



Updated August 1, 2019

Child Welfare: Purposes, Federal Programs, and Funding

What Is the Work of Child Welfare Agencies?

Children depend on adults—usually their parents—to protect and support them. The broadest mission of child welfare agencies is to strengthen families so that children can depend on their parents to nurture them, keep them safe, and provide them with a permanent, stable home. More specifically, child welfare agencies are expected to act to prevent abuse or neglect of children by their parents/caregivers. If abuse or neglect has already happened, the agencies are expected to provide assistance, services, or referrals needed to make sure children do not experience maltreatment again. For some children, this means removal from the home and placement in foster care.

Foster care is understood as a temporary living situation, and a primary task of a child welfare agency is to find children in foster care a permanent home. Usually this is done by providing services that enable children to safely reunite with their parents or relatives. If that is not possible, then the child welfare agency works to find a new permanent family for the child via adoption or legal guardianship. Foster youth who are not reunited or placed with a new permanent family are most often “emancipated” from care when they reach their state’s legal age of majority. These youth are said to have “aged out” of 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.

Children Served

During FY2017, state and local child protection agencies screened allegations of abuse or neglect involving some 7.4 million children, carried out child protection responses involving 3.5 million of those children, and provided follow-on services in the homes of some 1.1 million of those children.

Some 270,000 children entered foster care during FY2017, and as of the last day of that fiscal year, 443,000 children remained in care (including those who entered care during FY2017 or in earlier years). Circumstances most often associated with foster care placement were neglect and/or parental drug abuse.

Among children who were in foster care on the last day of FY2017, the median length of stay in care was just over a year (12.9 months). The majority (81%) were living in a family setting, 12% lived in a group home or institution, and the remainder lived in other settings.

Among the 248,000 children who formally exited foster care during FY2017, the majority returned to their parents or went to live with a relative (56%), while more than one-third (34%) left care for a new permanent family via adoption or legal guardianship (including with kin). However, some 8% aged

out of care, 1% were transferred to the care of another agency, and the remainder left foster care for other reasons.

Who Bears Public Responsibility for This Work?

As the U.S. Constitution has been understood, 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 assistance to improve state child welfare work. Further, through the provision of child welfare funding, the federal government compels states to meet federal program rules, including providing case review protections to all children in foster care. Compliance with federal requirements is monitored via federal plan approvals, audits, and reviews.

At the federal level, child welfare programs are administered by the Children’s Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). At the state level, federal child welfare programs are often administered within the state human services department, or by an independent, state-level child and family services agency. However, some states have county-administered programs supervised by the state agency.

Child Welfare Spending and Programs

State child welfare agencies spent close to \$30 billion on child welfare purposes during state FY2016, according to a survey by the research group Child Trends. The majority of this spending (56%) drew from state and local coffers. The remaining funds were supplied by federal programs dedicated to child welfare purposes (27%)—including those authorized in Title IV-E and Title IV-B of the Social Security Act (SSA) and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)—or from other federal programs that share some child welfare purposes but are not solely focused on child welfare (17%). Principally, these are the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

Total FY2019 federal funding authority dedicated solely to child welfare is about \$9.8 billion.

Title IV-E

Title IV-E of the SSA primarily supports provision of foster care, adoption assistance, and (in jurisdictions electing to provide this) guardianship assistance to children who meet federal Title IV-E eligibility criteria. Beginning with FY2020, as authorized by the Family First Prevention Services Act (“Family First,” Title VII, Division E of P.L. 115-123), states may also use Title IV-E to fund certain foster care prevention services. Funding is authorized permanently (no expiration) and on an open-ended entitlement basis.

Under Title IV-E, states are required to provide 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), as well as a part of the cost of administering the program (50% in all states) and for training (75% in all states). The federal budget authority for this Title IV-E spending is expected to total \$8.6 billion for FY2019, with most spending used for foster care payments, case planning and review, licensing/background checks, and other administrative work.

HHS estimates 667,000 children received Title IV-E support in an average month during FY2018. Most received adoption assistance (466,000); smaller numbers received foster care payments (168,000) or guardianship assistance (33,000). In general, unless a state has a Title IV-E waiver, it must only spend Title IV-E dollars (federal and state) on children who meet federal eligibility criteria. For foster care assistance, these include an income test (applied to the home the child is removed from), removal requirements (these typically must include judicial findings that the home is “contrary to the welfare” of the child and that “reasonable efforts” to prevent foster care were made), and placement in a licensed family home or other Title IV-E eligible facility. While the share varies by state, nationally about 40% of children in foster care meet those federal criteria.

