



## TANF & Child Welfare Partnering for Prevention: CALIFORNIA'S SITE JOURNEY

*The Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance convened the Families Are Stronger Together Learning Community (FAST-LC) in partnership with the Children's Bureau to support eight States and two Tribes in forming partnerships between Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and child welfare programs focused on preventing families' involvement in the child welfare system. The FAST-LC took place between September 2023 and September 2024.*

### Motivation for Change

Overall, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) seeks to disrupt poverty by giving families the opportunities and resources they need to thrive. The FAST-LC afforded the agency and its partners a unique opportunity to explore innovative strategies for reaching families sooner than the point of crisis with responsive and culturally appropriate, community-based services to reduce the number of children and youth entering foster care. This effort involved a close collaboration between California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs, the state's TANF program), its child welfare program (which is also housed within CDSS), and the Child and Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC).

CDSS also applied a rigorous equity lens to its FAST-LC initiative, seeking to accomplish its goal by harnessing disaggregated administrative data in collaboration with community partners across the state to evaluate, iterate, and adapt its strategies to reduce racial, regional, and economic disproportionalities and disparities in the child welfare system.

### Partnership Innovations

CDSS built a coalition of partners to advance this initiative, including the Office of Tribal Affairs; Tribal Advisory Committee; Native leaders from the Para, Wilton, and Yurok Tribes; the California Child Welfare Council; CFPIC and its Youth Engagement Project in particular; and frontline county practitioners that are part of California's [Linkages](#) initiative, among others. By creating a cross-agency team to guide the state's prevention improvement efforts, CDSS aimed to model a state-level collaboration that could be replicated at the local level in support of an integrated statewide social safety net system for child and family well-being.

CDSS leaders prioritized partnering with Tribal community and program leaders to explore and create strategies for prevention that are culturally responsive. The agency shifted its approach to outreach with local Tribal TANF staff (among which there had been considerable turnover) and added a new leader with Tribal experience to the state's Linkages team.

### About California

California served an average of over 824,000 individuals each month through its TANF program during fiscal year 2023, which represents more than 40 percent of the national TANF caseload. The California Department of Social Services, the state's human services agency, supervises the TANF and child welfare programs across 58 counties. California is a county-administered state, which means that discretion as to the design and delivery of services happens at the local level.

There are 109 federally recognized Tribes whose Native lands exist within California's borders. Based on U.S. Census figures as of 2022, more than 660,000 residents of California identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native.



## Prevention Innovations

Through the FAST-LC, California:

- Developed a joint training and resource platform to support greater consistency in proactive, prevention-oriented service delivery by CalWORKs and child welfare frontline staff, known as CalPrevents. This effort built on the state's existing Linkages initiative, a partnership model to ensure families engaged with both CalWORKs and child welfare are being served in a cohesive and coordinated way—for example, through joint case planning.
- Linkages was expanded to 71 percent of California's counties and the state began a process of co-developing a Linkages model with and for Tribes.

## Lessons Learned

California's experience in the FAST-LC led to several successes and important lessons learned. Key insights include:

- Although the evidence base is strong for providing concrete supports to families as a means of preventing their involvement in the child welfare system, many questions remain about how to operationalize this well and when it is most effective to provide supports. An implication of this is that practitioners at the frontlines of service delivery must be careful about assumptions and be flexible in response to the discrete needs and situation of each family.
- Outreach to and partnership with Native communities and families is best led by people with deep connections to these communities and adhering to the principle that Tribes must lead the process of tailoring approaches to their unique contexts.
- Building effective partnerships across departments and at different levels of government requires a mindset shift among all leaders and staff to overcome the compartmentalization of programs, which is deeply ingrained in the system.