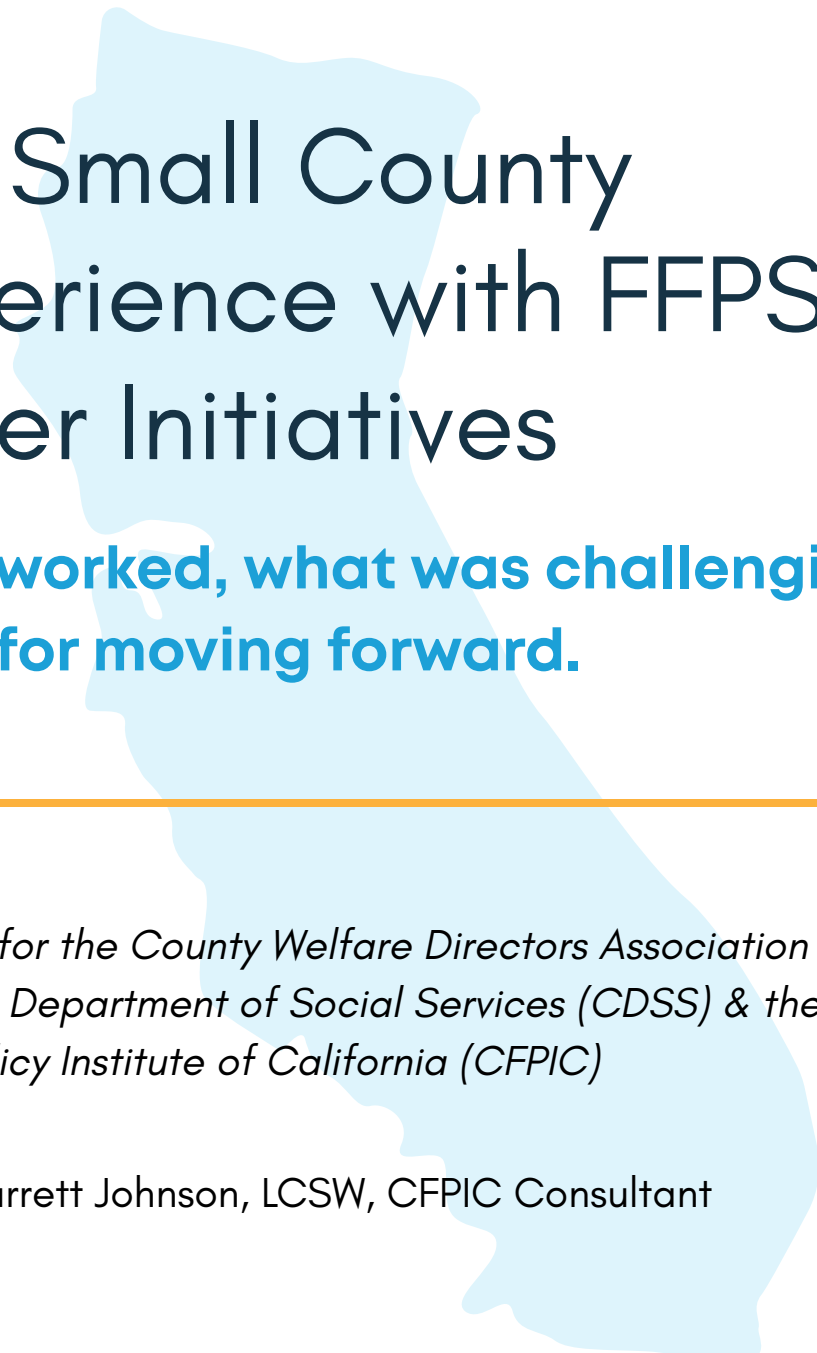




The Small County Experience with FFPS & Other Initiatives

**What worked, what was challenging, and
ideas for moving forward.**

*Prepared for the County Welfare Directors Association (CWDA), the
California Department of Social Services (CDSS) & the Child and
Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC)*

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Executive Summary

This report synthesizes findings from 15 interviews conducted with county child welfare leadership (including some county partners) and technical assistance (TA) providers regarding small California counties' experiences implementing Family First Prevention Services (FFPS) and other new initiatives. County interviews were conducted between February and April 2026 across Lake, Sutter, Mendocino, Del Norte, Calaveras, San Benito, Modoc, Trinity, Tuolumne, Yuba, and Siskiyou Counties. TA provider interviews included staff from Strategies TA, Shared Vision Consultants, Social Change Partners, UC Davis and other consultants working across multiple small counties.

