The Opportunity is Now:
Five Ways to Better Serve Adolescents and Young Adults through the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA)

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This brief highlights opportunities within FFPSA for states to build and enhance a prevention continuum that includes a focus on healthy adolescent development and that recognizes the need for strategies that take into account and help rectify disparate opportunities and outcomes for Black, Latinx/e, and Native American youth, and youth who identify as LGBTQ+.

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA)

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) of 2018 marked a significant policy shift toward child welfare finance reform by authorizing federal funding for certain time-limited prevention services to keep children in their homes and with their families whenever safe and possible. FFPSA was a significant step forward in aligning child welfare financing with what research tells us children, youth, and families need. Under FFPSA, services and programs eligible for federal reimbursement include mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment services and in-home parent skill-based programs that include parenting skills training, parent education, and individual and family counseling and must have well-supported, supported, or promising evidence as determined by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse (Clearinghouse). As a result, the law creates a compelling incentive for states to reimagine their child welfare systems and invest in innovation to build evidence for services and programs that better meet the needs of children, youth, and families.

This significant shift in financing, and the incentive to better serve children, youth, and families in their homes and communities, provides an untapped opportunity to better serve youth and their families when they come into contact with child welfare systems. There is a long history of older youth and their families being poorly served by these systems, particularly youth who identify as Black, Latinx/e, Native American and LGBTQ+, who have too often been left without the resources and supports they need, creating disparate outcomes, including placement instability, excessively restrictive living arrangements, longer stays in foster
care, and being unprepared for adulthood. While past legislation has attempted and made some progress in addressing some of these disparate outcomes, the data continue to show existing gaps in how systems support young people. This moment in time provides a critical opportunity to address these long-standing problems and to create a more responsive approach to working with youth and their families.

To date much of states’ approved FFPSA plans have focused primarily on improved outcomes for youth through meeting the requirements to restrict the use of congregate care and stepping down youth from restrictive to family foster care placements. While this is an important focus, there remains an opportunity to restructure systems in ways that prevent older youth from ever entering foster care. Perhaps a key reason many FFPSA approved plans have not included a more comprehensive menu of services for youth is the notably insufficient number of evidence-based programs for youth and young adults rated in the Clearinghouse. Research confirms that adolescence is a unique stage of development in which positive experiences and opportunities can help shape the still developing brain. There is a significant demand, therefore, for child welfare agencies, state and local advocates, policymakers, and community-based providers to work together to build the evidence base of new or existing programs that incorporate the research on optimal adolescent development—prioritizing programs and supports for Black, Latinx, Native and LGBTQ+ youth—with a goal of establishing evidence that will move these programs onto the Clearinghouse. In so doing, states could benefit from Title IV-E reimbursement, thereby creating a continuum of prevention programs that meet the needs of adolescents and young people and their families who are not yet considered candidates for foster care.

The following recommendations identify opportunities for states to build a prevention continuum based on a commitment to healthy adolescent development that rectifies the disparate outcomes faced by Black, Latinx/e, Native American youth, and youth who identify as LGBTQ+.

1. **Apply the research-informed Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive framework** to funding decisions on proposed or existing programs for youth and young adults, whether intended for IV-E reimbursement or otherwise.

By focusing on what the research shows young people need to thrive, states and child welfare systems can determine whether new and existing programs build the protective and promotive factors shown to contribute to youth well-being and make determinations accordingly about which programs and services to fund. Research has shown that because of the evolving, developmental changes taking place in the adolescent brain, adolescence is a critical period for young people, when new positive experiences, opportunities and supportive relationships can help create new neural pathways that can mitigate the impact of earlier life adversities, support healthy brain development, and prepare young people for a successful transition to adulthood. Through a synthesis of the research on positive youth development, resiliency, neuroscience and the impact of trauma on the developing brain, the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s (CSSP) Youth Thrive initiative identified five Protective and Promotive Factors that increase the likelihood that adolescents develop into healthy, thriving adults. These five factors are:

- **Resilience:** Managing stress and functioning well when faced with challenges.
- **Social Connections:** Having healthy, lasting relationships with people, places, and communities.
- **Knowledge of Adolescent Development:** Understanding the unique changes and assets of adolescence; implementing youth-friendly policies and practices.
- **Concrete Support in Times of Need:** Making sure youth receive high-quality, equitable, respectful services to meet basic needs (e.g., physical & mental health care, housing, legal services, education, nutrition, income); learning self-advocacy or leadership skills.
- **Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence:** Acquiring communication and thinking skills and attitudes to form an interdependent and positive identity.
The five Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors are presently being used by state and local child welfare and juvenile justice agencies across the country as a “lens” for assessing and modifying their policies, programs, training, services, partnerships, and systems that impact young people under their care. For example, New Jersey changed its protocol for developing Transitional Plans by actively engaging youth in identifying their strengths and interests and setting short and long term goals, and Nebraska includes Youth Thrive language that addresses adolescent development in its contracts with partner organizations and agencies. This same analysis and screen can be particularly valuable to states as they set priorities and make funding decisions when building out their preventive services continuum.

2. Develop and support programs and services that demonstrate a clear commitment to involving youth and young adults in conceptualizing, building, and implementing the delivery of services for youth.

