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Child Welfare: Purposes, Federal Programs, and Funding

The Work of Child Welfare Agencies

Children depend on adults—usually their parents—to protect and support them. The broadest mission of public child welfare agencies is to strengthen families so that children can depend on their parents to provide them with a safe and loving home. More specifically, child welfare agencies aim to prevent abuse or neglect of children in their homes. If this has already happened, the agencies are expected to offer aid, services, or referrals to ensure children do not re-experience maltreatment. For some children, this means placement in foster care.

Federal child welfare policy has three primary goals: ensuring children's **safety**, enabling **permanency** for children, and promoting the **well-being** of children and their families.

Foster care is understood to be a temporary living situation. When a child enters care, the first task of the child welfare agency is to provide services to enable the child to safely reunite with family. If that is not possible, then the agency works to find a new permanent adoptive or guardianship family for the child. Youth in care who are neither reunited nor placed with a new permanent family are typically *emancipated* at their state's legal age of majority. These youth are said to have *aged out* of care.

Children Served

During FY2021, public child protection agencies screened allegations of abuse or neglect involving 7.2 million children, and carried out investigations or other protective services responses involving 3.0 million of those children. Follow-up services were provided in the homes of some 900,000 children.

Some children are removed from their homes following an investigation; roughly 207,000 children formally entered foster care during FY2021. Neglect and/or parental drug abuse are the circumstances most often associated with foster care entry. Among the 391,000 children in foster care on the last day of FY2021, most (83%) lived with families (nonrelative or relative foster family homes and pre-adoptive homes), 9% lived in a congregate setting, 7% were on trial home visits or in supervised independent living, and 1% had run away.

Of the 215,000 children who formally left foster care during FY2021, the largest share returned to their parents or went to live informally with a relative (53%), while 37% left care for a new permanent family via adoption or legal guardianship. At the same time, 9% aged out of care, while most of the remainder (1%) were transferred to the care of another agency.

Who bears public responsibility for this work?

Under the U.S. Constitution, states are considered to bear the primary public responsibility for ensuring the well-being of children and their families. Public child welfare agencies at the state and local levels work with an array of private and public entities—including the courts and social service, health, mental health, education, and law enforcement agencies—to carry out child welfare activities. This work is done consistent with state

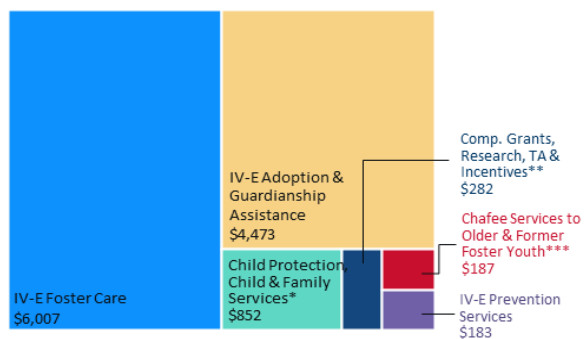
laws and policies. At the same time the federal government has long provided technical support and funding that is intended to improve state child welfare work. As part of accepting this funding, states must agree to meet certain federal program rules, such as required permanency planning for all children in foster care. Compliance with these child welfare requirements is monitored via federal plan approvals, audits, and reviews.

The Children's Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) administers most federal child welfare programs. State level administration may be housed in the state human services department, or at an independent, state-level child and family services agency. Some states have county-administered programs supervised by the state agency.

Child Welfare Spending and Programs

State child welfare agencies spent about \$31.4 billion on child welfare purposes during state FY2020, according to a survey by researchers at Child Trends. Most of that spending drew from state and local coffers (51%). Of the remainder, 30% was supplied by federal child welfare programs included in the Social Security Act (SSA); 18% came from other federal programs, most of which are not solely child welfare-focused (principally, the Social Services Block Grant and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families); and less than 1% of the funding came from offsets, and private and in-kind support. For FY2023, about \$12.0 billion was provided for federal programs that are wholly dedicated to child welfare.

Figure 1. Federal Child Welfare Funding by Purpose
(FY2023 total: \$12.0 billion. Dollars shown in millions)



Source: Prepared by CRS based on Division B, H, and N of P.L. 117-328.

Notes: Funding for IV-E activities is shown as definite budget authority (BA); IV-E prevention services amount taken from the foster care BA (as estimated for the FY2023 President's Budget). Actual funds spent may vary.

* Includes formula funding in IV-B and CAPTA plus \$10 million in supplemental CWS funding for areas affected by Hurricanes Ian and Fiona; ** Includes competitively awarded funding and incentives in IV-E, IV-B, CAPTA, and the Victims of Child Abuse Act; *** Includes Chafee general and ETV funding.

Title IV-E Foster Care, Prevention, Permanency

Title IV-E helps support provision of foster care, adoption assistance, or guardianship assistance to children who meet federal IV-E eligibility rules. The IV-E program may also fund kinship navigators and selected services intended to prevent

the need for foster care placement. Federal support for these IV-E activities is authorized on a mandatory, open-ended and permanent basis and is estimated as \$10.7 billion for FY2023.