The research questions guiding this analysis are:

- 1 What worked well for small counties in implementing FFPS that can be learned from and built upon?
- 2 What are the challenges faced by small counties in implementing initiatives?
- 3 What could be changed to better facilitate small counties' active participation in future initiatives?

Identified Strengths of FFPS Implementation:

Several themes emerged across multiple interviews about what has gone well and/or has been helpful in FFPS planning and implementation:

- 1.External consultant and technical assistance (TA) support
- 2.The small county exemption and flexibility via All County Letter 24-90
- 3.Alignment with existing planning and coordination structures, such as the California Child & Family Services Review (C-CFSR) and AB 2083
- 4.Asset mapping and resource discovery
- 5.Creative aggregation and blending of funding sources
- 6.A flexible approach to community-based services and FFPS State Block Grant (SBG) Expenditures
- 7.Sharing practical small county strategies



Themes Related to Challenges, both for FFPS and other Initiatives:

Additional cross-cutting themes emerged related to challenges facing small counties in FFPS and other initiatives. Note that some of the themes apply generally to new and existing initiatives, and not specifically to FFPS:

- Workforce and capacity constraints
- Funding structure and allocation inadequacy
- Restrictive program requirements
- Timely and translated guidance
- Uncoordinated and siloed initiatives
- TA issues
- Community and lived experience barriers
- Tribal engagement

Recommendations for Future Consideration:

The interviews also yielded recommendations for improving small counties' ability to fully engage in new initiatives. These are divided up by the primary actor who would need to lead implementation.

For CDSS

1. Establish a small county unit or specialist role to increase understanding of small county issues
2. Coordinate initiative timelines
3. Provide an initiative roadmap for small counties
4. Consolidate planning and reporting processes
5. Advocate for and fund embedded, ongoing TA funding for small counties
6. Provide more timely guidance with parameters
7. Revisit the allocation formulas for small counties
8. Address confidentiality guidance for small counties

For TA Providers

9. Support peer learning networks for small counties
10. Lead with peer examples and concrete playbooks
11. Function as embedded project managers, not advisors
12. Formalize the aggregated feedback function for TA providers to share information.

For Policy Makers

13. Address the structural wage gap for small county social work
14. Invest in CBO and provider infrastructure in rural counties
15. Explore and expand state-supported, lived experience infrastructure



Research & Overview Methods

Purpose

This study was conducted by Barrett Johnson (consultant) in collaboration with CWDA, CDSS, and CFPIC. The purpose was to identify barriers small counties face when implementing initiatives — using FFPS as a primary lens — and to develop recommendations that would enable fuller participation by small counties. This report integrates findings from both county officials and TA providers who work across multiple small counties.

Interviews Conducted

Twelve key informant interviews were held with county leadership, after recruiting participants via CWDA's 20 Small County Committee and Mountain-Valley CWDA Regional Child Welfare Committee.

Four interviews were conducted with a total of 8 providers of Technical Assistance to counties.

Information fiscal aspects of FFPS, as well as on allocation methodology was also collected from CDSS and CWDA staff in 3 separate interviews.

Interviews were scripted and lasted approximately an hour. Questions asked can be found in Appendix A.

Analysis

Each of the virtual interviews were recorded and transcripts were created using Otter AI, an online transcription service. Notes were taken in vivo while the interviews were conducted. Once all of the interviews were completed, the transcripts were aggregated and uploaded into Anthropic Claude, which was prompted to identify common themes and solutions.

Notes taken during the interviews and transcripts were reviewed manually, independent of the AI-generated content to validate and ensure accuracy. This manual analysis was then used to supplement, edit and enhance the AI-generated themes and solutions.

FFPS: What Went Well

Counties and TA providers noted several factors that contributed to success in their FFPS work or went well in the planning. The most cited of these factors included:

External Consultant and TA Support: The single most consistently cited positive factor — across nearly every interview — was the availability of external consultants and TA providers who took administrative work off counties' plates. A few counties had some caveats about what type of TA was effective: practical facilitative TA that directly assisted counties in the work and moved the process forward was universally desired. TA that was more general and didn't provide concrete assistance was less appreciated.

