



Engaging Philanthropy in Improving **CHILD WELL-BEING OUTCOMES**

Thanks to a new law, there are more ways than ever for foundations to support children in their communities

By Dr. William C. Bell, President & CEO, Casey Family Programs

The Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), which became law in February 2018, has the potential to dramatically improve child safety, reduce abuse and neglect, and strengthen the capacity of families to more effectively meet the needs of their children. It is the most significant change to federal child

welfare funding in more than a generation. It has also created a rare and important opportunity for philanthropy to facilitate cross-sector collaborations on behalf of vulnerable children and families.

For the past 38 years, the largest source of federal child welfare funding, known as

Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, was limited primarily to placing and maintaining children in foster care after they had suffered maltreatment. Family First extends that funding stream to provide critical proven and promising prevention services to eligible families with the aim of improving safety and stability for children.

For decades, philanthropy has led in identifying and funding “what works” to help families and their children succeed and to inform policymakers. Building upon this research, Family First presents a wide range of options to government systems, policymakers, judicial partners, community organizations, foundations, faith-based institutions and a host of other entities to come together to be more effective in strengthening families.

Securing the well-being of vulnerable children is a community responsibility, requiring purposeful and intentional collaboration across the entire community. All five sectors that constitute a community have to be involved in creating solutions that address the needs of its children and families. **These five sectors are:**

1. **Government, or public, sector**
2. **Private, or business, sector**
3. **Nonprofit sector, including civic and faith-based organizations**
4. **Philanthropic sector, which includes foundations**
5. **General public sector – those whose lives we seek to improve and everyday concerned citizens**

Family First is an important tool in building a 21st century child welfare system that is responsive to the needs of children and families: a system that includes more than just child protection agencies, but also other agencies, stakeholders and sectors, including philanthropy.

A major goal of the philanthropic sector is to leverage its resources so that they will have a long-lasting impact on the social issues it cares about. The reality is that our dollars are small relative to the amount government spends to address those same issues. Collaboration addresses this challenge by leveraging each of our relative strengths to have even greater impact.

Still, many in the philanthropic sector are reluctant to collaborate with government. There is often a concern that political cycles, leadership changes and staff turnover can make it difficult to sustain a focus on improvement strategies. Over the past decade, it has become increasingly evident that there are many child welfare leaders and organizations across the United States that have overcome many of their agencies’ historical challenges and have successfully implemented innovative approaches to improve outcomes for the children, families and communities that they serve.

We believe the Family First Prevention Services Act provides exciting opportunities for foundations and members of the other four sectors to work together

with government agencies to increase the impact of their work. This article will highlight some of the ways foundations can work with government child welfare agencies to assist with the implementation of Family First to best leverage our philanthropic investments in improving the lives of vulnerable children and families and strengthening the communities in which they live. *(See [Seven Key Areas for Foundations to Consider on the next page.](#))*

The Power of Cross-Sector Collaboration

The driving philosophy underlying the five-sector model is one in which all five sectors capitalize on their leadership and make the most of their capacity to influence, invest resources and build the political and public will necessary to improve marginalized communities and the lives of the children and families living in those communities.

Family First provides an opportunity to include community-based solutions when addressing the needs of children and families.

Child welfare must shift its model of practice from one that is primarily child-centered to one that also focuses on the child’s family and community. When communities are strong, healthy and vibrant, we have an environment where the residents and businesses of that community can thrive. On the contrary, if communities are isolated, under-resourced and challenged, the children and families living in those communities most likely are not doing well, or only marginally so.

The neighborhood or ZIP code a child is born in should not be one of the most determinant factors of that child’s quality of life or that child’s success or failure in life.

Of the nation’s roughly 33,000 residential ZIP codes, 20 percent of them are home to 80 percent of the nation’s children who live in poverty, with 56 percent of those children concentrated in just 10 percent of the ZIP codes.

Likewise, 76 percent of adults 25 and older who do not have a high school diploma or GED live in 20 percent of the nation’s ZIP codes.

Eighty-five percent of these ZIP codes overlap and are home to most of the country’s children in poverty and high school dropouts.

An insufficient income and an insufficient education are just two factors that can limit one’s access to opportunities and have a negative impact on a child’s future

outcomes. These same communities most likely also produce a disproportionate number of children in foster care, inmates in prison and violent crimes and homicides.

Many of these communities have not been the beneficiaries of philanthropy’s efforts, actions, or dollars. These are communities most in need — communities that, if changed, if improved, if made better for their residents, could effect positive change for a child’s lifetime.

An Opportunity for All

As a nation, we rarely have the opportunity to reimagine a world where every child is safe, families are strong and each community can provide the support needed to build hope in the life of every person. Family First has provided us all with a chance to make significant progress in turning that vision into a reality. Philanthropy has a unique role to play in the months and years ahead. By supporting the five sectors to step up and lean in, philanthropy can be more than its money. Philanthropy can be a catalyst for long-lasting and sustainable improvements that truly transform lives.

