOs have made a priority to offer resources that support older youth aging out of the system. FBOs can support these young people by helping them access housing, education, and employment. They can also mobilize volunteers as mentors. [Raleigh's Place](#) in **Alabama**, in partnership with Chilton County, provides transitional housing for older youth and a curriculum to guide them through the inevitable challenges of emerging adulthood.

FBOs are important partners in keeping children safe from imminent harm. FBOs not only can help prevent child welfare involvement and family separation, they also can step in and protect children at imminent risk of harm. For example, in most states, heads of FBOs are mandated to report suspected child abuse or neglect. A pastor who noticed signs of abuse in a child attending youth services can report it to the authorities, ensuring the child's safety and connecting the family to support services.

FBOs can work together in an interfaith approach to solve problems. Interfaith efforts are powerful, as they allow different faith organizations to work together to generate solutions to difficult broad community problems. Interfaith efforts help identify shared beliefs, practices, and values, and can build consensus about how the community can take action and promote child safety and family well-being. The [Faith Foster Families Network](#) in **California** is a collaborative of eight faith-based organizations in the Los Angeles area that provides various services and children and families involved in the child welfare system. In addition to engaging in foster family recruitment, support, and advocacy, the network uses a collective impact model designed to reduce racial disparities in the child welfare system.

“It's important to see the family for who they are — human beings — not based on their faith and what they believe. Families and children are from all different faiths and cultures, which can sometimes impact their access to services and even their comfort level with working with different faith-based organizations and agencies.”

—Genia Newkirk, Kinship Caregiver, North Carolina

Barriers to partnerships between child welfare and FBOs

While partnerships between child protection agencies and FBOs hold significant potential, they are not without challenges. Child welfare leaders may be reluctant to work with FBOs for a number of reasons that

limits their ability to fully leverage FBO resources and impact. Common barriers that may hinder strong partnership include:

1. **First Amendment constraints.** The First Amendment's protection of religious liberty and the separation of church and state can create challenges for partnerships between FBOs and child welfare agencies due to tensions between religious freedom and upholding nondiscrimination policies. While FBOs may wish to operate according to their religious beliefs, public agencies are required to provide services inclusive for people of all faiths. This can lead to conflict and limit partnership opportunities. In the Supreme Court case *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia* (2021), a faith-based foster care agency declined to certify same-sex couples as foster parents. The city stopped referring children to the agency, arguing that its refusal violated the city's nondiscrimination policy. The Supreme Court, however, ruled in favor of the FBO, finding the city violated the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment by denying an exemption allowed under its own discretionary contract policy, making the policy subject to strict scrutiny.
2. **Uncertainty about ulterior religious agendas.** Some child welfare leaders may question the motivations of FBOs, and wonder why they want to work with families involved in the child welfare system. They may worry that FBOs could proselytize, or pressure children or families into adopting their religious beliefs. They also may fear backlash from advocates who are concerned about discrimination against some children and families on the basis of an FBO's religious teachings.
3. **Concerns about program effectiveness.** Child welfare leaders also may be resistant to working with FBOs that are not delivering evidence-based programs. They may discount some of the benefits of accessibility, credibility, and relatability, and overlook opportunities to measure outcomes on a smaller, more community-based scale.

“Faith-based organizations may have a lot of resources, but they may not know how to partner with child protection agencies. Training is needed for agencies and FBOs to recognize the opportunities to partner and understand the boundaries within the partnership.”

—Churmell Mitchell, Parent, South Carolina

4. **Community mistrust of child welfare.** Faith leaders also may have hesitations about engaging with child welfare due to a lack of trust, stemming from the lived experiences of community members who have had negative experiences as the subject of unwarranted child protection hotline reports and investigations, and/or have experienced family separation. These painful encounters can create wariness and skepticism within faith communities, making partnership efforts more complex and sensitive.
5. **FBOs' limited understanding of the child welfare system.** FBOs may lack understanding about what child protection agencies do and how agency priorities are aligned with their own work to support children, families, and communities. They may also worry about bureaucratic barriers and systemic hurdles that stand in the way of getting the right help to families in a timely way.
6. **FBOs' resource constraints.** FBOs face competing priorities for how best to invest in their communities. Staffing and resource constraints, as well as demands on their volunteer base, may make work with child welfare systems difficult to pursue.

“There is an assumption that you have to separate church and child welfare, but the faith-based community is where you often find individuals with lived experiences — like myself who came out of drugs, alcohol, and gangs — and now are encouraging families going through the system with similar challenges.”

—Roger DeLeon, Parent, California

Practical steps toward child welfare-FBO partnership

Child welfare and faith-based organizations share a common goal: supporting the well-being of children and families in all communities. By developing mutual understanding, aligning efforts, and empowering those with lived experience, together they can overcome barriers and create stronger, more effective partnerships.

Considerations for child protection agencies	Considerations for faith-based organizations
<p>Become “religiously literate” by learning about the beliefs and values of many different faith traditions and how these perspectives influence their work with children and families.</p>	<p>Engage with community members with lived experience in child welfare to understand the system’s impact on their lives, and gain insight into how their experiences may inform strategies for system change.</p>
<p>Develop clear principles for working with FBOs that respect the integrity of religious institutions while upholding the agency’s mission to keep children safe and strengthen families.</p>	<p>Explore practical ways to support children and families in alignment with the child protection agency’s mission, including child maltreatment prevention, foster care, family reunification, and advocacy.</p>
<p>Facilitate joint training with FBOs to clarify the role of child protective services, identify shared priorities, and explore opportunities for collaboration.</p>	<p>Learn about the dual mission of child protection agencies to protect children and keep families safely together when possible, and understand the agency’s role across the full continuum of child welfare services.</p>
<p>Address capacity challenges by engaging faith leaders and equipping motivated FBO volunteers, especially individuals with lived experiences in the child welfare system.</p>	<p>Identify and understand gaps in community-based services and determine how to help fill them.</p>

¹ Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are organizations that derive inspiration and guidance for their activities from the teachings and principles of faith, or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within that faith. They comprise a range of religious charitable organizations affiliated with one or more faith and spiritual traditions.

² Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience in 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: Roger DeLeon, Jarrod Hummer, Churmell Mitchell, Genia Newkirk, and Lynn Urvina.

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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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