

Courageous Imperatives for Human Services

Child and Family Well-Being: Designing a Multifaceted Approach to Child Welfare Prevention

APHSAs Transition Recommendations for the Administration and Congress



The following is part of APHSA's series, *Courageous Imperatives for Human Services*, which provides recommendations to the incoming Administration and Congress to help develop strategies that unlock the potential of human services. To learn more about this series and how we can work together to create a country where everyone thrives, visit our [Election Transition Recommendations page](#).



Courageous Imperative #4: Promote family stability and reduce the need for child welfare system involvement by advancing proven, whole family solutions. By empowering local communities to support families in need and addressing economic challenges, we can keep families together and ensure better outcomes for children and families.

Outcomes

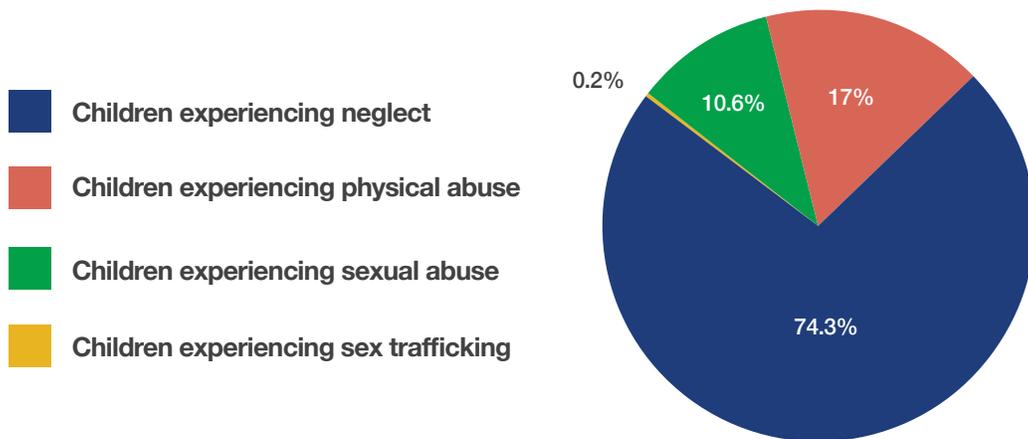
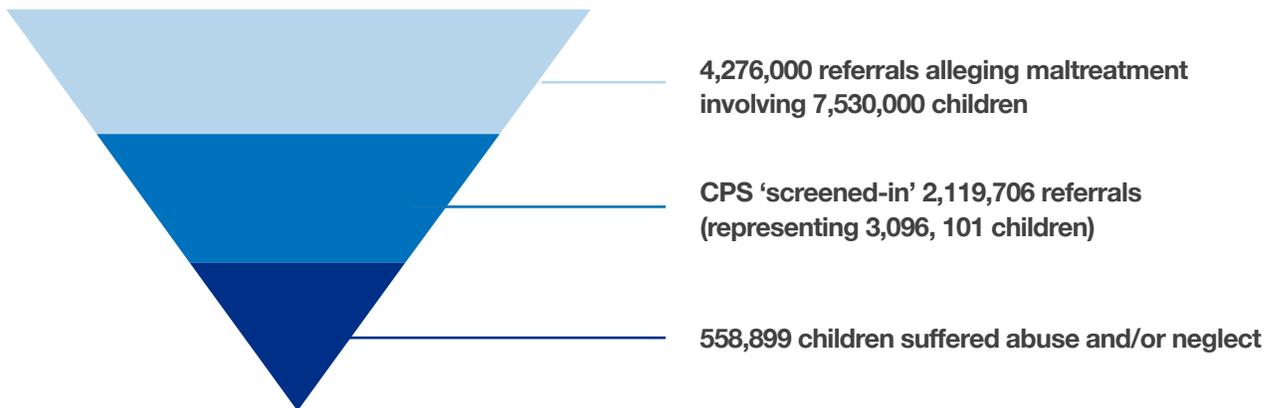
1. Prevent unnecessary child protection service involvement and foster care placements by addressing poverty-related factors that lead to child protection interventions, ensuring families receive support to prevent unwarranted separations.
2. Reduce foster care entries through the implementation of prevention services and Alternative or Differential Response that allow children to remain safely with their families while addressing abuse or neglect risks.¹
3. Promote family stability by strengthening family support systems and advancing child and family outcomes through holistic, well-being-centered initiatives.

