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The 2023 State of Child Welfare in Pennsylvania

# STRENGTHENING THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH AND FAMILIES





**Our 14th annual State of Child Welfare report provides a 5-year analysis of how Pennsylvania fares with practices around child safety, placement, and permanency and includes county-level data and statewide and geographic trends to improve the child welfare system. We continue to analyze racial disparity and disproportionality across the child welfare system’s population (age 0-20).**

**A Note on Required Data Suppression Rules:**

To ensure privacy and protect against identifying individuals, the Department of Human Services has data suppression requirements for counts of less than 11. This is also true for any percentage or rate that relates to a count of less than 11. When possible, a range is provided. In some instances, a percentage or rate related to a count greater than 10 must also be suppressed (or changed to a range) so that another rate cannot be determined through calculation. Additionally, some data was not provided in 2021, and those indicators are noted. Entities interested in these data points should contact DHS directly.

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# WHAT THE 2022 DATA REVEALS

## Structure of Pennsylvania's Child Welfare System

The purpose of the child welfare system is to investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect, make determinations on the validity of reports, and provide in-home and community-based services to stabilize families and keep them intact. However, if a placement is necessary, the system should ensure that children and youth are placed in a family-based setting or a treatment program in a time-limited capacity to meet specialized needs.

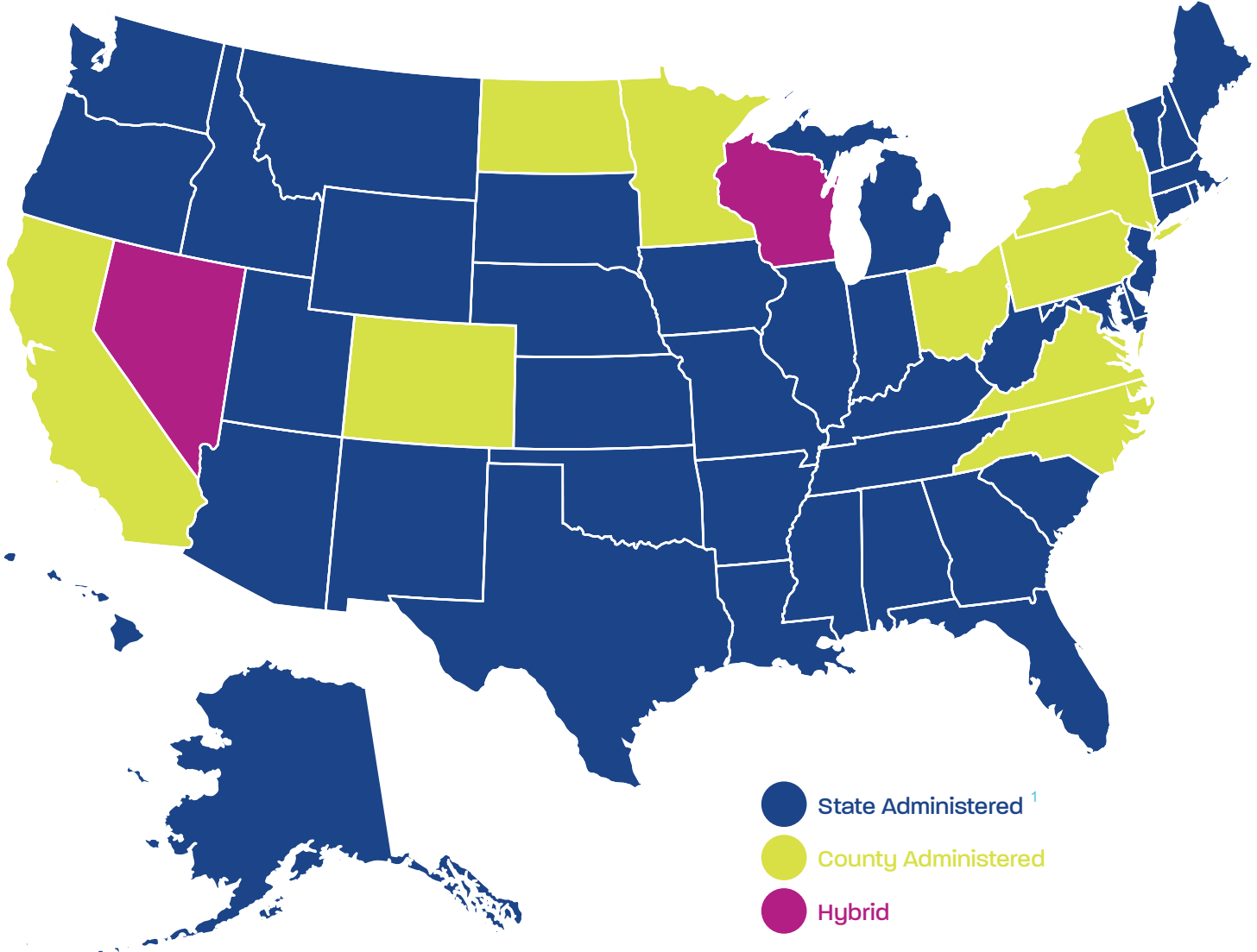
All states must have a child welfare system, but operate differently to serve children, youth, and

families. There are three types of child welfare systems:

- State-administered—a centralized, state-provided system.
- County-administered—each county operates independently but is supervised by a state entity.
- Hybrid—a system administered partially by the state and by the counties.

Pennsylvania is a county-administered, state-supervised child welfare system. The Office of Children, Youth, and Families (OCYF) supervises the 67 independently operated county child welfare agencies. Mandated and permissive reporters

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disclose child abuse and neglect allegations by verbally or electronically providing information to ChildLine, the state's toll-free reporting hotline. ChildLine then determines the category of investigation and transmits the information to the appropriate county child welfare agency for investigation. These are defined by either a Child Protective Services (CPS) report or a General Protective Services (GPS) report. Pennsylvania is somewhat unique in having differentiation in reports, whereas other states have only one designation of reports.

CPS reports—defined by the Child Protective Services Law—include reports of abuse such as physical, sexual, and serious physical neglect, among others. A case may also be determined as pending, meaning that the investigation may take longer to come to a final determination.