The Small County Exemption and Extended Comprehensive Prevention Plan (CPP) Deadline: Multiple interviewees from both county and TA provider interviews cited the small county exemption for Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs) and particularly the extended deadline for CPP submission as genuinely helpful. The exemption and flexibility options were released on 11/26/24 as All County Letter (ACL) 24-90. For counties that opted in late and were still building foundational infrastructure, the extended timeline made the difference between submitting a plan at all and not participating in FFPS. It was noted that the timing of the exemption could have been earlier in the process.

Alignment with Existing Planning Cycles and Coordination Structures: Several counties noted that for them, the timing of FFPS aligned helpfully with existing planning cycles, especially the County Self-Assessment (CSA) process, reducing duplication and survey/stakeholder fatigue. Multiple counties and TA providers also indicated that leveraging the AB 2083 multi-disciplinary structures was very helpful. This kind of integration was described as a significant relief — instead of convening a new group and conducting new surveys for every initiative, the county was able to build on existing infrastructure and relationships.

Asset Mapping and Resource Discovery: A consistent positive finding across multiple TA provider interviews was that the asset mapping process embedded in FFPS planning — inventorying existing community services and resources — produced genuine value for counties and their partners, often surfacing resources that even well-connected local professionals did not know existed.

Creative Aggregation and Blending of Funding: Two of the counties interviewed were able to aggregate multiple funding streams (from areas such as FFPS SBG, FURS, CSEC, CBCAP/PSSF, CFT and other county funds) and build out larger services contracts that could provide multiple prevention services. Other counties struggled to spend the SBG and indicated that they needed additional fiscal support to achieve these kinds of outcomes.

A Flexible Approach to Community-Based Services and SBG Expenditures: Several counties and TA providers indicated that having SBG funds that could be used flexibly, and (eventual) flexibility in choosing community-based services was helpful.

Sharing Practical Small County Strategies: Several counties indicated that it was most helpful to exchange plans and ideas with other counties, and that forums that allowed this, such as the UC Davis Regional FFPS Learning Collaborative, were helpful.

Cross-Cutting Themes Related to Challenges (General to Initiatives)

The following major themes emerged consistently across most of the interviews. County and TA provider perspectives are integrated within each theme.

Theme 1: Workforce and Capacity Constraints

This was the single most consistently cited challenge across all interviews — both county officials and TA providers. Small counties operate with skeleton crews: child welfare departments of 10–15 people covering multiple programs, with single analysts responsible for everything from data systems to compliance reporting. Staff vacancies are chronic (commonly 20–40% in social work positions), and those on staff are often working overtime.

Multiple interviewees noted while additional funds are helpful and can have a significant impact, that money alone does not solve this problem. What counties need is people, and the barrier to filling positions is wages that cannot compete with larger counties or the private sector.

It should be noted that capacity limitations were equally or more acute for Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) that were expected to deliver services. Success depends on having networks of providers that can engage families and provide services, and small communities don't have enough capacity for this.

The impact cascades into every other challenge. When a department is already operating at or below minimum capacity:

- There is no bandwidth to attend new meetings, trainings, or TA calls, even valuable ones.
- Community and Tribal engagement require going to partners and building relationships over time which becomes extremely challenging.
- FFPS and other initiatives fall to one person; when that person leaves, institutional knowledge is often lost or severely restricted.
- The administrative demands of reporting, opt-in decisions, plan amendments, and compliance are crowded out by direct service work.
- Even when consultants are available, engaging with them takes time counties don't have, especially if they must build new relationships with them over time.



Our biggest challenge is capacity — the same individuals wearing multiple hats. Child welfare is taking the lead, but we're also dealing with all of these other initiatives. There's turnover, leadership changes, positions not filled. And this work is long-term work. It's not easy for someone to just come in and take over.



County Manager

Theme 2: Funding Structure and Allocation Inadequacy

Allocations to small counties are typically set by formulas based on relevant metrics, such as caseload or population, with a minimum floor. FFPS-specific allocation methods are found in [CFL 21-22-84](#). Interviewees across multiple counties described this floor as often insufficient to accomplish what is being asked of them.



The allocations and how they're allocating dollars to small counties — if we're looking at building a whole new prevention system, we need the money to do that, and we don't get that. We are overflowing with ideas, with creative solutions, with needs. But we don't have the ability to bring in new CBOs without having the money to build it and sustain it.