Why It Matters

Historically, the American child welfare system has responded to crises of abuse and neglect by intervening only *after* abuse or neglect has occurred. By prioritizing proven prevention initiatives and implementing whole family approaches, agencies can strengthen and stabilize families with children at risk of abuse or neglect and reduce unnecessary and often traumatic foster care entries for children.

Using preventive policies to address systemic barriers—like housing instability, lack of child care, medical costs, and low wages—will reduce child welfare involvement and ensure greater family stability.

According to the [Child Maltreatment 2023](#) report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies received 4.3 million referrals alleging maltreatment involving 7.5 million children. Of these reports, CPS ‘screened-in’ 2.1 million referrals (representing 3.1 million children), meaning they met agency criteria for an investigation or alternative response. Investigations confirmed that 415,000 children suffered abuse and/or neglect, with 74 percent experiencing neglect, 17 percent physical abuse, 11 percent sexual abuse, and 0.2 percent sex trafficking.



Better Outcomes Through Prevention Services

Evidence strongly supports that some children will benefit more from receiving prevention services and maintaining connections with family members rather than if they are removed from their families and networks and enter foster care. In December 2024, Congress passed a bipartisan reauthorization of Title IV-B of the Social Security Act with overwhelming support. Titled *Supporting America's Children and Families Act*, the reauthorization introduces reforms to modernize the Title IV-B program while saving taxpayer dollars. By emphasizing early intervention, the updates aim to help families remain united and strengthen prevention services. We share in the vision and commitment that this bipartisan legislation highlights to invest in prevention efforts and supporting families nationwide. We call on the Trump Administration and Congress to do even more if we are to achieve the following vital goals:

- **Reduction in Maltreatment:** Prevention services reduce the incidence of child maltreatment by addressing risk factors such as parental substance abuse, mental health issues, and economic instability.^{2,3}
- **Improved Family Stability:** Programs that strengthen family relationships and support parents help prevent the need for child removal, maintaining family unity and reducing the trauma of separation.^{2,4}
- **Better Long-Term Outcomes:** Children who stay with their families and receive appropriate support achieve better long-term outcomes in mental health, educational achievement, and social relationships. Stability and continuity within the family contribute to these positive outcomes.^{3,5}
- **Cost-Effectiveness:** Investing in prevention services proves more cost-effective than the expenses associated with foster care and other child welfare interventions. Reducing the number of children entering the system allows for more efficient resource allocation.^{4,5}
- **Reducing Racial Disparities:** Prevention services mitigate the disproportionate impact of the child welfare system on families of color. Providing support before crises occur reduces the number of children from marginalized communities entering the system.²

Innovating and Building from Family First Prevention Strategies

The Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), signed into law by President Trump on February 9, 2018, transformed the child welfare system by allowing federal Title IV-E funds to be used for evidence-based prevention services, such as mental health support, substance abuse treatment, kinship navigators, and in-home parenting programs. This opened the path for many jurisdictions to begin implementing alternatives to removing children and separating families. The law made some of these preventive services available to families with children at risk of entering foster care, which may have unintentionally excluded families who could benefit from earlier, more comprehensive support, potentially creating gaps in the child welfare system's effectiveness. **The law should be strengthened by:**

- Revising the eligibility requirements determining which families can receive services to include those facing significant economic hardships (such as housing or child care).
- Supporting innovations and proof of concepts to cover services that demonstrate reduction of children entering foster care and stronger families.
- Creating flexibility for states to implement approaches that work best in their jurisdictions.

Taking Action—Opportunities for Impact

Federal policymakers can significantly reduce the number of children who experience abuse and neglect and enter foster care by advancing executive actions and policy changes that continue to shift the child welfare system from reactive interventions to proactive prevention services. By revising the scope and scale of effective prevention services, removing barriers that hinder family connections, and creating opportunities for cross-system collaboration and coordination between child welfare services and other systems that increase economic security, policymakers can create a more effective, coordinated system. This modernized approach would not only strengthen the child welfare system's ability to protect children and strengthen families, but generate measurable, long-term outcomes that reflect both fiscal responsibility and social impact.



