

The CHAMPS Campaign Urges States to Use at Least 50 Percent of Family First Transition Act Funds to Support Family-Based Foster Care

The *Family First Transition Act (FFTA)* was passed in December 2019 and provides \$500 million in flexible federal funding to states and tribes to help them implement the bold reforms envisioned by the *Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First Act)*. This new federal funding will be distributed in one-time allotments to states and tribes; there are no matching requirements. Funds can be used flexibly to address challenges and advance implementation efforts.

An overarching goal of the Family First Act is to ensure more children have the benefit of growing up in safe, stable families. The Act aims to keep more families together and prevent unnecessary entries into foster care. The *Family First Act* also elevates the importance family-based care for children and youth who need foster care.

The CHAMPS Campaign urges policy and program leaders to seize the opportunity provided by the *FFTA* to strengthen family-based care by directing resources to services and supports for foster and kinship families. Doing so is critical to achieving the transformational goals envisioned by the *Family First Act*. Here's why:

- 1. We will always need a foster care system** that can provide a temporary safe haven for a limited number of children and youth who cannot remain safely at home.
- 2. Children in foster care should experience the most family-like setting possible.** Children do best in family-based care, and they are more likely to leave foster care for safe, permanent families when they are in family settings, yet most states struggle to recruit and retain enough foster families to meet the unique needs of children in foster care.¹
- 3. Foster and kinship families help children reunify or find forever families.** Foster families can serve as coaches and mentors to birth families in their time of need. Some foster parents become adoptive parents or guardians for children who cannot return home, or help children or youth make connections that lead to family.

¹ Child and Family Services Reviews Aggregate Report (FYs 2015-17): https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cfsr_aggregate_report.pdf

What is the Family First Transition Act?

The *FFTA* was signed into law in December 2019 and aims to help public child welfare agencies implement the *Family First Act*, a major child welfare reform law that was passed in 2018 through Title VII, Div. E of P.L. 115-123. Key provisions in the *FFTA* include: one-time flexible funding provided to all states and tribes, totaling \$500 million; assurance of federal funding certainty by creating a “federal foster care funding floor” in FY2020 and FY2021 to 24 child welfare agencies with recently ended waiver projects; and a time-limited policy change (during FY2020-FY2023) to loosen the restrictions on the level of evidence a program must have demonstrated in order to be eligible to receive federal funding under the *Family First Act's* prevention activities.

What can the new flexible federal funds in the Family First Transition Act be used for?

FFTA acknowledges that child welfare agencies face implementation challenges in realizing the bold reforms envisioned by the *Family First Act*. A **Program Instruction** (PI-20-04) issued by the Children's Bureau in February 2020 describes the wide array of allowable uses of the *FFTA* funds including for: any purposes specified in title IV-B of the Social Security Act; any activities previously funded under a waiver demonstration project to reduce any adverse fiscal impacts as jurisdictions transition funding sources for the projects; and any activities directly associated with implementing the *Family First Act*. Importantly, support for children and youth in family-based foster care and recruitment and retention of foster parents are allowable under IV-B and are also related to implementation of Family First. See the **Program Instruction** for more detailed information on allowable activities.

4. **Prioritizing foster family recruitment and retention is necessary** to achieving the goal of safely reducing group care.
5. **Solutions exist.** In partnership with families, agency leaders have developed effective approaches to common challenges foster family recruitment, training, and retention.

CHAMPS encourages state decision makers to invest at **least 50 percent** of their state's FFTA allotment in policies and practices to strengthen family-based foster care. Decision makers can make investments that have immediate and long-lasting impact and ensure they *meet the goals of the Family First Act*.

Highlighted below are policies and practices that can strengthen family-based care through collection and analysis of critical information; effective recruitment of foster and kinship families; and support for the families who are caring for children and youth in foster care.

Informed Decision Making

Understanding the experience of foster and kinship families throughout their involvement can help agencies better recruit, support and retain families. FFTA funds can be used to adapt and build information systems and feedback loops that can help agencies match children with families and improve foster family recruitment and retention for years to come. Smart investments include:

- Improving information systems to provide a clear picture of foster family capacity and needs and to track the recruitment, support and retention of foster families, including kinship families
- Administering periodic surveys of foster and kinship families and youth in foster care
- Establishing statewide and/or regional parent advisory boards to include foster, kin and birth families

Effective Family Recruitment

Effective foster family recruitment and retention often requires a dedicated focus, a level of expertise and consistent prioritization. Lessons learned from federal 'diligent recruitment' grantees² offer examples of how to use specialized staff to increase recruitment of families for children and youth. FFTA funds provide states the opportunity to make use of specialized staff, track progress, and then shift resources to support the work long term. Smart investments include hiring or contracting for specialized services such as:

- Family finding/family search and engagement
- Foster family recruitment
- Support for foster and kinship parents (families are more likely to say yes when they know they will be supported!)

Supported Families

When foster and kinship caregivers are supported, they can provide stable, quality caregiving and also serve as a support to birth families. In turn, children experience higher quality placements and better rates of stability; children are also more likely to leave foster care to join a permanent family; and agencies experience greater efficiencies and lower costs. FFTA funds can be used to start up (or expand existing) critical supports to family-based providers and demonstrate their impact on stability and outcomes. Smart investments include:

- Modernize in-service training for foster and kin families with most up-to-date information and adult learning techniques
- Provide crisis mobile response services
- Improve training for caseworkers, judicial staff and families in support of family time (i.e. visitation) between children in care and their birth parents

² Diligent Recruitment of Families for Children in the Foster Care System
https://www.jbassoc.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Diligent_Recruitment_Report_Final.pdf