County Director

The core issue is that rural service delivery has high fixed costs (transportation, facilities, staff time) that do not scale proportionally with population. A county serving 50 families across a geographically dispersed rural area faces similar fixed costs to one serving 1,000 families in an urban area but may receive a fraction of the funding depending on the methodology. For example, a minimum floor for an allocation may not be sufficient for a small county to provide a full-time equivalent. Moreover, because in small counties even minor changes in caseload can result in significant percent changes to population served from year to year (e.g., caseload changes from 3 to 7 cases), a predetermined minimum floor can also be insufficient to meet future caseload needs.

Additional allocation and funding challenges identified across interviews included:

- Allocations are often insufficient to pay for training, model fidelity, and infrastructure required to implement evidence-based programs. (This issue may not be unique to small counties).
- The SBG was nice to have but sustainability of funding and services were a big issue. Small counties don't have other sources of funds that they can plug in to provide match and sustain services. They are also fairly risk averse financially, since they have a smaller margin for error.
- Small counties generally were not willing or able to invest in services only to withdraw them later, nor were their CBOs willing to do this.
- The reimbursement model requires counties to have working capital they often do not have. The SBG provided assistance for FFPS but was unusual for new initiatives. The State could consider revenue advances for new allocations or programs where counties may face cash flow constraints in the future.
- Allocation cuts often arrive after counties have already made commitments to CBOs and families. This impacts planning significantly when trying to blend or aggregate funds from multiple allocations.
- Smaller pots of money across multiple initiatives do not add up to the administrative workforce needed to administer the programs effectively. In most instances, at least a full position is necessary to accomplish all of the planning, support and reporting functions but often funding only supports a fraction of a position. This means that one person in a small county is responsible for very large (and sometimes duplicative) administrative functions.



We don't do things we can't sustain. I would never do a pilot, because families would really feel it — it's more relational. If you put in a program and families love it and then you take it away, the community will be like, well, they had this, but then it stopped. And they won't go back.

- County Director

Theme 3: Restrictive Program Requirements and Limited Flexibility

The federal FFPSA legislation, and the FFPS state plan required counties to implement programs from a pre-approved list of evidence-based practices in order to claim federal funding. For small counties, this list was largely irrelevant — they had not been using those programs and lacked the infrastructure and funding to build them. Key dimensions included:

- EBP clearinghouse gaps: Community-based practices, especially those rooted in indigenous culture, were initially not recognized, limiting options for counties with tribal partnerships.
- Cost of model fidelity: Training and ongoing fidelity monitoring for proprietary EBPs can cost huge amounts — more than some counties' entire state block grant allocation. Child welfare agencies and rural CBOs are also not accustomed to the data collection and fidelity requirements associated with EBPs.
- Reimbursement risk: Counties were unwilling to front money for programs and risk not being reimbursed, given that federal reimbursement was dependent upon implementation of the new statewide information system, the Child Welfare Services-California Automated Response and Engagement System (CARES). Any delay in CARES implementation presented a very large risk to small counties and the CBOs that they would contract with for services
- County-community mismatch: The state plan funneled funding toward programs that did not fit community needs or existing infrastructure. The EBP list also seems designed for larger systems — some counties don't have enough families who need a given service to justify standing up an EBP at all.
- Timely flexibility: The flexibility afforded to small counties was appreciated, but would have been helpful earlier in the process so that small counties could plan on it.

Theme 4: Timely and Translated Guidance:

Multiple interviewees described a pattern in which new initiatives arrive with enthusiasm but without the clear, practical guidance needed to implement them.

Counties are often charged with conducting a needs assessment and developing a plan for approval by the state. This affords flexibility for counties, but often places a planning and administrative burden on small counties who have limited capacity.

- Guidance is often not tailored to small counties, who would benefit from concrete, practical examples from a small county perspective. Templates are helpful, but examples are more so.
- ACLs and CFLs that require a great deal of analysis to interpret are not helpful to counties with limited analyst capacity.
- Guidance can also trickle in over months or years, sometimes after counties have already made irreversible decisions. This was particularly acute for guidance and planning for Motivational Interviewing, which most small counties selected as the only viable EBP that they and their partners could implement.