An increasingly common axiom in social services is that those closest to the problem should be informing the solution; this is especially important with regard to youth and young adults. Research has demonstrated that drawing on the lived experience of youth and young adults not only helps ensure successful outcomes, it also serves to build important neural connections for optimal executive functioning that youth need to thrive. Built on the legacy of collective action of organizations such as Youth In Action that centers current and former foster youth in improving the lives of their peers, the field of child welfare has begun to recognize the imperative of including youth and young adults in identifying and developing responses to critical needs. For example, the Children’s Bureau (CB) Program Instruction that guides states in how to implement the Consolidated Appropriations Act specifically calls on states to draw on the expertise of youth “at both the individual and system-level” as they build their COVID-19 implementation infrastructure.

Strategies to incorporate youth voice can include partnering with community-based organizations that have direct connections to young people, targeting outreach and/or developing and investing in youth advisory boards and other diverse youth leadership groups. Some states have learned that they can benefit from young people’s networks to solicit information on prevailing and emerging concerns to help fashion responsive and effective solutions. New Jersey’s Department of Children and Families (DCF) recently de-
developed the DCF Youth Council, housed in its pioneering Office of Family Voice, as part of its commitment to meaningfully incorporate youth voice in policy and systematic change. Building a successful and sustainable prevention continuum will require action that is directly informed by young people most affected.

3. **Prioritize programs that emphasize the quality of adult and/or worker relationships with young people that lead to the kind of “transformational relationships” research tells us are foundational for healthy adolescent development.**

While each Protective and Promotive factor is important for young people to thrive and succeed, research tells us that social connections act as a lynchpin toward the realization of the other four factors. The Youth Thrive framework emphasizes that all young people need adults, whether family members or others, who care about them, are non-judgmental listeners, “who they can call on in times of stress and for help in solving problems; who encourage them and promote high expectations; who help them identify and nurture their interests; and who set developmentally appropriate limits, rules, and monitoring.”

Research into model practice with youth also offers insight into the importance of a subset of social connections, referred to as effective “transformational relationships.” Effective transformational relationships are characterized by energetic listening, persistence over time, authenticity, reliability in times of crisis, and love. Building a successful preventive services continuum, therefore, will require states to offer programs and services that prioritize social connections and promote the transformational relationships that can develop as part of a young person’s emerging social network.

4. **Integrate trauma-informed and healing centered practice into work with young people and their families; support programs and services that center culture as an essential feature of well-being and encourage young people to actively exercise their voice and power to make meaningful change in their communities and beyond.**

A growing body of neuroscience has demonstrated the importance of recognizing the impact of trauma on healthy adolescent development. Indeed, the FFPSA explicitly recognizes the value of trauma-informed practice, requiring that eligible preventive services and programs “address trauma’s consequences and facilitate healing.” This effort to support young people who experience trauma has led to a movement of “trauma-informed care” in youth serving systems around the country. The movement attempts to provide direction for how to interpret the impact of strong, frequent or prolonged adversity on a young person’s mental, emotional and physical health. It is important, of course, that state’s incorporate trauma-informed care into the full range of options for working with young people, and any prevention continuum would be incomplete without it. But that should not be where the intervention ends.

Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) is an approach that moves away from deficit-based mental health models that characterize many therapeutic inventions toward “healing centered” practices that promote a more holistic view of healing from traumatic experiences and environments. HCE involves culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing; it emphasizes the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively, rather than exclusively within isolated individuals. Consistent with Youth Thrive, HCE perceives those who have experienced trauma not as victims but as champions of their own destiny and well-being and requires youth workers to inquire of young people not “what happened to you,” but “what's right with you.” HCE also supports those working with youth and other system professionals to recognize the importance of their own journey towards healing, and how previous experiences, personal trauma, and biases can inform their work. In developing their reimagined preventive services continuum, states have a unique opportunity to invest in programs and services that develop young people’s strengths, center culture as an essential feature of well-being, and simultaneously create opportunities for achieving meaningful change in communities.
5. Build evidence to enhance the service array from an equity perspective; ensure anti-racist policy strategies drive planning for and implementation of Title IV-E Prevention Plans that lead to a bolder, more responsive preventive service continuum.

Research confirms the existence of disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system, and suggests that Black youth who experience the trauma of family separation and foster care are at heightened risk for negative outcomes as a result of structural and institutional racism and inequality. FFPSA provides states an opportunity to enhance their service array and center equity, directly addressing the harm child welfare systems have caused Black, Brown and Native children, youth, and families. This effort is particularly important during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dramatically destabilized so many young people—especially youth of color—across the country. States’ attention to equity in developing and enhancing their continuum of services will require the hard work of examining the policies and practices that may have contributed to oppression—oppression based on race, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression (SOGIE), class, immigration status and ability—the role institutional structures have played in negative outcomes, and a comprehensive inquiry into the multifaceted areas in which those policies and practices can respond to and rectify historical inequities. Such an inquiry would, by design, recognize the importance of individuals’ and communities’ social, cultural, political, ecological, and spiritual identities.

The FFPSA represents a first step toward reimagining a child welfare system where racial disproportionality and disparities are reduced or eliminated, youth and young adults play a pivotal role in developing solutions, and families are strengthened and supported to avoid family separation. These recommendations serve as a guide for states as they seize the opportunity presented by the FFPSA to build strong and visionary prevention continuums to prevent youth and young adults from coming into care, keep families safe and together, and promote resilient and thriving communities.
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Endnotes

3 For more information on CSSP’s Youth Thrive Framework, see: https://cssp.org/our-work/project/youth-thrive/
6 For more information on Foster Youth in Action, see: https://www.fosteryouthaction.org/resources/rsc/FYA-Training-TA.pdf.
11 Social Security Act: Title IV-E Section 471(e)(4)(B), Publ. L. No. 115-123, Section 50711(a).
13 For more information on Healing Centered Engagement, see: https://flourishagenda.com.