Foster Care, Adoption, and Guardianship

Under IV-E, states and participating tribes must provide foster care and adoption assistance to eligible children, and the federal government is committed to paying a part of the cost of that aid (50% to 83%, depending on the state/tribe), as well as a part of the cost of administering the program (50% in all states/tribes) and for certain training (75% in all states/tribes). States may opt to provide IV-E guardianship under this same cost-sharing structure. During FY2022, about 726,000 children received IV-E assistance each month, including for adoption (548,000), foster care (135,000), and guardianship (43,000).

In general, states and tribes may spend IV-E dollars (federal and state/tribal) only on children who meet federal eligibility criteria. Rules vary by the type of aid. For foster care, they include an income test (applied to the home the child is removed from), removal requirements (typically, a judge must find that a home is “contrary to the welfare” of the child and that “reasonable efforts” to prevent foster care were made), placement in a licensed foster family home or other eligible facility, and age requirements. Fewer than 45% of children in care meet those criteria, although this share varies by state.

Prevention Services and Kinship Navigator Programs

States and tribes opting to provide approved IV-E prevention services may offer them to children at *imminent risk* of foster care; pregnant or parenting youth in care; and the parents or kin caregivers of these children and youth. No income test need apply. During FY2022, an average of 7,000 children in 16 states and one tribe received IV-E prevention services each month. As of early 2024, 42 states, the District of Columbia, and four tribes have HHS-approved IV-E prevention plans; 4 states (Delaware, Mississippi, New Jersey, and New Mexico) and Puerto Rico have IV-E prevention plans under review; and 4 states (Alabama, Alaska, South Dakota, and Texas) and the U.S. Virgin Islands did not have such plans either in review or approved.

Federal IV-E prevention funding is available for up to 50% of a state/tribe’s IV-E prevention costs, including related training and administration. Services offered must be rated by the IV-E prevention services clearinghouse as meeting IV-E evidence standards; and, to claim full support in FY2024, at least 50% of a state’s IV-E prevention dollars must be for services rated as *well-supported* or *supported*. Beginning with FY2025, at least 50% of a state’s IV-E prevention services spending must be for *well-supported* programs in order for the state to receive federal IV-E support for that spending. States most often include *well-supported* programs in their IV-E prevention services plans, including (in 20 or more) Parents as Teachers, Functional Family Therapy, Multisystemic Therapy, Motivational Interviewing, Healthy Families America, or Parent-Child Interaction Therapy.

Title IV-E-funded kinship navigator programs are intended to ensure kin caregivers have access to services and supports that meet their own needs and those of the children in their care. The programs may serve kinship families whether or not they have child welfare involvement. IV-E support is authorized at 50% of a state’s/tribe’s costs, if the navigator program meets IV-E evidence standards. As of early 2024, four kinship navigator programs were rated as meeting those standards.

Title IV-B Child and Family Services

Title IV-B includes the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services (CWS) and the MaryLee Allen Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) programs. These programs authorize grants to states and tribes for child and family services. Total FY2023 funding for CWS, PSSF and related research and training is \$710 million, including \$10 million in supplemental CWS disaster funding. Capped mandatory and/or discretionary funding authority for CWS and PSSF was extended by Section 6103 of P.L. 117-328 through FY2023 (at the most recently authorized funding levels). These authorities have continued into FY2024, via a series of continuing resolutions (P.L. 118-15, P.L. 118-22 and P.L. 118-35), most recently through March 8, 2024.

There are no federal eligibility rules for receipt of Title IV-B services. Funds are used to protect children (CWS); support, preserve, and reunite families (CWS and PSSF); and promote and support adoption (CWS and PSSF). Children served may be living at home or in foster care. States must provide at least \$1 in nonfederal funds for every \$3 in federal funds received.

A portion of PSSF funding is reserved each year for the Court Improvement Program (\$30 million), monthly caseworker visit grants (\$20 million), Regional Partnership Grants (RPGs) to improve outcomes for children and families affected by substance use disorder (\$20 million), and for related technical assistance and research (circa \$8 million). For FY2023, P.L. 117-328 further directed \$19 million of PSSF funding to kinship navigator grants; \$6 million to the IV-E clearinghouse; and \$1 million for additional child and family services research.

Chafee Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood

States receive Chafee basic grants to support services for children who experience foster care at age 14 or older, including most of those youth who were formerly in care (up to age 21, or 23 in some states). Funding is also authorized for Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs) to help Chafee-eligible youth attend college or post-secondary training. Chafee grant funding is authorized on a capped mandatory basis and for ETVs on a discretionary basis. Both funding authorizations are permanent (no year limit). States must provide no less than \$1 for every \$4 in federal Chafee/ETV funding they receive. FY2023 funding was \$187 million.

Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)

CAPTA authorizes grants to states to improve child protective services (no nonfederal match required), and for community-based efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect (20% nonfederal match required). CAPTA’s funding authorities expired with FY2015, but support has continued. FY2023 funding totaled \$214 million, including \$105 million for state grants, \$71 million for community-based grants, and \$38 million for research and technical assistance.

Adoption and Legal Guardianship Incentive Payments

States may earn incentive payments for increasing the rate at which children who would otherwise remain in foster care are placed in new permanent adoptive or guardianship families. For FY2022, HHS awarded \$46.5 million to 47 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. FY2023 funding of \$75 million continued this program, although discretionary funding authority ended with FY2021.

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