Theme 5: Uncoordinated and Siloed Initiatives

Counties and TA providers reported that multiple initiatives emanating from multiple branches of CDSS often duplicate processes and place a particular burden on small counties and communities.

Specific problems:

- Initiative overload: FFPS, FURS, CalAIM, CARES, AB 2083, CPIP, C-CFSR, and others all arrived with varying timeframes, all requiring attention by administrators.
- Siloed initiatives: Different CDSS branches issue programs with separate reporting, contacts, and timelines — even when they all require the same county staff to convene the same community partners.
- Community and Tribal overload: When multiple initiatives require community input and needs assessments, the same community partners in small counties get tapped over and over again. This is magnified in small counties, where there are fewer CBOs and partners, and they often have limited capacity.



It feels like you're doing all six surgeries at once, and we're sitting here bleeding out on the table. People acknowledge the problem more — I've seen that. But I don't know that it's in a solution phase yet.



County Administrator



State guidance frequently arrives piecemeal, requiring counties to go back through stacks of ACLs to find current requirements. The translation of guidance that CFPIC provided was helpful, and should be provided as early as possible with a small-county focus.



TA Provider



I don't question the value of the initiatives. I just think the impact on the workforce is having unintended consequences, and it's not rolling out the way the vision wanted.



TA Provider

Theme 6: Technical Assistance Issues

TA was fairly consistently described as invaluable in getting the work done. The most effective TA was concrete, action-oriented, and delivered by someone who deeply understood small county realities and functioned as an embedded team member rather than an external advisor.

What worked:

- Consultants who took administrative work entirely off the county's plate by assisting with drafting and editing plans, coordinating meetings, creating flyers, managing logistics.
- TA that was patient with counties still building their foundational infrastructure.
- Peer learning that allowed counties to hear what other small counties were doing was consistently cited as more useful than broad state-level guidance.
- Direct, in-person engagement that allowed county staff to learn more about their own community's resources than from any other source.
- Showing examples from comparably sized counties, especially small counties.

What did not work:

- Broad, process-heavy facilitation that produced meetings about meetings.
- TA that provides direction but doesn't provide actual assistance in getting the work done alongside the county.
- Free TA that still requires significant county staff time to engage with.
- Statewide training formats designed for specialists in large counties.

TA support and consultants have been vital. It's mostly because they're helping with a lot of the more administrative tasks — coordinating meetings, putting things together. I don't have a lot of that support on staff. It's literally just me. So being able to have the consultants on hand to help walk through that with me was really helpful.

— County Director

Theme 7: Community Lived Experience Engagement Barriers

All interviews touched on the difficulty of meaningful community engagement, especially for people with lived experience. Small counties often have strong relationships with core agency partners but struggle to include community members and people with lived experience in their planning processes.

Key barriers:

- Infrastructure for lived experience: No mechanism to compensate people for their time in ways compliant with county procurement rules.
- Initiative fatigue: Community partners who are invited to overlapping meetings eventually stop attending.
- Confidentiality issues: In small counties and communities, everyone knows everyone's business. Given the stigma

- associated with involvement with Child Welfare Services, this impacts people with lived experiences' desire to participate and provide feedback. It also impacts the Community Pathway, since accessing prevention services will likely be known in the community.
- Supportive environments: Authentically engaging people with lived experience requires significant preparation. Bringing them into highly technical meetings without preparation is counterproductive and can feel tokenizing, but such preparation takes bandwidth and time that is often lacking in small counties.



In smaller communities, it's a little harder to intentionally and formally engage folks with lived experience for two reasons. One, it's a small community and they all have complicated relationships with child welfare. The other is they just don't have the money or infrastructure to have any kind of parent partner, parent advisory, or peer advocate system. And I appreciate that they're reticent to pick people's brains without compensating them appropriately.



TA provider

Theme 8: Tribal Engagement

Several barriers were identified that were specific to Tribal engagement and engaging with Tribes as sovereign entities.

Key barriers:

- Staff shortages: Limited capacity for the relationship-building and going-to-the-community work that effective Tribal engagement requires.
- Historical distrust: Especially in counties with high rates of tribal family involvement in child welfare.
- Geographic distance: Tribes and community partners may be an hour or more from the county seat.
- Tribal capacity: Tribal administrators face their own staff shortages; directors sometimes do social work because they can't fill positions.
- TA targeted to the 'how': Some of those interviewed noted that tribal TA tends to focus on 'why to engage' rather than 'how,' leaving counties that already understand the why without practical tools.