Title IV-B

Title IV-B—the Stephanie Tubbs Jones Child Welfare Services (CWS) program and the Promoting Safe and Stable Families (PSSF) program—primarily authorizes formula grants for child and family services. In February 2018, these funding authorities were extended through FY2021 (P.L. 115-123). Total FY2019 Title IV-B funding—including for CWS, PSSF, and related research and activities—is \$730 million. This includes \$5 million in supplemental funds (P.L. 116-20) provided under CWS for states experiencing certain recent natural disasters and \$15 million appropriated in the SUPPORT Act (P.L. 115-271) to further develop a reunification and recovery treatment model for families affected by substance use disorder.

There are no federal eligibility criteria for receipt of Title IV-B services. Funds are to be 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 no less than \$1 in nonfederal funds for every \$3 they receive in federal Title IV-B formula funding. Funding is authorized on a discretionary basis for CWS and on a discretionary and a capped mandatory basis for PSSF.

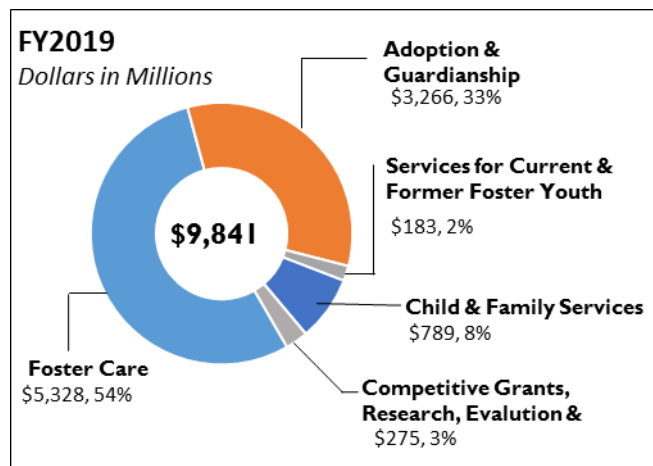
Some PSSF program funding is reserved each year for specific programs, including the Court Improvement Program (about \$30 million), grants to improve monthly caseworker visits with foster children (\$20 million), and Regional Partnership Grants (RPGs) to improve outcomes for children affected by parental substance use disorder (\$20 million). The FY2019 appropriations act (P.L. 115-245) maintained PSSF discretionary funding at the level provided for FY2018 and again directed a portion of those funds be used for additional RPGs (\$19 million), for state and tribal kinship navigator programs (\$19 million), and to enhance HHS technical aid to states and tribes working to implement evidence-based prevention services, as authorized in Family First (\$2 million).

Chafee Program

Title IV-E of the SSA also includes the Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood. States receive formula Chafee grants for services to assist children who experience foster care at age 14 or older, including former foster youth up to age 21 (or up to age 23 in states that offer foster care support up to age 21). Funding is separately authorized for Educational and Training Vouchers (ETVs), which may provide up to \$5,000 per year (for a maximum of five years or up to age 26) to allow Chafee-eligible youth to attend college or post-secondary training.

Funding for Chafee basic grants is authorized as a capped mandatory entitlement; ETV funding is authorized on a discretionary basis. Both funding authorizations are permanent (no expiration date). States are required to provide no less than \$1 for every \$4 in federal funding they receive under this program. Combined FY2019 funding is \$183 million.

Figure 1. Federal Child Welfare Funding by Purpose



Source: Prepared by CRS using FY2019 appropriation levels from P.L. 115-245, P.L. 115-271, P.L. 116-6, and P.L. 116-20.

Notes: Funding to states for “services to current & former foster youth” is authorized in Chafee. Funding to states for “child and family services” is authorized in CAPTA and Title IV-B. Child welfare funding awarded competitively, including incentive payments for adoptions and legal guardianships, is shown as “competitive grants, research, evaluations & incentives,” without regard to where it is authorized.

CAPTA

Federal policy concerning states’ receipt of and responses to allegations of parental or caregiver child abuse and neglect—the front door to child welfare involvement for most children and families—is primarily addressed in CAPTA. That law authorizes formula grants to states to improve child protective services, funds for research and technical assistance related to preventing and treating child abuse and neglect, and formula grants to support community-based efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect. CAPTA’s discretionary funding authorities expired with FY2015, but funding has been continued.

FY2019 appropriations for all CAPTA grants and activities totaled \$158 million (same as FY2018). As was the case with FY2018, the FY2019 appropriations act (P.L. 115-245) provided \$85 million of this total to CAPTA state grants (\$60 million more than they received in FY2017). The conference agreement to the FY2019 measure stated that the \$60 million was continued to help states develop and implement “plans of safe care” for infants identified as substance-exposed, including services for their caregivers.

Emilie Stoltzfus, Specialist in Social Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.