



STRATEGY BRIEF

SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

April 2026

How can child protection agencies and faith-based organizations work together to meet family needs?

Protecting children and supporting families is a shared community responsibility. No single entity can meet the needs of children and families on its own. Increasingly, child protection agencies are partnering with trusted community institutions, including faith-based organizations (FBOs),¹ to help keep children safe and their families thriving.

This brief explores how child protection agencies and faith-based organizations can build and sustain effective partnerships to support and strengthen families.² It highlights strategies and examples that demonstrate how partnerships have evolved from a narrow focus on foster care and adoption to encompass a full range of prevention-oriented and family-support efforts. Together, child protection agencies and FBOs can help: prevent child maltreatment and family separation; reduce disparities; recruit and support kinship caregivers and foster families; and support older youth in foster care transition successfully to adulthood.

To learn about the benefits and potential barriers when government entities and faith-based institutions collaborate toward a shared goal, see the companion brief: [“Why should child protection agencies and faith-based organizations partner to support children and families?”](#)

“They live next door to us. Children and families on the brink of destruction or facing challenges are in our community. So how do we bridge better connections for them? I think faith communities are central in that because it has proximity to the families.”

—Chris Campbell, Executive Director, 111Project

Strategies for effective partnerships

Individuals working at the center of a range of child welfare-FBO partnerships shared several strategies that are critical to success.

Acknowledge the role of community in family support and child protection

Recognizing the essential role that the community plays in strengthening families and protecting children is the foundation for effective partnerships between FBOs and child protection agencies. Families may be embedded in community networks that can offer closer proximity, deeper trust, culturally relevant supports, and more consistent presence in their lives than government agencies. Leaders of child protection agencies must acknowledge this reality, as this legitimizes the significant role partnering with FBOs can play in shaping positive outcomes for families, particularly in preventing child maltreatment and providing early support to families in need.

Educate one another

Educating leaders of FBOs and child protection agencies about how both contribute to family well-being is essential for dismantling assumptions and building collaboration. Cross-organizational training can clarify responsibilities, strengths, limitations, terminology and available resources on both sides. Child protection agencies can explain their roles in safety, prevention, foster care, and permanency, and share data that highlights why some communities are disproportionately involved in the system. Faith communities, in turn, can offer insight into local families and resources, cultural dynamics, and the types of support they already provide. Nancy Harris, executive director of [Faith Foster Families Network](#) in **Los Angeles**, said her team facilitates orientations for new social workers, increasing awareness of support the FBO network provides.

FBOs and child protection agencies each have their own language and practices, which can create misunderstandings that can hinder partnership success. Chris Campbell, executive director of [111Project](#) in **Oklahoma** said child protection agencies use acronyms and terms — such as permanency or case management — that do not necessarily translate to faith-based organizations, and that both entities may use the same words — such as adoption or orphan — but are interpreted differently. To learn how to communicate in a way that resonates with both, Campbell worked with the child protection agency and other FBOs, including [Christian Alliance for Orphans](#), to better understand the challenges families face and how to convey those needs clearly to faith communities.

With shared knowledge, agencies can recognize the strengths faith organizations already bring — such as mobilizing volunteers, offering relational support, and providing concrete resources — and explore new opportunities to collaborate in ways that amplify impact rather than duplicate efforts. Moreover, when faith leaders understand child protection services more fully, they can help shift community perceptions of child welfare and inspire deeper support for vulnerable families.

“Families needing resources are referred to us from the Arizona Department of Child Safety, which is rare because agencies never share data with each other, especially with a faith-based organization. We really value this partnership. I think it works because we have mutual respect, built trust, and a shared commitment to strengthening families.”

—Berisha Black, Director of Community Hub, Pilgrim Rest Foundation

Build trust

Trust between child welfare agencies and faith institutions must be cultivated from the outset. FBO staff and volunteers may hesitate to engage because of negative feelings about the child welfare system expressed by families that have experienced child protection investigations, their own experience with the system, or uncertainty about their responsibilities as mandated reporters. Similarly, child protection agency staff may approach FBOs cautiously, concerned about church-state separation legal boundaries, equitable

and accessible services for all children and families, including LGBTQ+ youth and caregivers, or that families might feel pressured to participate in religious activities in return for services.

Consistent, open communication is essential for thoughtful collaboration and to address any concerns that may arise. Both entities must feel free to ask questions and clarify expectations without fear of judgment. Transparent dialogue helps dispel misconceptions, reinforce shared commitments, and identify resolutions early before trust erodes.