The counties that tell me they need help with tribal engagement are so far ahead of all the counties that don't think they need help with tribal engagement. Counties that say they need help — they often don't know how well they actually are doing.



TA Provider

It should be noted that Tribal engagement tended to vary from county to county, with some counties showing more success. One TA provider noted that counties often don't know what they don't know about their Tribal engagement. Counties who say they need help with Tribal engagement are often further ahead than those who don't recognize the gap.

Additional information specific to Tribal Engagement is found in Appendix B.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are informed by both county officials and TA providers. New recommendations informed primarily by TA provider perspectives are noted. Recommendations are organized by the primary actor who would need to lead implementation. They are generally aimed at general improvement in implementing current and future initiatives in small counties, but have applicability to future approaches to FFPS as well.

For CDSS

1. Establish a Small County Unit or Specialist Role

Create a dedicated team or role within CDSS focused specifically on small county needs and ideally staffed by people with direct small county experience. This unit would review new initiatives before rollout for small-county feasibility; serve as a single point of contact for small counties navigating multiple programs; and ensure all-county letters and guidance are stress-tested for small county contexts. TA providers across all four interviews independently endorsed this idea.

2. Coordinate Initiative Timelines

Establish an internal coordination requirement so that CDSS branches developing new initiatives consult with other branches about existing county burdens before setting deadlines and requirements. TA providers noted this as a root cause of initiative overload — branches operate in silos and don't know what other branches are asking of counties.

3. Provide an Initiative Roadmap for Small Counties

For each new major initiative, provide a clear visual roadmap showing how it connects with existing initiatives, what actions are required and by when, and a menu of options appropriate for small county contexts. The roadmap should be available before counties are asked to engage.

4. Consolidate Plan and Reporting Requirements

Work across CDSS branches to consolidate reporting requirements for small counties. Plan for and facilitate counties using existing structures, especially the C-CFSR. Replace annual checkbox reports with periodic conversational reviews where small counties discuss all funded programs with a single knowledgeable state contact. Consider modeling this on the CSEC review process that multiple county interviewees cited positively.



If you had a small county team — and all the new reporting things came to them — they might get the perspective early: *oh, this is not going to work, this is a lot. Because I don't think the branches realize all the other demands.*



County Director

“**Having a specialized person look at all the reports we’re requesting counties to do — because I don’t think the branches realize all the other demands placed by other branches. They have their own thing, and this is what they need. But do you know all these other things we’re also doing?**”

— **County Director**

5. Advocate for and Fund Embedded, Ongoing TA Funding for Small Counties

Create and enhance the TA structure to include a pool of TA resources that provides embedded, individualized, ongoing support to small counties across multiple initiatives. Fiscal TA on how to combine and braid funding should also be provided, as this was identified as a high-value capability that unlocked success. TA providers suggest formalizing a model where TA providers serving multiple counties aggregate feedback and provide it back to the state.

6. Provide More Timely and Practical Guidance with Parameters

Ensure guidance arrives before counties must make decisions. Critically, provide parameters alongside flexibility. Broad flexibility that allows things to be ‘determined at the county level’ with no floor or ceiling is more difficult for small counties than a range to work within. Include case examples from comparable small counties. TA providers noted that state guidance frequently arrives piecemeal, requiring counties to go back through stacks of ACLs to find current requirements. The translation of guidance that CFPIC provided was helpful and should be provided as early as possible and with a small-county focus.

7. Revisit Allocation Formulas for Small Counties

Review allocation methodologies for programs with specific attention to whether the minimum floor accounts for the higher fixed costs of rural service delivery. Consider: a rural infrastructure multiplier; a minimum FTE-based floor; explicit administrative capacity funding for small counties opting into new initiatives.

8. Address Confidentiality Guidance for Small Communities

The confidentiality challenge in small communities (everyone knows everyone, service providers may be relatives, and professional and personal relationships are blurred) is underappreciated in state guidance. Develop specific guidance on navigating confidentiality in small community contexts, particularly for implementing community pathways.