Among the Maasai of East Africa, it is customary for acquaintances and passersby to greet each other asking a question: “Kasserian ingera,” or, “How are the children?” The reply is, “Sapati ingera,” meaning, “All the children are well.” This response is at once a declaration and an aspiration. This exchange acknowledges the community’s common interest in all of its children, whether or not they are one’s own birth children. The Maasai know that the well-being of all their children is an indicator of the well-being and future of their community.

Family First is an opportunity for the entire community — all five sectors, including philanthropy — to work together under a shared ownership of the issues, with a shared responsibility for the solutions, toward a shared vision of stronger families and communities. ■

Sources:

The Family First law can be found on page 169 of this document: <https://www.congress.gov/115/bills/hr1892/BILLS-115hr1892enr.pdf>

*See Christie, C. A., Inkelas, M. & Lemire, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Improvement science in evaluation: Methods and uses*. New Directions for Evaluation, 153, 11–21.*

*NICs are distinguished by four essential characteristics: (1) focused on a well-specified common aim; (2) guided by a deep understanding of the problem, the system that produces it, and a theory of improvement; (3) disciplined by the rigor of improvement science; and (4) coordinated to accelerate the development, testing and refinement of interventions and their effective integration into varied educational contexts. As described by LeMahieu, P., in *Networked improvement communities – What? Why? And a little how*. Presentation to Casey Family Programs, November 8, 2017.*

Seven Key Areas for Foundations to Consider

1 GET TO THE TABLE.

It is often said that if you are not at the table, you can't make change. You are unlikely to succeed at systems change if you invest in interventions without engaging with those who lead the system you are trying to change.

Action Plan:

- Build relationships with local child welfare system leadership, legislators and judges. The three branches of government have considerable power in the decision-making process around keeping families together. Ideally, build these relationships around the same table instead of separate ones.

2 BRING OTHERS TO THE TABLE.

Philanthropic organizations are usually experienced community conveners. Working with government to bring the right people together is a critical skill that philanthropy can provide to help drive change.

Action Plan:

- Leverage your relationships and bring to the table leaders from each of the five sectors: philanthropy, nonprofit, government, business and citizens.

3 CHAMPION AND FUND RESEARCH.

Family First allows federal funding for prevention programs that meet one of three recognized levels of evidence: promising, supported or well-supported. This presents an important opportunity for philanthropy to support practice leaders and research scientists who are developing evidence for specific services and programs. Engaging with system leaders, legislators and judges will help clarify where evidence gaps exist and how to address them.

Action Plan:

- Assist system leaders in selecting and implementing evidence-based practices.
- Support research to improve practices. This approach would enable the country to take advantage of two important innovations in evaluation:
 - **Improvement science:** A form of evaluation that focuses on using data to improve policies and programs over time. Improvement science uses iterative learning cycles to adopt, amend or discontinue concepts and is derived from the work of Deming and others.
 - **Networked improvement communities (NICs):** Scientific learning communities to help guide and monitor the work.

4 INNOVATE, IMPLEMENT AND SCALE.

Philanthropy has an opportunity to work with government to support demonstration and innovation that government can later bring to scale. This includes family-based substance abuse treatment facilities, high-end treatment services, interdependent living services for youth and young adults aging out of foster care, and better services for children ages 0–3 reported to Child Protective Services.

In addition, many funders already invest in areas of prevention. There may be effective strategies or high-quality interventions already available in communities that, if brought to scale, could assist many more families.

Finally, many nonprofits and government entities are challenged with data collection to either inform targeted delivery of services or to measure the impact of those services and the performance of systems and communities.

Action Plan:

- Provide direct support for nonprofits or government to develop and implement strategies to enable scaling, demonstration and innovation of efforts within the funder's practice area of interest.

5 BUILD CAPACITY.

Community-based nonprofits are often in a strong position to provide the kinds of reimbursable services allowed under Family First. But even those who are getting good results for the populations they serve might lack the capacity to contract with local jurisdictions to take advantage of new opportunities. The same holds true for building capacity within public systems.

Action Plan:

- Support the capacity-building of nonprofits or governments to achieve long-term and sustainable results.
- Target research support to help align delivery of services to communities where the needs are greatest.
- Support strategic agency collaborations or mergers when necessary to achieve efficiencies in areas such as billing or payroll.
- Develop specific strategies for rural and tribal communities, which are often overlooked in philanthropic efforts and investments. Programs in rural and tribal communities often require different approaches than in urban communities to be successful.

6 FACILITATE FIVE-SECTOR COLLABORATIONS.

Under Family First, philanthropy is in a strong position to bring together the five key sectors — philanthropy, nonprofit, government, business and citizens — to understand the needs of the community and help jointly craft a path forward that improves the lives of children and families. Philanthropy can provide the persistence needed to keep parties at the table and ensure a sustained focus on improving outcomes in specific communities.

Action Plan:

- Invest in strategies to improve five-sector, community-driven collaboration and integrated functioning.

7 SUPPORT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT.

Government, nonprofits and constituent leadership can make all the difference in the success of any program or service. All too often, however, government entities and nonprofits don't prioritize leadership development because they are focused on meeting the needs of those they serve.

Action Plan:

- Invest in leadership, supervisory and front-line human capacity development for both nonprofit and government agencies.
- Develop and support constituent leadership so they have a seat at the table as an equal partner in service design.