The county child welfare agency most often investigates CPS reports, but certain reports are also investigated by OCYF regional office staff.

GPS reports have less severe findings, often focused on indications of neglect, and can include parental substance use disorders, truancy, and homelessness, among others. It is also the goal of the child welfare agency to provide services to families to assist with stabilization, decrease risk factors for ongoing abuse or neglect, meet specific treatment needs, or support placements in out-of-home care. Services can be community-based, in which there is no formal oversight or contracting by the county child welfare agency, and can be either preventative or on an intervention basis. Similarly, and more often, county agencies contract with providers to offer comprehensive services. Whichever service the county provides, community or in-home support is a critical practice that child welfare agencies deliver.

## Outcomes for CPS Reports

- **Founded**—there is a court action that includes a judicial adjudication that the child was abused, acceptance into an accelerated rehabilitative disposition program, a consent decree entered in a juvenile matter, or granting a final protection from abuse order.
- **Indicated**—OCYF regional office staff or a county child welfare agency find substantial evidence that abuse has occurred based on medical evidence, the child protective service investigation, or an admission by the perpetrator.
- **Pending**—status assigned to a report when the County Children and Youth Agency (CCYA) cannot complete the investigation within 60 calendar days because criminal or juvenile court action, including an active criminal investigation, has been initiated.

## Outcomes for GPS Reports

- **Validated**—allegations are substantiated as true.
- **Invalidated**—allegations are not substantiated.
- **Screened out**—meaning no formal investigatory action is taken—or accepted for ongoing services. CPS cases are required to be investigated and cannot be screened out.

If a child cannot safely remain in their biological home, placement outside the home into a foster care setting is the next option. Preferably, children should stay in their homes and community with supportive services to ensure their safety and mitigate ongoing risks. However, when this cannot

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occur, children and youth should have the first option of being placed with kin, or someone they know, trust, or with whom they have a significant supportive relationship. Kin do not have to be blood-related and can be a teacher, counselor, family friend, or someone the child or family identifies as support. Only when kin placement is ruled out should a child be placed in a higher level of care, such as foster care. Congregate care settings, such as group homes or residential placements, must be the last option and should only be utilized to meet specialized, time-limited treatment needs.

Once a child is in out-of-home placement, in most cases, every effort should be made to reunify them safely and quickly with their biological parents. A concurrent plan is needed to determine the next permanency option if reunification is unsuccessful. The goal should account for what is in the child's best interest and with their input if age-appropriate. Other permanency options include adoption or permanent legal guardianship. The goal of last resort is Another Planned Permanent Living Arrangement (APPLA), which means that a child will likely exit care to a non-permanent option. This leaves children and youth without legal permanent connections and families.

## Data Trends: Abuse and Neglect

Child abuse referrals include allegations of suspected abuse defined in the Child Protective Services Law, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, or serious physical neglect. In 2020, there was a significant decline in child

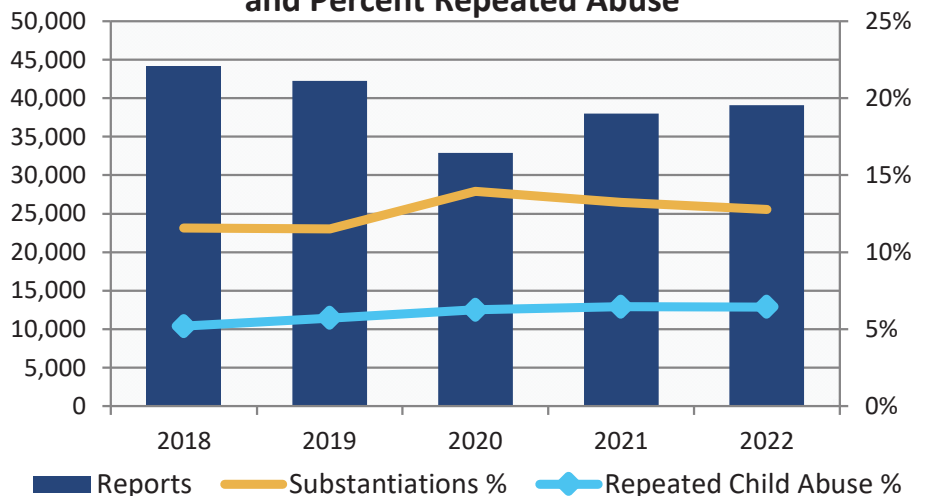
**"As cases of child neglect continue to increase throughout the Commonwealth educating mandated reporters on a deeper level about race, inequality and diversity is essential. Mandated reporters and community members alike must realize that poverty does not cause neglect. There is a very fine line between the parental neglect of a child and societal neglect of families. Ensuring that parents and caregivers are able to meet the needs of their children through child care subsidies, affordable housing, home visiting and enhanced primary care, in addition to concrete supports is essential to addressing the risk factors associated with neglect."**

*- Angela Liddle, President and CEO, Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance*

abuse referrals due to the COVID-19 pandemic, when children had less contact with mandated reporters such as teachers, medical professionals, and coaches. With schools resuming in-person

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### Child Abuse Reports, Percent Substantiated and Percent Repeated Abuse



Source: Annual Child Protective Services Report

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learning and children returning to more normalcy, referral rates began to climb slightly in 2021.

