

Family First Prevention Services Act

An Opportunity for Systems Change

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) is the most significant change to federal child welfare policy since the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997. FFPSA's passage comes at a time when child welfare in Wisconsin faces the challenge of an 18.5% increase in the annual total number of kids who experience time in foster care. Concurrently, FFPSA positions Wisconsin to leverage our understanding of trauma, its causes and effects, as well as treatment and intervention through the use of Evidence-Based Interventions (EBIs), to prevent children from entering foster care.

“In child welfare, change is hard because people often underestimate the risk of current policies and overestimate the risk of changing policies.”

-Bryan Samuels, Executive Director, Chapin Hall

Policy is a necessary tool in preventing child maltreatment, but policy alone is insufficient in addressing its complex root causes. Systems change, or “shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place,” is a collaborative approach that works to redefine relationships between system actors, develop a shared understanding of the root causes of the problem, and implement strategies to influence drivers of systems change. While there are many opportunities across different drivers of systems change, some that should be considered priorities include:

Relationships: Changing relationships between actors within a system is a core component of achieving transformational change. In systems, the relationships between individual parts may be more important than the parts. The inclusion of voices of people with lived/living experience, or context experts, could be an important part in understanding system barriers and the implications of policy and procedure in the daily lives of the families being served.

Resource Flow: The federal fiscal backbone of FFPSA is providing flexibility to use Title IV-E funds, the largest portion of federal child welfare spending, to pay for evidence-based interventions to prevent ‘candidates for foster care’ from being removed from their home. To pay for this flexibility, FFPSA has increased requirements for federal funds that support congregate care settings. A challenge for the state will be that the portion of federal funds for congregate care only accounts for 1.4% of total child welfare spending in Wisconsin. While there are new administrative funds available to support the transition to FFPSA, to include training on EBIs, there will have to be an increase in funding for preventative services, which account for 4% of child welfare spending in Wisconsin.

Direct Practice Mental Models: The mental models, or deeply held beliefs and assumptions that influence one’s actions, of professionals working directly with families should be accounted for in FFPSA planning. The judgement of these staff, who will be selecting families for FFPSA services, will be central in successfully executing any plans for a desired future state. An

evaluation of the Family Unification Program, a housing voucher program for families involved in child welfare, by the Urban Institute found that caseworker's judgement and use of vouchers were informed by who they thought would be most likely to succeed, not who had greatest need as policy intended. In implementing FFPSA, states should consider including direct practice staff in designing the prevention plan, roll-out of the plan to other staff, and monitoring effectiveness of implementation.

Sharing Knowledge and Ideas: Relationships among network members are strengthened when participants can name their issues, discuss them extensively, and eventually describe remedies that seem to offer the most hope for progress. Experience from providers, specifically those who have experience providing in-home EBIs, will be critical to support fiscal efficiencies and practice adaptations necessary for sustainable shifts in practice.

Conclusion

FFPSA is the most significant federal child welfare legislation since 1997; it presents as an opportunity to shift the focus *and* resources of child welfare systems toward preserving children in their home, as they cope with increasing populations. The opportunity for transformational change with FFPSA comes from leveraging what we understand about the benefit of including a broad range of voices in generating solutions with the community; leveraging local content and context expertise; and the latest insights into trauma, vicarious trauma, resilience, and brain science.

The foundation of such an effort will be collaboration between new partners, extending past child protection services, into other service systems and into the community. This effectively will require building trust among new partners with differing definitions of success. This will likely challenge the status quo, causing tension between well-meaning partners, which is a common element of transformational change. These efforts should extend past any FFPSA mandated timelines into the space of a new definition of what constitutes a child welfare system.

Recommended Reading on the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA):

The Annie E. Casey Foundation: <https://www.aecf.org/blog/family-first-prevention-services-act-will-change-the-lives-of-children-in-f/>

The Alliance for Strong Families and Communities Overview of Provisions in the Family First Prevention Services Act: <https://www.alliance1.org/web/news/2018/feb/overview-provisions-family-first-prevention-services-act.aspx>

The Chronicle of Social Change: A Complete Guide to the Family First Prevention Services Act: <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/finance-reform/chronicles-complete-guide-family-first-prevention-services-act/30043>

Recommended Readings on Systems Change:

FSG: [The Water of Systems Change](#)

Tamarack Institute: [Evaluating Systems Change Results: An Inquiry Framework](#)

Stanford Social Innovation Review: [What Exactly Do We Mean by Systems?](#)