Pilgrim Rest Community Hub Foundation and the **Arizona** Department of Child Safety have worked to build trust and strengthen their partnership by co-designing a clear referral process for families involved with the child welfare system whose reports are screened out or deemed not warranting an investigation. Together, they develop shared guidelines that ensure families, most of whom are not affiliated with the church, are offered accessible, voluntary, non-religious support and tangible resources. Community Hub Director, Berisha Black, emphasized that these practices help families feel safe seeking help and reassure DCS staff that services are equitable and free of religious pressure. This clarity and transparency have laid the foundation for a durable, mutually respectful partnership built on trust. Evaluation findings [highlight the impact](#) of this collaboration.

Being present in the community also builds trust. When child protection agency staff meet FBO representatives in places such as houses of worship, local coffee shops, or at community events, they demonstrate respect and commitment. While in-person engagement can be time-intensive, over time it helps dismantle the barriers that often separate child protection agencies from faith-based organizations — and from the children and families they both aim to support. This kind of engagement goes beyond a transactional request for FBO resources. Rather, it demonstrates to the broader community that agency staff are approachable, invested, and willing to listen. Former Deputy Director Lillian Asoera of the **San Diego County** Child and Family Well-Being department said she and her team regularly visited faith communities — including mosques and LGBTQ+-affirming churches — to clarify their role and purpose, and foster relationships.

“We don’t stay behind the desk sending letters. We are present in the community. When we learn about a faith community with resources, we make an appointment and meet face-to-face. We sit down with the leaders, and we listen. We share who we are. We have meaningful conversations about the needs of families in the community and how those needs are showing up for children in local schools.”

—Lillian Asoera, former Deputy Director, Child and Family Well-Being,
County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency

Assess strengths and readiness to partner

Partnerships flourish when child protection agencies and FBOs engage in a thoughtful assessment of each entity’s capacity. When the approach is grounded in the belief that “everybody can do something,” it is easier to recognize the unique strengths, limitations, and motivations of FBOs of all sizes. Agencies can offer a menu of engagement options that allow FBOs to choose entry points that are achievable and mission-aligned, from low-lift activities like hosting meetings, organizing diaper drives, or providing gift cards for families in crisis to higher-commitment roles such as recruiting kinship care and foster families, or serving as visitation sites for families that have been separated. The key is to start small, which is both practical and strategic. Delegating low-risk tasks helps to build confidence, establishes early wins, and allows both partners to learn how to collaborate before moving into more complex work.

Child protection agencies that take time to understand an FBO’s readiness and comfort level are better able to prevent mismatched expectations, which is one of the most common partnership pitfalls. Faith Foster Families Network in California equips faith communities interested in supporting families with a

checklist of possible engagement opportunities — such as serving as cultural brokers, offering basic goods, or hosting events and educational sessions — and explaining the capacities that each option entails.

Create accountability mechanisms

Accountability is essential to ensure that both partners share responsibility for results. This can be achieved by documenting and tracking outcomes related to family well-being, such as the number of children and families served, the speed by which support is delivered, the types of assistance provided, and the ways each partner's efforts contribute to improved child safety and permanency. Both parties also should monitor administrative or policy improvements resulting from the collaboration, as this provides insight into collective impact.

[CarePortal](#), an online platform that connects children and families with community support, has enhanced collaboration and accountability among more than 6,000 faith communities and 1,500 requesting agencies across 39 states since 2015. The platform allows child protection agency caseworkers to share family needs directly with faith communities for rapid support, while simultaneously tracking request types and fulfillment times — thereby giving the partners real-time data on performance and gaps.

Integrating lived experiences into planning and decision-making also ensures a shared responsibility in making sure that families' desires and needs are reflected in practices and policies. Leaders at Faith Foster Families Network organized a meeting that allowed caregivers to air their frustrations with the child welfare system and present potential solutions to executives of the Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services. As a result of hearing the concerns directly from the families, the department committed to several actions, including establishing a caregiver council and conducting a caregiver-focused survey to improve services.

Work together across the child welfare continuum

Child protection agencies historically have partnered with FBOs primarily as a resource for recruiting foster and adoptive families. While this remains an important function, there are opportunities to involve FBOs across the entire child welfare continuum, including efforts at preventing child maltreatment.

Organizations like [For Others](#) help bridge the separation between child protection agencies, faith communities, nonprofits, businesses, and local leaders by aligning around a shared goal of strengthening families. Rather than functioning as a direct service provider, For Others seeks to build a common agenda through its [Well-Being Support Ecosystem](#) that is designed around three priorities: 1) preventing unnecessary foster care entry while supporting reunification when removal occurs; 2) recruiting and retaining ideal foster and kinship placements when child removal must occur; and 3) empowering communities to work toward shared goals and measurable outcomes. In states such as **Arkansas**, **Tennessee**, and **Oregon**, this approach has helped align partners to address the root drivers of family crisis, reduce recruitment and licensing barriers, and increase placement stability.