**In 2022, there were 39,093 CPS reports, an increase of over 1,000 from 2021.** The number of reports is still not at the pre-pandemic level but continues to rise since stay-at-home orders were lifted. However, the substantiation rate for the reports was only 12.8%. Cases of repeat child abuse and neglect also slightly declined in 2022, but are still higher than pre-pandemic rates.<sup>2</sup>

General protective services referrals are non-abuse allegations, such as truancy, homelessness, or parental substance use disorders. **In 2022, there were 165,295 GPS referrals, marking an increase of over 3,500 reports from 2021. Over half of the received GPS reports are screened out, with the remaining half receiving a formal investigation. Additionally, the substantiation rate of GPS reports slightly declined in 2022, with 24.2% being validated.**<sup>3</sup>

**“The role of providers in assuring child safety has never been more poignant than it is today as providers take on key roles in child welfare that generate momentum for change that result in successful outcomes in hundreds of families lives throughout Pennsylvania.”**

*- Terry Clark, President and CEO, Pennsylvania Council on Children, Youth, and Families*

In-home services often refer to prevention and intervention-based programs that mitigate safety or risk factors and help keep families intact. However, if an out-of-home placement is necessary, services can help to reunify families or support permanency. **In 2022, 211,150 children and families were served through child welfare-funded services.**

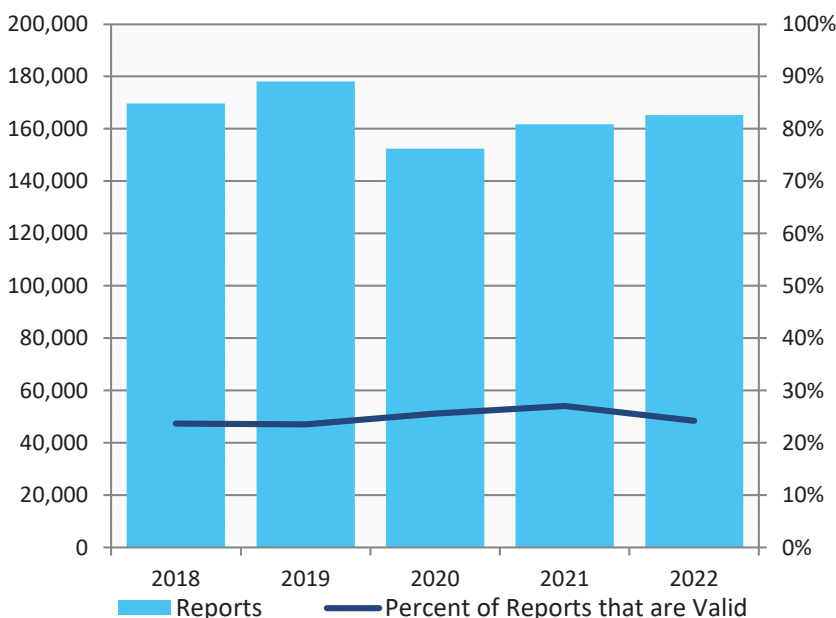
This is an increase of more than 18,500 children and families receiving child welfare-funded services compared to 2021 data. The number of children and families served does not include

services provided through other DHS-funded programs in OCDEL, OMHSAS, etc., or independent community providers, meaning that children and families could receive additional prevention or intervention services outside the child welfare system.<sup>4</sup>

### **What the research says:**

Research shows there is significant racial disparity and disproportionality in every major decision-making point within the child welfare continuum. This is often true for child abuse and neglect investigations, as the underlying concerns often relate to family poverty and systemic racism. There are a variety of issues that contribute to disparity and disproportionality, some

**General Protective Services Reports, Percent Valid**



Source: Annual Child Protective Services Report



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of which include the disparate needs of children and families, racial bias and discrimination, and geographical context.<sup>5</sup>

While poverty does not equate to abuse or neglect, it is a risk factor that can interfere with a parent’s ability to care for their children by restricting access to basic needs, such as housing, food, and health care.<sup>6</sup> Poverty and other vulnerabilities experienced by families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds may amplify their exposure to social services systems (such as financial or housing assistance), which may further increase their visibility to mandated reporters.<sup>7</sup> Implicit and explicit racial bias may also impact diverse families during reporting, investigation, and substantiation.

Structural racism is the result of the accumulation of historical and cultural factors that have allowed racial inequities to endure and adapt over time.<sup>8</sup> One emerging school of thought is the Structural Risk Theory, which indicates that families with low socioeconomic status are more likely to have multiple reports to CPS/GPS because structural barriers associated with neglect, particularly economic stability, have not been addressed.<sup>9</sup>

It considers how structural socioeconomic conditions, as well as individual implicit and explicit bias, contribute to the overrepresentation of child welfare involvement for children and families of

color. Disproportionality within the child welfare system can be viewed as a reflection of underlying racial and socioeconomic injustices present throughout society as a whole. Researchers have extensively attempted to disentangle poverty from neglect without success.<sup>10</sup> Data consistently shows a connection between family financial hardship and maltreatment, which helps to explain why access to social safety nets often leads to a reduction in neglect and child welfare involvement.<sup>11</sup>

## Data Trends: The Foster Care System

While county agencies offer services to increase safety and minimize risk and future harm, not all children can remain in their biological homes. Preferred placement is in a family-based setting, such as kinship or foster care. Congregate care, such as group homes and residential programs, should be the last option and aimed at meeting the time-limited specialized treatment needs of a child or youth.

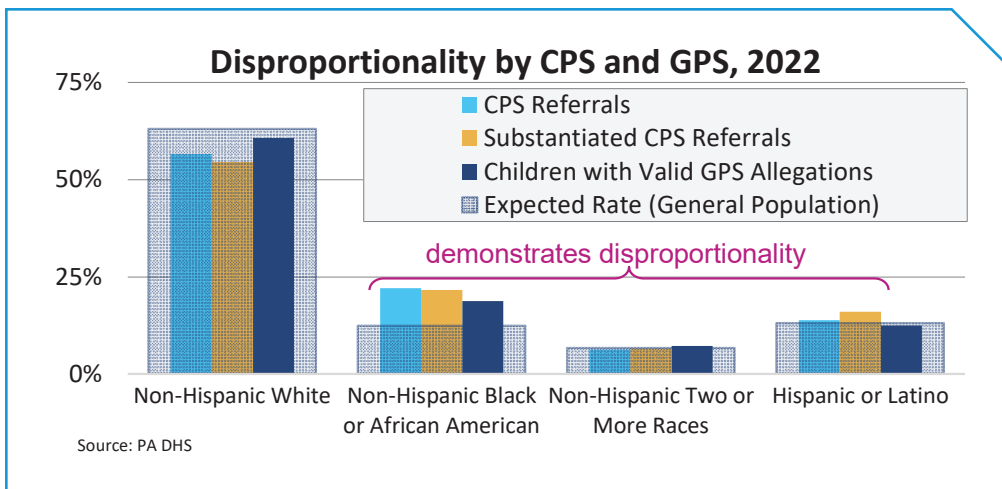
***In 2022, 19,287 children were served in the foster care system, a decrease of more than 1,200 children from 2021 and the lowest rate in the last five years.***

A majority of children, or 84.9%, are placed in a family-based setting of either kinship, non-relative, or adoptive homes.

