



These talking points and companion message box are designed to help you communicate with key stakeholders about the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First). Agency staff can choose appropriate messages and strategies. Here are a few tips:

- Build talking points around the mission, values and vision of your agency.
- Explain how the overarching goals and focus of Family First supports the values your agency shares with stakeholders.
- Describe the possibilities for exciting new opportunities, innovations, community partnerships and other actions provided by Family First implementation; reinforce these with stories, data and concrete examples, when possible.
- Tailor your messages to key target audiences.
- Try talking in short sound bites in addition to providing detailed background.

### Our vision, values and mission are reflected in Family First

Family First is based on several core principles shared by our agency:

- Kids involved with the child welfare system should grow up in safe, stable and secure families that support their long-term well-being. Research makes clear that growing up in a family is essential for all kids, especially those who have experienced abuse or neglect.<sup>1</sup>
- Systems should work to keep families together by providing access to prevention services so children and teens can grow up in their own home and caregivers who need access to treatment and support services can improve their ability to care safely for their kids.
- Children and teens who cannot stay at home should live with relatives or close friends. When this is not possible, they should live with a loving and supportive foster family.

### An opportunity moment with exciting possibilities

Our agency believes (and local advocates, policymakers and community stakeholders agree) that passage of Family First is an opportunity moment that offers exciting possibilities for us to be responsive to the specific needs of children, teens and families. Family First provides additional resources to promote innovations and flexibility in our reform efforts thanks to federal reimbursement for prevention services. This is an important opportunity for us to engage the entire community in planning for Family First implementation and gather ongoing feedback on improving our preventive services and practice models. This includes engaging with community-based organizations, private providers, the legal community and other stakeholders.

- A strong federal-state-community collaboration is the foundation for new Family First policies, which demand quality prevention services with a proven track record based on data, facts and evidence. Implementation of Family First's provisions means fairness for all families, more

resources and the flexibility to be innovative and responsive to opportunities, especially during challenging times such as today's opioid epidemic.

### Family First offers help and hope for children, teens and families

The law provides an opportunity for positive change and supports ongoing efforts to transform our child welfare system by keeping children and teens safely with their own family and to avoid the often-traumatizing experience of unnecessary placement into the foster care system. Its name reflects the elements of the legislation: *a family first* for children and teens with *prevention services* to keep kids safe and growing up in their family.

- Prevention services, including in-home, skills-based training for parents; mental health care, including family therapy; and substance abuse and treatment programs, are important parts of Family First.
- When our agency and the courts determine that children need to enter foster care, Family First specifically calls for them to be placed in the least restrictive, most family-like setting to meet their individual needs.
- The law recognizes that treatment programs can provide short-term, customized therapeutic support while kids are living in families. This could be with birth parents, other relatives, close friends or foster caregivers. Residential treatment may be needed for short-term stabilization, usually less than 90 days, with follow-up services when children return to their family.
- Federally reimbursed services are meant to support and strengthen families, so children don't enter care. They are also meant to maintain child and family connections when children enter foster care or require short-term residential treatment. And they provide six months of after-care when a child has transitioned home from either setting. The focus is on helping children and families live and grow together safely and successfully.

### True transformation will take time

Family First follows a long tradition of legislation designed to ensure that children and teens grow up in a family. The law is the first major modernization and overhaul of the system in three decades and the proper implementation of all elements will take time.

Beyond Family First implementation, policy modernization will always be needed, based on lessons learned and evolving evidence on what works best for our children, teens and families. Family First supports our ongoing reform efforts. We now have additional resources to promote innovation, collaboration and partnerships thanks to the federal dollars that can be used for prevention services.

### The opioid epidemic

The nation's opioid crisis has been a motivating factor for congressional support of Family First. The number of children in foster care has increased dramatically, which the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services largely attributes to the opioid addiction crisis.<sup>2</sup>

- Family First offers new supports for our families struggling with substance use disorders by providing access to mental health care, substance abuse programs, treatment services and increased support for grandparents and other relatives to care for children.
- In appropriate cases, children can stay with their parents while at residential substance abuse treatment programs for drug or alcohol addiction.

