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How have child protection agencies partnered with faith-based organizations to support families?

A range of partnerships between child welfare and faith-based organizations thrive nationwide to support child maltreatment prevention, permanency, kinship care placements, other foster care placements, youth aging out of foster care, and other aspects of child, family, and community well-being. These partnerships also benefit the child welfare workforce.

One Church One Child is one example of a partnership model. Active since the 1980s in several states, including [Florida](#), [Maryland](#) and [Oklahoma](#), it engages faith institutions and community organizations around foster care and adoption for Black children.

This brief highlights partnership efforts in two states — **Arizona** and **Oklahoma** — where child protection agencies are leveraging the existing strengths of faith-based institutions to improve child and family well-being. It shares perspectives on how to strengthen these partnerships and maximize their effectiveness.¹

For more information on the benefits, challenges, and impacts of collaborations between child protection agencies and faith-based organizations, see: [Why should child protection agencies and faith-based organizations partner to support children and families?](#) and [How can child protection agencies and faith-based organizations work together to meet family needs?](#)

“Faith partners are in the community and understand exactly what families need. They are constantly evolving to meet the needs.”

—Katie Ptak, Director, Arizona Department of Child Safety

Arizona

The Arizona Department of Child Safety (DCS) has a long history of working with faith-based organizations, primarily in informal partnerships. More recently, however, it has explored the potential for faith institutions to support families that are the subject of a child protection hotline report but are screened out for investigation. Given that these families may still benefit from services, DCS has been engaging faith-based organizations that are trusted in the community to help meet children and family's needs. By having these partners engage families directly, further child welfare involvement for the families may be prevented.

Supporting families on the front-end

In Phoenix, which has a high volume of child removals, Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church — the largest Black church in the metro area — stands out as having a strong infrastructure and enduring trust within the community. Community members, for example, turned to Pilgrim Rest for supports during the COVID-19 pandemic. The church not only serves its own members, but others in the community who seek its support.

DCS viewed Pilgrim Rest as a natural venue to test outreach and support for families screened out for child protection investigation, due to the long-standing community presence of the [Pilgrim Rest Foundation](#) (PRF), a separate nonprofit with a Community Hub program offering a broad service array for families. The Community Hub receives referrals from DCS for families screened out of the hotline. When families are connected, advocates from the hub make it clear that **they are from the community and not part of the child welfare system**.

A [program evaluation](#) spanning July 2024 to August 2025 revealed that PRF distributed \$1.3 million in assistance to 6,375 individuals, which included 88 DCS-referred families receiving a total of \$44,870 in assistance.² The majority of DCS-referred families supported by the Community Hub were families with older children. Families with at least one child aged 6–17, which made up 54.1% of families served, was followed by nearly a third of families (31.8%) who had a mix of both younger and older children aged 0–17.³ The evaluation indicated that families received a comprehensive range of support, including housing, utilities, food, education, employment, behavioral health, transportation, healthcare, and legal aid. Among the specific subset of families referred by DCS, the vast majority (75.4%) received rental assistance at least once, while 19.7% received utility assistance.⁴ A subsequent evaluation will analyze outcomes of DCS-referred families after being screened out of a hotline call and Community Hub intervention.

DCS sees the partnership with Pilgrim Rest as an important test of the capacity for faith-based partners to support its prevention agenda, and based on the success of this partnership, is now seeking partners in four other communities with high rates of child removals. Katie Ptak, DCS director, notes that Pilgrim Rest's holistic approach allows it to address a wide range of child safety risk factors within families, beyond those alleged within a hotline report.

“We never want people to feel they need to be a part of our faith. We serve everyone the same.”

—Berisha Black, Community Hub Director, Pilgrim Rest Foundation

Key considerations

DCS leaders reinforce the importance of keeping an open mind about working with faith-based organizations. “We need to be sure they are in it for the right reasons. They must be willing to work with birth families when safe,” Ptak said. At the same time, child welfare professionals need to make sure their own preconceived notions about faith communities don't get in the way of the potential for powerful partnerships. In particular, child welfare needs to appreciate the critical role that faith-based organizations have played historically in recruiting kinship caregivers, foster families, and adoptive families. DCS should

nurture that historic engagement while making sure that faith institutions understand that foster care is considered a temporary placement for children seeking permanency, ideally to be reunited safely with their families. The idea of “foster to adopt” can be reframed to “foster to safely reunify” for all community partners, including faith-based organizations.

Oklahoma

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) also has a long history of partnering with faith-based organizations. A state in which 70% of the population identifies as Christian,⁵ many Oklahoma-based churches have been eager to step in as an extension of its ministries. “I don’t even have to seek out these partnerships,” says Michael Williams, DHS director of child welfare services. “The churches are coming to me and asking what they can do.”

Partnering to prevent family separation

The [111Project](#) exemplifies how child welfare can partner with faith-based organizations as a child maltreatment prevention strategy. Its primary tool for mobilizing churches throughout the state is CarePortal, a technology that enables a range of community partners including business, and faith-based organizations (i.e., churches, mosques and synagogues) to quickly respond to family needs. DHS staff request for faith-based organizations to get involved through local CarePortal sites. These requests may be for families at any stage of involvement with the department. Faith-based organizations that participate in the CarePortal sign a statement committing to serve all people. They also have access to 111Project training and support.