Placement rates with a kinship caretaker are the highest in 5 years, with 42%

placed with someone they know, trust, and have a positive, supportive relationship. Rates of children placed in a congregate care setting are the lowest in 5 years, with a rate of 10.4%.<sup>12</sup>

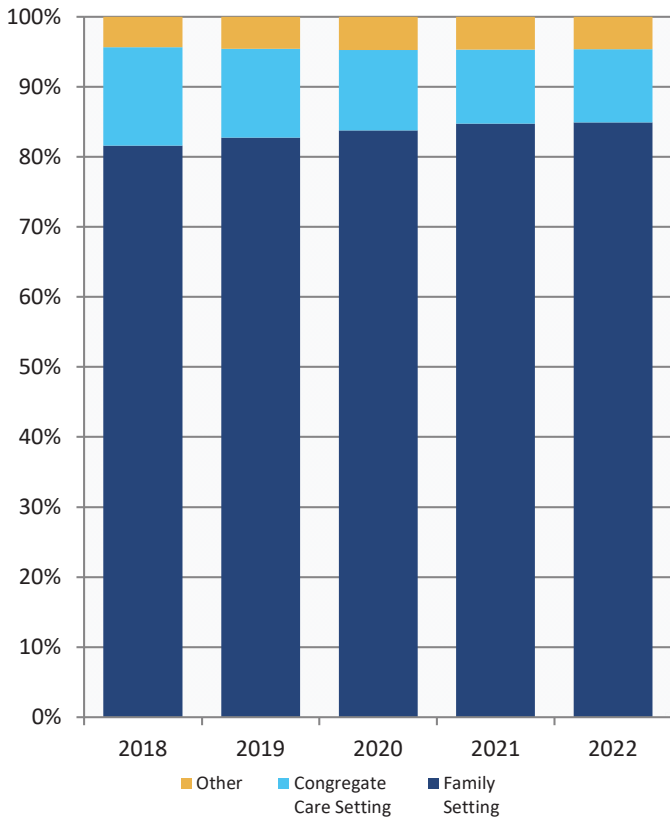
The largest population of children being served in the foster care system are those under the age



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**Latest Placement Setting of All Children Served in Foster Care**



Source: PPC analysis of AFCARS data

of 6 years old. This is often due to the inability of young children to care for and protect themselves and needing additional protective factors to allow them to remain safely in their homes. The next highest population are transition age youth, ages 14 and older.

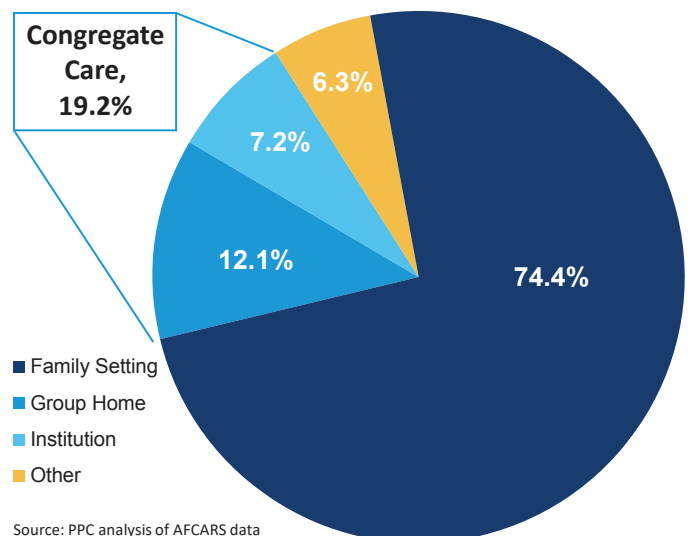
Rates of first-time entries into foster care have continued to decline and are the lowest in 5 years. A total of 5,394 children and youth entered placement for the first time in 2022. Placement with kin was the highest in 5 years, with 46.6% being served in this setting as their first reported placement. ***The most vulnerable population—children under the age of six—make up over half of all first-time entries.***<sup>13</sup>

Some children experience multiple entries into the system, meaning they reunify or achieve permanency but are then placed in the system again due to new allegations or changes in circumstances. ***At least 1 in 10 children and youth in placement experienced a re-entry into care.*** Factors like inadequate transition and support services, failure to

**“When this system is at its best in serving children and family there are key factors present with perhaps the most critical being interagency and stakeholder engagement. At a time when resources are scarce and the demands of treating children with more complex needs; partnership and collaboration will be the pathway to building system that is responsive to these needs in balanced and thoughtful manner. Reform in regulations, treatment practices, payment modalities are mission critical to creating a system we envision for the children and families of the Commonwealth.”**

- Jim Sharp, Mental Health Policy Director, Rehabilitation and Community Providers Association

**Percent of Children by Placement Setting at Re-Entry to Foster Care, 2022**



Source: PPC analysis of AFCARS data

Note: The congregated care total does not equal the sum of group home and institution due to rounding.



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mitigate issues that lead to the initial placement, or premature reunification or permanency finalization can cause re-entry. **It is important to note that transition age youth, or youth ages 14 and older, make up almost half of the population re-entering placement.** When a child or youth re-enters care, they are less likely to be placed in a family-based setting and more frequently enter a congregate care setting than at first entry. While 74.4% of re-entries resulted in a family-based setting, nearly 20% of placements resulted in congregate care. Congregate care should be the last resort. It should only be utilized when a youth needs time-limited treatment to support reintegration into a community-based setting.<sup>14</sup>

## Data Trends: Removal Reasons

County child welfare agencies are required to report the reasons for which a child experiences a placement episode. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) technical bulletin, issued by the Administration for Children and Families, identifies 15 factors that are federally required data elements the state must track and report. While there are 15 independent factors, a child can have multiple placement reasons. **The top 5 placement reasons for all children served from October 2021 to September 2022, including first-time entries and re-entries into placement, were:**

1. Parental drug abuse
2. Neglect
3. Caretaker's inability to cope
4. Inadequate housing
5. A child's behavioral problem(s)

These primary reasons for placement are not abuse allegations but rather GPS allegations that correlate with neglect and poverty. Allegations of general neglect, including inadequate housing, are

issues that could be alleviated more appropriately by community-based interventions and supportive services rather than disrupting families and communities by separation.