Effective partnering across the continuum also requires the flexibility to adapt services to meet specific needs of a community. [Jewish Adoption and Family Care Options](#) initially focused on recruiting foster and adoptive families to maintain Jewish children's cultural heritage while in foster care. After expanding from South Florida to Philadelphia, it conducted a needs assessment that showed fewer Jewish children were entering the child welfare system, and those who did often were placed with relatives. The FBO identified a more urgent gap among intact families at risk of child welfare system involvement. In response, it created [FamilyMatters](#) to provide culturally responsive prevention services to stabilize families before system involvement becomes necessary, including many families that had been investigated or screened out of formal intervention but still face significant challenges.

Engage across multiple faith traditions

The religious landscape of most communities is diverse. Engaging a wide range of faith traditions can expand the network of institutions that families can trust and rely on, while ensuring that services are culturally appropriate. When faith leaders understand the overlap between families involved in the child

welfare system and those within their specific communities, a powerful catalyst for FBO engagement is created. For example, the [Muslim Foster Care Association](#) in **Michigan** recruits and provides all potential and licensed foster families with tools needed to care for Muslim children in foster care. The organization also educates child-placing agencies on culturally responsive care and resources to support Muslim foster families.

Identify facilitators from both entities

Effective partnerships require clear leadership and dedicated personnel on both sides. Within individual faith communities, leaders are essential to promote the work, cast vision, and signal that partnership with child welfare is a priority. Yet it often is FBO staff or volunteers who have the time to mobilize and sustain the effort over time.

Similarly, child protection agencies require senior leaders to authorize and champion the partnership. These leaders can delegate agency staff to handle day-to-day tasks, build relationships in the community, and respond to emergent needs. In statewide or regional initiatives that support networks of FBOs, dedicated staff are especially important to maintain momentum, continually raise awareness, offer education, coordinate communication, and troubleshoot challenges as the partnership grows.

Having designated staff to steward the partnership, rather than juggling it among unrelated tasks, is a critical success factor. When someone's role is intentionally structured to prioritize relationship-building, coordination, and follow-through, the partnership is stronger, more consistent, and better positioned to ensure families receive timely and effective support.

“Jurisdictions must make community engagement a priority. It takes time, but the only way to make it sustainable is leadership allowing us to do engagement. Unless you have a leader who will prioritize it, the work and community relationships won't be sustained.

— Mariah Williams, Program Coordinator, Child and Family Well-Being,
County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency

Develop principles to guide the partnership

Clearly established partnership principles help ensure that FBOs operate in ways that support children and families, and child protection agencies can provide the guidance FBOs need to be effective.

FBOs that partner with child welfare should agree to:

- **Serve all families without discrimination**, regardless of religion, race, gender identity, economic status, family structure, or other circumstances.
- **Support children and families without judgment**, treating them with dignity and respect through compassion, not criticism.
- **Avoid proselytizing or coercion**, including using resources and services as a means to recruit families for worship or require participation in religious activities.

To address common FBO concerns about bureaucracy and to sustain innovation, child protection agencies should commit to:

- **Prioritize community over control** by sharing power and resisting the temptation to take over when an FBO has a successful program.
- **Embrace honest communication** by addressing areas of conflict directly so concerns do not escalate or go unresolved.

- **Respect cultural and spiritual practices** by asking about a child’s faith and cultural identity during intake and then using that information to guide placement decisions. Rebecca Salus Hodge, director of grants and partnerships at FamilyMatters in **Philadelphia**, said when children are removed from home due to abuse or neglect, their culture and heritage ought to remain consistent.

“There should be an open invitation from agencies to the faith community that says, ‘Come partner with us and here are ways you can do that.’ From the faith community, there needs to be a consistent response in a posture of service. When this happens, there will be a great partnering that the whole community will benefit from.”

—Jared Brown, Executive Director of Strategic Partnerships, For Others

¹ Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are nonprofit or community groups whose mission, values, and programs are anchored in religious traditions and/or spiritual beliefs. These organizations often provide children, families, and communities with a range of support and services to promote well-being in ways that align with their guiding religious or spiritual principles.

² The content on this brief was informed by conversations with: Adrien Lewis, CarePortal founder, on July 8, 2025; Chris Campbell, Executive Director, 111Project, on August 20, 2025; Rebecca Salus Hodge, Director of Grants and Partnerships, FamilyMatters (a program of Jewish Adoption and Family Care Options), on September 2, 2025; Nancy Harris, Executive Director, Faith Foster Families Network, on September 23, 2025; Lillian Asoera, former Deputy Director, Child and Family Well-Being, and Mariah Williams, Program Coordinator, County of San Diego Health & Human Services Agency, on October 17, 2025; Berisha Black, Director of Community Hub, Pilgrim Rest Foundation, on November 4, 2025; Jared Brown, Executive Vice President of Strategic Partnerships, and Tiffany Farr, Program Manager, For Others on January 27, 2026.

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