### Additional language for target audiences

- Research shows that kids of all ages need close family relationships to develop and grow. Attachment is needed for healthy child and adolescent development; without it, children struggle when they are younger and throughout adulthood.<sup>3</sup>
- Separation from family is traumatic for children; it's painful for parents, too. When agencies and judges decide to separate children from parents, we owe them the best possible care and family is the best choice, starting with relatives or close friends.
- Childhood trauma and adverse experiences, including separation from parents and family, often result in a lifetime of emotional and psychological problems.
- To provide high-quality services to children and families, public agencies and family courts need community support — a wide array of stakeholders, advocates and our families need to collaborate and work together, guided by the communities they serve. Children and youth do best in a strong family and families do best in supportive communities.
- Children, youth and family safety and well-being are at the center of our work. They deserve access to quality services designed around evidence-based research and outcomes.
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau describes the principles and values guiding our work in child welfare as "the recognition that all parents and families could become vulnerable with a twist of fate, that all families are worthy and deserve respect, that all children love their parents, and that everyone needs a little help at times in overcoming life's challenges."<sup>4</sup>
- Children and teens touched by our child welfare system need to have the right options, at the right time, with the right services for themselves and their families.

### Message tips for each audience

When talking to **elected officials**:

- Point out that family and helping the next generation are important American values. We are a nation that values family and community.
- Drive home the message that the public strongly supports investments in children and youth. Public opinion polling consistently shows support for preventing child abuse, helping people help themselves, engaging local communities in services and programs for children and families, establishing public/private partnerships and putting family first.<sup>56</sup>
- Be prepared to respond to possible local backlash among people who may not be aware that there are proven ways to help families stay together with the right incentives and investments in programs that work.

- Only if needed, make a case for cost-effective outcomes rather than cost savings.

When talking to **agency leaders and providers**, remember:

- Concerns about finding good foster parents can be reframed as the need to focus more resources on better identification and support of kinship care, individualized child and teen recruitment programs, certification standards, training and support of foster and kinship resource families.
- Add examples of successful transitions, for kids, families and service providers, in your agency and other communities and in states that have increased the number of kids safely living in families and decreased the need for out-of-home placements.
- Put “loving” before “family” when discussing the benefits to kids of relative or foster families.
- Provide examples of programs that have been proven to be effective and now have an opportunity to be funded under Family First.

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<sup>1</sup> Dozier, M., Kaufman, J., Kobak, R., O’Connor, T.G., Sagi-Schwartz, A., Scott, S., Shaffer, C., Smetana, J., van IJzendoorn, M.H., & Zeanah, C.H. (2014) Consensus statement on group care for children and adolescents: A Statement of policy of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol. 84, No. 3, 219-225

<sup>2</sup> Radel, L., Baldwin, M., Crouse, G., Ghertner, R., & Waters, A. (2018, March 7) Substance use, the opioid epidemic and the child welfare system: Key findings from a mixed methods study. *ASPE Research Brief*, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>3</sup> Li, D., Chng, G., & Chu, C.M., (2017) Comparing long-term placement outcomes of residential and family foster care: A meta-analysis. *Sage Publications*, Trauma, Violence and Abuse, 1-12. Doi: 10.1177/1524838017726427

<sup>4</sup> Milner, J., Testimony from Jerry Milner, Associate Commissioner, The Children’s Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on the opioid crisis: Implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). (2018, July 24). Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Human Resources, U.S. House of Representatives.

<sup>5</sup> Americans View Child Abuse and Neglect as a Serious Public Health Problem. (2018, June 18) *Research America*, a nationwide survey by Zogby Analytics for Research America & EndCAN. [www.researchamerica.org/childabusesurvey](http://www.researchamerica.org/childabusesurvey).

<sup>6</sup> Baldari, C., Mathur, R., Study Shows Americans Agree: Poor Child Well-Being is a Top Issue. (2017, October 3) *First Focus Blog*. [www.firstfocus.org/blog/most-americans-see-child-poverty-as-top-concern-study-finds](http://www.firstfocus.org/blog/most-americans-see-child-poverty-as-top-concern-study-finds)