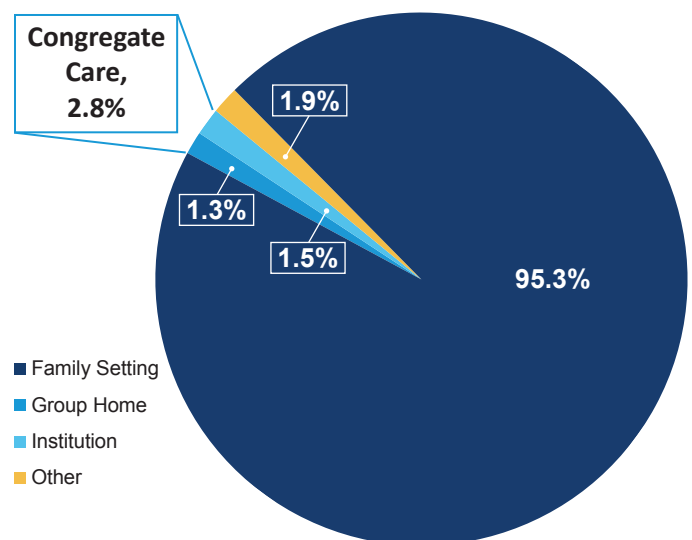
## Data Trends: Transition Age Youth

Transition age youth are ages 14 and older who have been served in the foster care system and are a population that continues to need targeted and specialized support. **Older youth made up nearly one-third of the overall foster care system, one-quarter of first-time entries, and almost one-half of all re-entries in 2022.** Unfortunately, transition age youth have poorer outcomes than their peers in the general population and often struggle with exiting placement and entering adulthood successfully.<sup>15</sup>

Of the transition age youth population served in foster care in 2022, only 57.9% were in a family-based setting. Nearly one-third were served in a congregate care setting, such as a shelter, group home, or residential facility. Similarly, first-time

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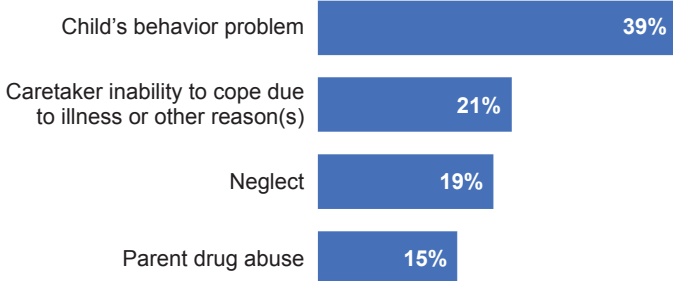
Percent of All Youth (<14 years) in Foster Care During the Year by Placement Setting



Source: PPC analysis of AFCARS data

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## Top Four Placement Reasons for Youth (14+years) in Foster Care October 2020-September 2021



Source: PPC analysis of AFCARS data

entries into placement had comparable outcomes, with 54.7% placed in a family-based setting and 40.0%, or 2 in 5 youth, placed in congregate care. However, rates of youth placed in family-based settings decreased for re-entries, with only 50.1% placed in a family-based setting.<sup>16</sup>

The top four reasons transition age youth are placed in care are child behavioral problems, caretakers' inability to cope, neglect, and parental drug use. The top four reasons for first-time youth entry were the same as the overall population.

To better understand how transition age youth are faring, the Annie E. Casey Foundation produced its second installment of the [Fostering Youth Transitions](#) report.<sup>17</sup> The report has detailed profiles of all 50 states, along with the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, and traces the experiences of foster youth ages 14 to 21 who were served in the foster care system between 2006 and 2021. Pennsylvania's profile demonstrates both positive and negative trends. Some of the conclusions are:

- There are fewer youth in foster care in 2021 compared to 2006, a reduction of 48%
- Placement due to neglect, or often related to poverty, is the primary reason for placement rather than abuse
- Increases in kinship care have led to a reduction in group care

- Youth are still struggling with exiting care to permanency
- Although extended foster care is an option for youth over 18 years old, participation is low

Transition services, such as vocational training and housing assistance, are designed to help young people in foster care transition to adulthood. However, participation in transition services is low. Only 51% of Pennsylvania's foster care population received a service at any point between ages 14-21. Of this population, only:

- 71% utilized life skills training
- 44% utilized academic support
- 22% participated in educational or vocational training
- 14% utilized room and board

While some promising trends demonstrate the child welfare system's positive efforts to better support youth, much more work remains. With only half of youth receiving transition services, and less than half achieving permanency, older youth still need additional support to become successful adults. One of the most important ways to identify effective ways to support youth transitioning is to listen directly to their solutions. PPC convened several focus groups in 2022 and 2023 with former older foster youth.

These focus groups allowed youth to share their perceptions of strengths, challenges, and solutions for adequately supporting youth through transitions. The themes that emerged include:

- Ensuring that kinship care and kinship connections are a primary goal—many youth reported they were placed in formal foster care rather than with family. Additionally, even if kin could not be formally licensed, they were completely disconnected and not provided opportunities for ongoing visitation

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**“When I was in foster care, it would have been really helpful if there was someone to make sure I could keep talking to my brothers and sisters. I’m the oldest and staying connected with them would have meant a lot to me. My brother and I were placed together initially until he was sent away for mental illness and I never saw him again. I have five siblings all together, all by the same biological parents whom I have no contact or relationship with. I only have contact with one brother, who was adopted by a family in Ohio, and unfortunately the family doesn’t support or honor our relationship.”**

*- Johnny N., former foster youth*

or connections through phone calls or letters. Most importantly, youth noted that connections to siblings, preferably by joint placement, are lacking and frequently not occurring.

