



Over the coming months and years, there will be numerous opportunities to discuss the benefits of the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First) with elected officials, policymakers, foster parents, advocates and other community leaders using both traditional and social media. Early in 2018, local media across the United States started covering Family First in light of public meetings and other implementation activities.

As you think about how to discuss Family First with your community and stakeholders, be strategic about messages and placements. Whether you approach or have been called by reporters from newspapers, television or radio stations or online publications, develop tailored messages for target audiences. Think about placements and the best way to reach your audiences — in editorials, columnist commentaries, op-eds, blogs, radio talk shows or community calendars. Ask, are you working to reach internal staff? Elected officials? Service providers? Stakeholders? A broader public?

Focus on your agency's commitment to kids and families

- Build a strategic communications plan based on your agency's vision, values and mission. The critical elements of a communications plan include:
 - Identify your target audiences, both external and internal.
 - Develop tailored messages.
 - Produce needed materials.
 - Assess your resources and bandwidth for doing a good job.
 - Write an action plan with timelines, assignments and anticipated outcomes.

- Your ongoing activities might include:
 - publishing op-eds, blogs, newsletters and other communications where you control the message,
 - pitching news stories to local outlets,
 - securing editorial endorsements and columnist support,
 - cultivating partnerships with a variety of community voices about a collaborative approach around the implementation of Family First,
 - positioning your messages on social media outlets,
 - preparing for backlash or pushback, and
 - monitoring your results while repeating and revising as needed.

Op-ed and blog placements

You might want to start by placing an op-ed authored by an agency spokesperson or by a local advocate. Op-eds give you a chance to frame Family First in your own 500 words (word limits vary by publication) while highlighting some of the key messages in this tool kit. Here are a few examples:

- **Reaching influential audiences:** A newspaper op-ed by Jim Koppel, assistant commissioner for Children and Family Services for the Minnesota Department of Human Services, highlights *Putting families first will help keep children safe*.
- **Targeting service providers:** Providers are critical to the success of Family First and their voices are important for implementation. In New York, William Gettman, CEO of Northern Rivers Family Services in Albany, co-authored a piece with Sarah Kroon Chiles, executive director of the Redlich Horwitz Foundation, and Jeremy Kohomban, CEO of Children's Villages that ran in several daily papers and was posted on their websites entitled, *New federal law aims to increase family-based care*. In Florida, Maggie Dante of the Children's Home Society of Florida authored an op-ed titled, *Ending the need for foster care as we know it*.
- **Encouraging community voices:** Local groups can be important champions. In Rhode Island, Darlene Allen, CEO of Adoption Rhode Island, did an op-ed in the state's largest newspaper: *Helping families help children*.
- **Reaching policymakers and foundations:** Rob Geen, director of policy reform and advocacy at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, targeted other foundation leaders and policymakers with a blog for The Duke Endowment that puts Family First in the historical context of child welfare reforms and looks at the promise, opportunities and potential for helping children and their families. <http://dukeendowment.org/news/blog>

Editorial and columnist commentary

If your local media regularly covers child welfare issues, regardless of their point of view, their editorial board may have an interest in taking a position on Family First implementation as an opportunity to improve services to children and families.

- In Dallas, where the paper is routinely critical of the public agency, the editors used Family First as hope for the future in an editorial headlined, *Federal Family First Act could help vulnerable Texas kids – but only if the state quits dragging its feet*.
- In Utah, columnist Monica Villar makes a case for *Dispelling the stigma of foster children: Family First Prevention Services Act Supports Families in Crisis*.

News stories — print, broadcast, online

Positive stories are appearing in a variety of media about the opportunities provided by Family First.

- In Hattiesburg, Mississippi, [local coverage included covering community implementation](#).
- In Seattle, [the local television station](#) connected the challenges of racial disparities to the potential of Family First implementation as an opportunity for improvements.
- In Oregon, a popular online outlet, Keizertimes, focused on Family First with the headline, [Foster system changing from outside and in](#).

Calendar of events

Themed months are a time to write and pitch stories about Family First. For example, April is Child Abuse Prevention Month, May is Foster Care Month, September is Recovery Month and November is Adoption Month. Home for the holidays is often a theme from Thanksgiving to the end-of-the-year. Other feature stories appear during Back-to-School season, Mother’s Day and Father’s Day.

Work strategically to place editorials and news stories around state legislative actions or to submit positive media coverage as part of legislative hearings. Use calendars posted in local media outlets as a way to reach community groups and other stakeholders. Weekly papers can be a good way to communicate with local leaders and weekly newspaper editors are often looking for good news stories.

Targeted and specialized outlets

If you need to boost support among the judiciary, there may be state legal publications with an interest in a piece about Family First. Schools and school boards, police and law enforcement agencies, mental health associations, substance abuse treatment and recovery groups, university schools of social work and public health, community groups, the business community, service groups such as Rotary, local funders including United Way and other stakeholders — all have newsletters or listservs to reach their members. These can be an important outlet for framing the conversation about Family First opportunities and how each audience can participate in implementation.

Remember

- **Put kids first.** Keep kids, children and youth at the center of messages, rather than agencies, providers, systems or reforms. Focus on what’s best for kids and their families.
- **Keep it simple.** Messages need to be compelling, easy to say and be read, heard and understood.
- **Tell personal stories.** Describe your kids, their families, and hopefully, their successes, along with a few challenges.
- **Tailor messages to the target audiences.** Agency managers know and understand concepts such as kinship, continuum of care, levels of care or long-term well-being. These terms are not likely to be understood by elected officials, county commissioners or broader audiences.
- **The bottom line is, “Kids can’t wait.”** Judges, child welfare agency staff, state legislators and policymakers need to act now so kids grow up in families, not institutions.