

Best Practices for Child Welfare in Working with Families with Immigrant Members

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One out of four children in the United States has an immigrant parent, and while the great majority of those parents are in the United States lawfully, 5 million children live with at least one parent who is an unauthorized immigrant. These families face many of the same issues and needs as other families and some have contact with state and local child welfare systems. Families with immigrant members interacting with state and local child welfare systems may face distinctive issues and challenges relating to a child or parent's immigration status, barriers to service access resulting from linguistic and cultural differences, and fear or distrust toward public systems.

All child welfare agencies can take important steps to improve their responsiveness to the needs of these families and promote the well-being of these children. The recommendations here are drawn from *Immigrant Families and Child Welfare Systems: Emerging Needs and Promising Policies*, a Migration Policy Institute report done in collaboration with the American Public Human Services Association. The report recommendations were developed after reviewing relevant literature and consulting with members of the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA), with follow-up discussions in 2021 and in consideration of increased numbers of unaccompanied youth in 2021. The report presents a detailed discussion of the reason for each recommendation and examples of promising state and local practices. Read the report at: bit.ly/childwelfareimm. And click on the links below or use the page numbers to access the relevant section in the report.

Staff, Training, and Procedures

- 1 Employ specialized staff or points of contact for caseworkers to partner with on immigration issues in child welfare cases.** While all staff working with immigrant families will benefit from training, caseworkers need access to specialized staff when more complex questions arise. (For more, see report [pp. 23–25](#).)
- 2 Develop preservice and continuing training for caseworkers concerning immigration issues in child welfare cases.** The nature and extent of training will vary depending on caseworker responsibilities, but there is some core information that all caseworkers should have relating to common legal statuses, identifying immigration issues in child welfare cases, and key agency resources. ([Pp. 25–28](#))
- 3 Ensure language access policies reflect the needs and demographics of immigrant populations.** In addition to having forms translated into multiple languages, agencies need to ensure the availability of multilingual staff and interpreters. ([Pp. 28–30](#))



- 4 Identify and address barriers that prevent noncitizen caregivers from becoming licensed placements.** Licensing can bring caregivers financial assistance, training, and other supports; jurisdictions should review their formal policies and operational practices to effectively allow noncitizen kin to be licensed caregivers. (Pp. 30–34)

Placement of Children with a Parent or Guardian in Another Country

- 5 Review policies for placement of children with a parent/guardian abroad and ensure the agency has skilled staff or contracted capacity to address these cases.** International cases involve distinct issues calling for specialized expertise, and agencies need to either ensure they have developed this expertise internally or contract for this knowledge and experience. (Pp. 34–38)
- 6 Develop memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with foreign consulates in countries where larger numbers of children are placed.** A number of U.S. jurisdictions have developed MOUs with Mexico, and those models can be helpful to others. There is also a need to develop MOUs with other nations where significant numbers of children are placed. (Pp. 38–40)



Child Welfare Intersections with the Immigration System

- 7 Develop a process to screen all children and associated parents with child welfare cases for immigration benefits such as naturalization, humanitarian protection, or relief from deportation.** Screening for immigration benefits eligibility is a key way to help children and parents, as well as to identify needs for service referrals. (Pp. 39–46)
- 8 Review confidentiality policies concerning information sharing with federal immigration agencies and provide guidance to caseworkers.** In addition to ensuring policies are consistent with legal protections, it is important to provide guidance to caseworkers about how to explain confidentiality policies to families. (Pp. 47–48)
- 9 Build relationships with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) field office staff for cases involving detained parents.** ICE has policies and procedures concerning cases with detained parents and legal guardians, including those with pending child welfare proceedings, and communicating with ICE staff when parents are in detention can help in maintaining family unity. (Pp. 48–50)



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