- Ensuring that formal foster parents have the tools and resources to care for youth adequately—overwhelmingly, youth reported that foster parents have unrealistic expectations of them. Many youth reported being treated differently than biological children in the home, that foster parents were quick to have them removed, and often didn’t understand how to navigate the trauma they experienced. One recommendation is to update the training requirements for foster parents and have additional crisis case management support to provide trauma-informed care when difficult situations arise.
- Improving and increasing access to transition services—youth often feel unprepared to transition to independence and cannot care for themselves in the most basic ways. This includes simple tasks like managing a checking

account, doing laundry, and navigating public transportation. Additionally, they desire more financial support through child savings accounts and increased access to housing options.

- Improving quality and increasing access to mental health, behavioral health, education, and specialized services—youth report having significant trauma from the situation that led to placement and additional trauma navigating (often multiple) placements. There appears to be a lack of consistency in access to services, specifically those that treat mental and behavioral health needs. Youth who identify as LGBTQIA+ reported that services to support their population are scarce, and there are not many formal networks for peer support.

OCYF and county child welfare agencies should invest in conducting further older youth focus groups at the state and local levels. Understanding their specific needs can help to identify and develop targeted solutions to address their concerns. Ultimately, youth know and understand their needs and are expert advocates for improving the system.

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**“As youth continue to develop a sense of self in their journey through and out of the system it is pertinent for systems to hear them. Understanding that youth are the experts of their own story and having on the ground connections to others is extremely important in developing policy that will affect them directly. Welfare systems and legislators must do their due diligence in listening to youth in order to understand the development of what is needed within the system for the betterment of youth.”**

*- Teshiana Smith-Nichols, Youth Leader, Foster Club*



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## Permanency Outcomes

All children in foster care have an assigned permanency goal that the county agency must work to achieve. Additionally, children have a concurrent goal to be worked on simultaneously if the primary goal is not achievable. Family-based permanency goals include reunification with a parent or guardian, adoption, and guardianship (often known as subsidized legal custodianship). Non-permanency outcomes fall under Another Planned Permanent Legal Arrangement (APPLA), which can include long-term foster care and emancipation—this often means the child exits care without a legally established family.

Reunification with a parent or guardian is the primary permanency goal, with 65.1% of children and youth having this assigned goal in 2022. 1 in 4 children were anticipated to be adopted from the foster care system, either by a foster or kinship caregiver. **Exits to non-permanency goals more than doubled in 2022, with 7.9% of children and youth having an assigned goal of APPLA. Youth with an assigned goal of APPLA are less likely to achieve permanency and often exit care to homelessness. In 2022, 78.8% of youth with a goal of APPLA were discharged to non-permanency rather than reunification, adoption, or guardianship.**<sup>18</sup>

The children that left foster care in 2022 spent approximately 15.7 months in care before exiting. Children who reunified with a parent or guardian spent less time in care than other permanency options, at a rate of 8.3 months. Children awaiting adoption spent the most time in care at 32.7 months before achieving permanency.<sup>19</sup>

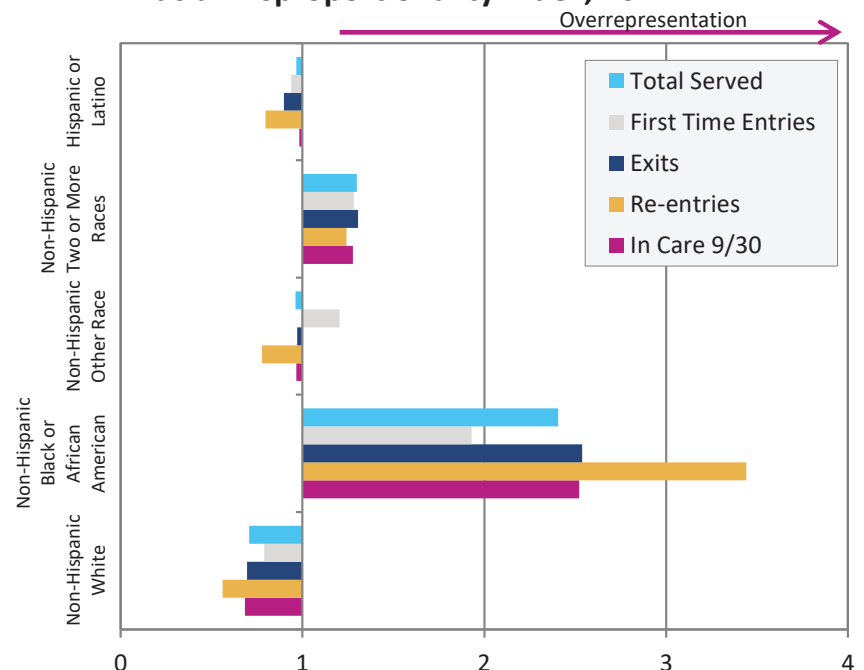
**“I often find myself explaining that Grandfamilies/Kinship families are all formed due to crisis. And due to the crisis, the children all have experienced trauma. In fact, often the entire family is experiencing trauma; the parents, the caregivers, the children, and any others living in the home. We need to be trauma sensitive to these families.”**

*- Deborah Willet, Kinship Caregiver and Program Director of GRANDFamily Connections of Chester County*

## Racial Disparity and Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System

PPC is committed to ensuring the equitable treatment of every child and youth the child welfare system serves. Far too often, Black, Hispanic, and children and families of multiple races are over-surveilled, investigated, and represented in all aspects of the system. Addressing potential

**Racial Disproportionality Index, 2022**



Source: Decennial census, PPC analysis of AFCARS data

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disparities and disproportionality in CPS and GPS investigations and foster care outcomes, including first-time entries, exits, and re-entries starts with analyzing data by race and ethnicity.