Currently, CarePortal has 843 church partners across all 77 counties. In 2025, 111Project served over 20,000 people through 6,134 requests. The most common requests included resources for biological families, and kinship care placements to ensure children can safely remain with family. The total financial support to families was \$6.1 million that otherwise would have been met via government program or remain an unmet need.

DHS covers the CarePortal software licensing fee and contributes to 111Project for staff to facilitate community mobilization, provide training, and manage the network. Individual faith-based organizations and their volunteers also provide funding to meet the needs of the families, and sometimes contribute toward 111Project operations. CarePortal also relies on foundations, community members, and businesses to finance the model.

The CarePortal network provides real-time support to families while also reducing the bureaucracy DHS staff often face when trying to meet the needs of families in real time. By harnessing the capacities of churches, staff have access to a more local and responsive support network that is unburdened by the fear and stigma often associated with seeking or receiving help through the child welfare system. The success of the 111Project partnership rests in families knowing that their needs can be met in the community by trusted institutions.

Care Portal in action

A parent was fleeing to Texas with her two children to escape a dangerous domestic violence situation. She loaded her belongings into a rental truck, which a friend drove as she drove her own car with the children. While traveling through Oklahoma, police stopped the mother and arrested her for an expired driver's license. With the woman having no local ties in that community, the police contacted Oklahoma Human Services to take the children into state custody.

Instead of placing the children in foster care, however, DHS staff posted about the family's situation on the local CarePortal site. Within hours, local churches mobilized to support the family. Volunteers drove the family's car and the rental truck to Texas, moved the family into its new home, and provided food and other essentials. The volunteers also returned the rental truck.

For the mother, this meant the difference between being separated from her children while stranded in an unfamiliar place and being supported by caring community members who simply wanted to provide her and her children a safe harbor.

Key considerations

DHS leaders emphasize that the child welfare workforce also benefits as a result of the partnerships with faith-based organizations. Some Baptist churches in Oklahoma have hosted lunches and shared resources with frontline staff of the local child protection agency. Having a church support the workforce serves to boost staff morale and demonstrates respect for the daily pressures of child welfare work.

Faith leaders also can help broker relationships on behalf of child welfare systems by helping to educate communities on complex and controversial issues, such as policy proposals that may run counter to the mission and values of the child welfare system. “We have called on leaders in the faith community to help explain the agency’s approach to supporting families, and to educate on and advocate against legislation that may not serve children’s best interests,” Williams said.

DHS views faith partnerships as foundational to its work but also is clear about the guidelines for faith-based community engagement. “We shouldn’t be referring people to faith institutions if we know they have different belief systems,” Williams said. The agency also discourages faith partners from evangelizing and encourages them to respect that some families receiving support may be resistant to attending church. Like Arizona, Oklahoma also cautions faith partners against viewing the partnership as an opportunity to “save” children from their parents, but instead align with system values that seek to safely reunify families whenever possible.

“We don’t see our partnership through the lens that separates church and state. We see ourselves as being connected through a partnership that respects each other’s right to express who we are.”

— Michael Williams, Director of Child Welfare Services, Oklahoma Department of Human Services

Overcoming challenges

Leaders in Arizona and Oklahoma shared common challenges when partnering with faith-based organizations:

Inclusive partnerships

A need exists to engage a wide range of faiths. The Arizona and Oklahoma examples reflect ways that historically Black and other Christian churches have stepped forward to support families, yet many other faiths can and should be engaged (i.e., Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Latter-day Saints) in efforts to support children and families.

Bias

Respecting deeply held religious beliefs of faith organizations is important, but so is ensuring that families can receive support without fear of discrimination. The religious beliefs of faith institutions, however, ultimately may prevent them from choosing to serve certain families. It’s important to seek support from community institutions and organizations whose values align with the children and families being served. Agencies should maintain directories of faith-based and culturally aligned service providers, build partnerships with community and interfaith organizations, make families aware of their options, and follow through on referrals so families do not have to navigate processes alone.

Distrust of child welfare systems

Child welfare leaders should acknowledge and communicate to faith-based organizations, community partners, and families the historical trauma resulting from unnecessary child removals by child protective services. They can share ideas such as [shifting from mandatory reporting to a focus on community supporting](#), engaging a child's kinship network for support, and other ways they seek to partner with the community to keep children safe with their families. This helps to reinforce the understanding that faith-based organizations are a pivotal part of a larger community ecosystem that supports families at all stages of child welfare intervention.

Keep an open mind

Be open toward partnering with faith-based organizations, given that they already are active in the community, consist of individuals motivated to serve, and often have timely access to resources that families need. Focusing on the positive benefits to children, families, and communities is a strong foundation for entering into these partnerships.

¹ The content of this brief was informed by conversations with: Berisha Black, Director of Community Hub, Pilgrim Rest Foundation, on November 4, 2025; Michael Williams, Director of Child Welfare Services, Oklahoma Human Services, on January 30, 2026; Katie Ptak, Director, Arizona Department of Child Safety, on February 27, 2026.

² Kanala, C., Quintana, E., Eustice, K., & Cook-Davis., A. (2025). [Pilgrim Rest Foundation Community Hub Evaluation Report](#) (pp. 2-3). Arizona State University Morrison Institute for Public Policy.

³ Kanala, C., Quintana, E., Eustice, K., & Cook-Davis., A. (2025), pp. 2-3.

⁴ Kanala, C., Quintana, E., Eustice, K., & Cook-Davis., A. (2025), p. 20.

⁵ Pew Research Center. (2025). [Religious landscape study: Oklahoma](#).

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