



Passage of the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First) is an opportunity moment that offers exciting possibilities to respond to the individual needs of children and families. Many state and local advocates, policymakers, public child welfare agencies, private providers, the legal community and other stakeholders are working in partnership on implementation. Here's why:

Family First makes resources available to promote innovation and flexibility thanks to new federal dollars for reimbursing prevention services. It offers an important opportunity to engage the entire community in planning for Family First implementation and gathering ideas on how preventive services and practice models can be added or improved. In addition to involving families, Family First provides an opportunity to engage existing and new stakeholders.

Public agencies now have a chance to truly put families first by endorsing the philosophy that infants, children and teens want, need and deserve a family, that kids do best in families and that families do best in strong, supportive communities. The new law's name reflects its key components: *a family first* for children and teens with *prevention services* to keep kids safe and families together. Family First funding for states and tribes is not dependent on the family's income.

The new law updates child welfare policies and recognizes what research has made clear — that growing up in a family, not in residential or group settings, is essential for all kids, especially those who have experienced abuse or neglect.

Adopted on Feb. 9, 2018, as a part of the Bipartisan Budget Act (HR. 1892), Family First follows a long tradition of federal legislation designed to ensure that children and teens grow up in a family. In passing the law, Congress recognized that too many children are unnecessarily separated from parents who could provide safe and loving care if given access to needed mental health services, substance abuse treatment or improved parenting skills.

**Among the law's features, federal reimbursements can be provided to public agencies that:**

- Develop and provide prevention services.

*Here's why it's important: In 2014, 46 percent of federal dollars were spent on out-of-home placements and only 15 percent on in-home prevention services. Family First offers an opportunity for agencies to provide more appropriate, effective prevention services based on the needs of children, teens and their families.*

- Provide for families at risk of entering the child welfare system up to 12 months of mental health care; substance abuse and treatment services; in-home, skill-based parenting training; and family therapy. The law also eliminates time-limits for family reunification services.

*Here's why it's important: In most systems, child neglect is the reason most children and teens are removed from their homes. Often, the child neglect determination is driven by a lack of available mental health services, drug/alcohol abuse programs and parenting skills training. Research is clear that taking a child from their parents can cause trauma that has a lasting negative impact; some children do not recover. Quality preventive, trauma-informed services based on promising, well-supported practices are the basis for transforming public child welfare agencies. They are what's best for children and their families.*

- Ensure residential treatment programs are part of the essential, often life-saving services provided by the child welfare system, understanding that to be effective such treatment needs to be short-term, therapeutic and high quality.

*Here's why it's important: Family First recognizes that treatment programs can provide short-term, customized therapeutic support while kids are living in families — with birth parents or with kin or foster caregivers. Residential treatment may be needed for short-term stabilization, usually less than 90 days.*

### To learn more

Background materials from a variety of groups may be shared with staff, elected officials, policymakers, community leaders and other stakeholders.

- The full text of the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#)
- The Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has released several resources, including a 20-page [Information Memorandum](#)
- The American Public Human Services Association conducted a [Family First Act webinar](#) with attorneys from Arkansas and Texas human services departments
- The Children's Defense Fund has a [two-page summary](#) and a [13-page detailed summary](#)
- The [Congressional Research Service](#) issued a [35-page memorandum](#) for Congress that includes a chart comparing three versions of the Family First Act, which will help agencies understand which provisions made it into the final law