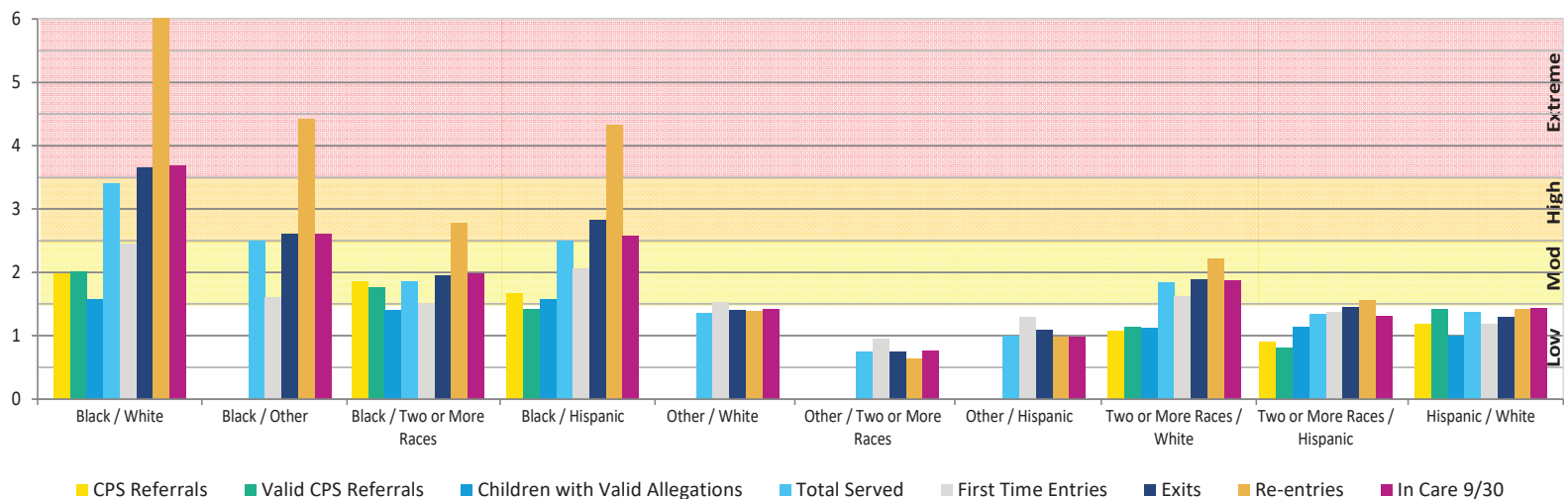
Disproportionality is apparent at the level at which groups of children are present in the child welfare system at higher or lower rates than in the general population. As exposed through the data, children who are Black, Hispanic (of any race), or of multiple races had higher than expected rates of CPS referrals, including those that were ultimately substantiated, as well as valid GPS allegations. **Regarding foster care rates, Black children are represented in re-entries 3.4 times more than their rate in the general population. Additionally, Black children are disproportionately placed in institutions, and children of multiple races are disproportionately placed in pre-adoptive homes.**<sup>20</sup>

Disparity demonstrates the lack of equality between two racial groups in the child welfare system. This data reflects a significant difference

between white children, Black children, and children of two or more races. **Black children are more than 6 times more likely to re-enter foster care than white children and more than 3.5 times more likely to exit and remain in foster care than white children. Black children are more than 2.5 times more likely to exit foster care and remain in foster care than Hispanic children.**<sup>21</sup>

DHS released a *2021 Racial Equity Report* that focused on ways to promote intentional equity and inclusion, but the formal strategy to improve outcomes remains unclear.<sup>22</sup> One step OCYF has taken includes creating an internal race equity workgroup and identifying ways to disaggregate data. For the first time, OCYF included some disaggregation of child abuse data in the [2021 Annual Child Abuse Report](#) and updated these indicators in the 2022 Annual Child Abuse Report.<sup>23</sup> PPC will continue to elevate the need for a more intentional focus on equity and inclusion in meetings with the administration.

### Racial Disparity Indices, 2022



Source: Decennial census, PPC analysis of Annual Child Abuse Report and AFCARS data. Unless noted, all races shown are non-Hispanic. Scores near 1.0 are indicative of no disparity between the race or ethnicity shown.

## Continued Implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act



One of the most significant child welfare legislative reforms in recent history, the Family First Prevention Services Act—part of the omnibus, sweeping Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018—aims to promote evidence-based programs to support families and avoid formal foster care placement. One critical provision incentivizes family-based care while reducing federal support for congregate care placements. Other components include extending supports for transition age youth and addressing specialized issues, like parental substance use. Out of the 11 provisions that are included in the law, Pennsylvania has opted to implement two, which include the Title IV-E prevention provisions and specialized settings. There has been no indication by OCYF to expand and implement the other provisions (such as qualified residential treatment programs).

Pennsylvania's [5-year Title IV-E Prevention Plan](#) was approved in the summer of 2023.<sup>24</sup> The plan outlines the roadmap for formal implementation of the prevention provisions of the law—this includes how children and youth are identified as candidates for foster care, approved evidence-based services, and ongoing reporting and data collection. To support counties in implementing FFPSA, OCYF developed the Building Strong Communities and Healthy Families workgroup in 2022, tasked with providing strategic direction related to the state's implementation of the 5-year plan. The outcomes from this workgroup and its future are unknown. Additionally, counties were to be receiving technical assistance for establishing

innovation zones, with learning collaboratives as part of ongoing planning, but it is unclear if those have continued. Counties are still working to implement the prevention provisions, but no county has fully implemented them to date.

One of the significant challenges in implementation is surrounding workforce turnover and retention. Counties continue to struggle with maintaining a full staff compliment; high staff turnover directly translates to inability to meet outcomes as caseworkers are overwhelmed, and struggle to meet basic requirements. Any new initiative will be difficult to adequately implement without a qualified, sustained and maintainer workforce.

**“The workforce of child welfare is what makes the whole system function. We must make sure pay is appropriate to the work and recognize the high level of professionalism and dedication that the job requires. Without adequate staffing, everybody suffers, both the families and youth being served and the other workers trying to carry the load for vacancies.”**

*- Brian Bornman, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Children and Youth Administrators*

## New Federal Kinship Rules



On September 28, 2023, the U.S. Administration for Children and Families (ACF) issued a [final rule](#) that explicitly gives all state child welfare agencies the option to use kin-specific foster care licensing standards rather than having one licensing process for both





formal foster parents and kinship caregivers.<sup>25</sup> The regulation encourages states to limit requirements that are outside of the federal safety rules and make the process easier for kinship caregivers to become licensed. The rule change will allow more children to be cared for by those they know and love and be financially supported like children with non-kin foster parents. The American Bar Association Center for Children and the Law and several other national organizations, [drafted a tool](#) to guide states in analyzing how to implement the new provisions.<sup>26</sup>

At this time, OCYF is evaluating the state's option for implementing these new provisions. Some of the provisions would require regulatory or statutory changes, which can be time-consuming. The state is determining implementation avenues, including issuing a new bulletin.