Increase the Availability of Prevention Services

Key Issues:

- The Family First Act currently funds a set of services including in-home parenting programs, mental health services, substance abuse prevention and treatment, and kinship navigator services. These services address many prominent issues that may cause children to be at risk of abuse and neglect. However, additional covered services could enhance the system's ability to prevent foster care entry due to neglect. As noted above, conditions of poverty have a strong correlation to determinations of neglect.
- The IV-E Clearinghouse requires prevention services to demonstrate evidence of effectiveness through randomized control trials or quasi-experimental designs to qualify for funding, which has been instrumental in advancing evidence-based practices. However, this standard poses challenges for innovative programs developed in rural communities or tailored for specific populations that often lack access to academic researchers, institutions, or funding. Despite their proven success within smaller populations, these programs may be ineligible for support. Many well-designed and impactful initiatives struggle to meet the Clearinghouse's rigorous academic standards due to limited resources, potentially excluding effective solutions from broader adoption and funding opportunities.
- Child welfare services and economic assistance programs are implemented by different agencies or offices at the federal level, making coordinated and aligned service delivery to families at the state and local level difficult.
- Complex federal financing rules across Medicaid, child welfare, public health, and behavioral health make it difficult to contract with, reimburse, and monitor service providers.

Key Opportunities:

- Establish a cross-agency task force to identify barriers and develop solutions for integrating prevention strategies into housing, Medicaid, and public health systems and specifically delinks factors associated with poverty from the child protection system.
- Extend Family First's allowable services to explicitly include economic supports and other evidence-based services that demonstrate success in preventing children from entering foster care.
- Amend the IV-E Clearinghouse rating criteria so that effective cultural-, location-, or population-specific programs and services are eligible as IV-E prevention services without having to meet the randomized controlled trial, quasi-experimental design, sample size, or replicability criteria.
- Align the IV-E Clearinghouse with existing best practices in substance abuse and mental health so that best practices funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Medicaid are available in the Clearinghouse or otherwise made allowable for reimbursement under Family First.



Better Engage Family Members to Support At-Risk Children and those in Foster Care

Key Issues:

- Only 34 percent of children in foster care are placed with family members or fictive kin.
- Unlicensed kinship caregivers typically receive support limited to child-only benefits through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which generally amounts to less than half of the financial assistance provided to licensed foster parents. States need additional funding and technical assistance to meet the intent of the Kinship Licensing Rules which allow states to reimburse kinship caregivers at the same rate as licensed foster parents.

Key Opportunities:

- Create a set of best practices, model policies, innovative use of technologies, and technical assistance to enhance family finding and engagement activities through federal guidance and technical assistance.
- Address funding gaps that limit kinship caregivers from being reimbursed at the same rates as licensed foster parents.



Address the Intersection of Poverty, Neglect, and Unnecessary Foster Care Entries

Key Issues:

- Children are often reported to the child protection system for conditions related to poverty.
- Work is needed to advance and evaluate community-based alternatives to child protective service involvement that could help children in low-income situations and ameliorate harmful conditions of poverty.

Key Opportunities:

- Introduce a federal demonstration project on diversion programs that supports state pilots to test diversion programs for neglect-only cases that focus on prevention and service provision without formal child welfare involvement.
- Evaluate outcomes and scale successful models through federal funding mechanisms.

APHSAs and our members are committed to working with the Trump Administration to strengthen the nation's human services system so it continues to provide foundational support to families across the country. Through leadership, innovation, and executive action, human services programs can become an instrumental tool to attain our national priorities of health, well-being, and prosperity for all. To discuss our recommendations, please reach out to policy@aphsa.org. For media inquiries, please reach out to media@aphsa.org. Visit our [Election Transition Recommendations page](#) for additional publications.

APHSAs is a bipartisan membership association representing state, county, and city human services agencies that improve outcomes for people nationwide through the administration of programs that build resilience and bolster the well-being of people through access to food, healthcare, housing, employment, child care, community support, and other key building blocks. [Learn more](#) about APHSAs.



Endnotes

- ¹ [Differential Response](#)
- ² [Transforming Child Welfare: Prioritizing Prevention, Racial Equity, and Advancing Child and Family Well-Being](#)
- ³ [Evaluating Prevention Services in Child Welfare](#)
- ⁴ [Improving Children's Lives: Balancing Investments in Prevention and Treatment in the Child Welfare System](#)
- ⁵ [How the Child-Welfare System Could Protect More Kids and Save Billions of Dollars](#)