If a child must enter placement, kinship care is the best option as long as it is safe. Some of the provisions in current state policy go outside those safety requirements and place an undue burden

upon kinship caregivers; this can lead to kin being arbitrarily disqualified or self-removal. PPC hosted a focus group with kinship caregivers and formal foster parents in November 2023. Overwhelmingly, kinship caregivers reported that the licensing process is overwhelming, burdensome, and time-consuming. Their top legislative and administrative recommendation was to change the licensing requirements for kinship caregivers so that more children have the opportunity to be raised by family. PPC believes that this should be a primary priority for OCYF in 2024.

## Kin Now Have a Voice in Dependency Proceedings



[Act 48 of 2023](#) codified new requirements to allow potential kinship caregivers a voice in dependency proceedings when a child is in placement.<sup>27</sup> Currently, when a kinship caregiver is denied formal licensure and placement by a county agency, they cannot report to the court and the assigned judge as to their qualifications or be reconsidered as an option. Additionally, those kin that have been denied are also often cut off from having ongoing visitation and contact with the child or youth in placement. Under the new law, kin will be provided with the opportunity to speak with the court during one hearing and can express their desires for placement or ongoing contact for consideration. The judge can then make decisions based on the testimony and make a determination for ongoing participation in court proceedings. The hope is that the law will be more inclusive of kin and allow them more opportunities to participate in a child's case planning, including increasing kinship placements.

Continued on next page



## Journey to Success



PPC is honored to be a part of the [Journey to Success](#) policy advocacy campaign that seeks to improve opportunities and outcomes for all youth and

young adults who experience foster care by promoting their healing, family connections, and economic security. The diverse network of local, state, and national organizations work alongside youth leaders to guide federal policy reform. The campaign has six primary priorities, which include:

- Prioritizing health, health, and wellbeing.
- Nurturing family ties and family permanence.
- Retooling foster care to serve adolescents and young adults better.
- Increasing accountability, foster care fairness, and focusing on results.
- Ensuring youth are plugged into supportive services, including health, education, and housing.
- Promoting economic security.

These recommendations build on prior Congressional enactments and provide a roadmap for further reforms needed to drive better and more equitable opportunities for all youth and young adults who experience foster care. PPC will continue to advance federal policy recommendations to support transition age youth in 2024. Regarding state policy, 2023 was the first year of implementation of Act 118 of 2022. Act 118 aims to improve outcomes for Pennsylvania's transition age youth by requiring counties to eliminate APPLA for youth under 18 years old, increase family finding and adult connections, improve transition planning, and requiring new data collection elements. OCYF issued a [special transmittal](#) for implementation in 2023, and PPC looks forward to analyzing data in 2024 to determine the impacts of the new law.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Data in this annual report can help advocate state and federal policymakers to make significant policy changes for the millions of children who have—or will have—touchpoints with the child welfare system.



✓ Evaluate changes to the child protective services law and the general protective services bulletins to identify ways to reduce child welfare intrusion for families that could be better served in their communities. Solutions must emphasize the investments in social safety nets and improving cross-system collaboration between OCYF and other DHS offices (including the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning, and the Office of Medical Assistance Programs). This includes redefining allegations of general neglect and response to them, such as homelessness, mental and behavioral health, parental substance use, and meeting children’s basic needs.



✓ Kin-specific licensing standards should be implemented in Pennsylvania. The standards should ensure that burdensome, unnecessary, and non-safety specific standards are eliminated. Further, new funding should be provided to counties to assist with purchasing items that can assist with licensure (for example, well water testing or purchasing beds and dressers for children) and to create kinship support services to ensure placement stability.



✓ Continue to reduce the number of children and youth in congregate care placement for reasons not associated with time-limited, specialized treatment needs. To promote family-based care, identify fiscal strategies to invest further in community-based care, such as specialized foster care or enhanced kinship care rates. Reinvest savings into peer supports or specialized services for reintegration into the community.



✓ Ensure transition age youth can successfully exit the system by enhancing transition services and promote the use of services. Allow youth to inform the programming changes so that it meets their needs as they transition to adulthood. Focus on building support networks for youth that will be available once they exit care (outside of government supports).



✓ Expand and make data more publicly available from DHS. As OCYF builds a new state information system, increase data sets required from county agencies and ensure that all data is disaggregated by age, gender, race, ethnicity, and county. In developing the new statewide system, DHS should ensure that advocates, researchers, and families are engaged in the development process and provide feedback on outcomes to track.



✓ Develop community feedback forums—both within the state and with external advocates—to obtain the lived experiences of children and youth involved with the child welfare system to help shape practice and enact policy change. This should include special populations, such as approved or denied kinship caregivers, adoptive parents, or county and provider staff.



✓ Invest in our child welfare system at the state and county levels to ensure adequate system funding. This involves supporting the child welfare workforce, including privately contracted providers, by promoting recruitment and retention policies and developing an understanding of the federal and state funding options to support needed changes.



A review of the available child welfare data coupled with the policy recommendations outlined in this year's State of Child Welfare report can improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. There is an excellent opportunity to strategize legislative and administrative policy that focuses on better primary prevention, increasing opportunities for placement in a family-based setting, supporting transition age youth, and adequately supporting the system and workforce. These recommendations will require a deep root-cause analysis by the administration, agencies, and advocates, including lifting the voices of youth and families involved with the system. Further, it is incumbent upon DHS to increase the collection of data measures and produce them publicly and in real time. Together, all stakeholders can be a part of advancing system change.

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Statewide geographic and county-specific data tables can be retrieved [here](#).

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