“**There are ups and downs to having a small county. By necessity we have to work together with community partners — we don’t have a choice. We’ve been doing it a long time. But I just sometimes wonder what they’re thinking when they give us these allocations. . . it’s not even enough for one whole person.**”

“
County Director

For TA Providers

9. Support Peer Learning Networks for Small Counties

Facilitate structured peer learning among comparable small counties including small county-specific sessions at conferences and opportunities to learn from each other's creative approaches before finalizing their own plans. TA providers confirmed that peer learning (hearing what similarly sized counties are doing) is one of the most effective strategies for shifting mindsets from 'this is impossible here' to 'we could try something like that.'

10. Lead with Peer Examples and Concrete Playbooks

When supporting small counties, lead with concrete examples of what comparable small counties have done rather than examples from large urban counties. Provide a structured menu of options that feel achievable given small county context. One of the most effective TA moves is showing a county director that another county their size figured something out. This shifts the conversation from 'impossible' to 'let's adapt that.' Create structured opportunities for counties to share practical ideas and advice, such as the UC Davis Learning Collaborative.

“
I think coming prepared with suggestions to help people brainstorm — because a lot of people were stuck. I was stuck. I couldn't think of an idea. And then you hear ideas from other counties and you're like, wow, that was so cool, I wish we would have done that. So coming with concrete resources and ideas would benefit us.

”
County Director

11. Function as Embedded Project Managers, Not Advisors

Small counties need TA providers who will do the work alongside them: write the agendas, send the meeting invites, create the flyers, draft the plan sections for review. Information delivery and facilitation alone is insufficient. The most effective TA takes enough work off the county's plate that staff can attend and contribute meaningfully to the process.

12. Formalize the Aggregated Feedback Function

TA providers who work across multiple counties are uniquely positioned to identify systemic patterns such as misunderstandings, gaps, and barriers before they become widespread. This function should be formalized, as it was in the FFPS Training and TA Subcommittee: a structured mechanism for TA providers to aggregate and communicate cross-county insights back to CDSS and CWDA.



For Policymakers

13. Address the Structural Wage Gap for Small County Social Work

The workforce crisis in small counties is structural and requires a structural solution. Consider state-funded wage supplements or incentives for social workers in small counties; rural practice loan forgiveness programs; and regional recruitment pipelines that expose social work students to small county practice.

14. Invest in CBO and Provider Infrastructure in Rural Counties

Small counties have very few CBOs, and those that exist are already over-extended. Even doubling county allocations would not resolve service delivery without a stronger rural provider ecosystem. Consider: a



We literally don't have any CBOs that are at the capacity for a lot of FFPS requirements. We tried to write a plan that didn't set us up for failure — not knowing that ahead of time made it challenging to make it useful and meaningful.



— County Director

targeted rural CBO infrastructure investment fund; incentives for multi-service providers to expand their footprint into rural counties; and subsidies for rural service provision that account for the impossibility of break-even delivery at small caseload levels.

15. Explore State-Supported Lived Experience Infrastructure

Authentically engaging people with lived experience requires preparation, compensation, and facilitation expertise that individual small counties struggle to provide. Consider a state-funded entity or program that builds and maintains a statewide network of people with lived experience who are prepared, compensated, and able to participate in county planning processes. This would reduce the burden on individual counties to build this infrastructure themselves. The assistance that Chapin Hall is providing to assist counties in supporting people with lived, community and tribal experience in the FFPS Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process may be a model for future initiatives.

Moving Forward: Recommendations for Dissemination and Discussion

This report provides a number of proposed recommendations, all of which will require discussion, prioritization and future effort. It is intended to open up conversations about what might practically work to improve the experience of small counties, and improve the services for the families that live in them. Not all of the recommendations may turn out to be feasible or even desirable, but can prompt actions that would be effective.

To foster these conversations, we propose the implementation/dissemination steps below:

- Release the final report to CWDA, CDSS, the 20 Small Committee in early July, 2026.
- Present the report with an emphasis on the TA-related themes and recommendations to the FFPS Training and TA Subcommittee.

- Over the course of July to September 2026, schedule a series of joint state/county discussions focused on reviewing the report findings and recommendations, prioritizing, and planning for action steps. These conversations should minimally include:
 - Executive Staff from CDSS with authority over multiple branches and initiatives
 - FFPS-specific CDSS leadership
 - 20 Small Committee members, plus any children’s services managers/deputies identified by the counties.
 - CWDA Children’s Staff
 - CFPIC staff and consultants (to facilitate discussions and document action steps).
 - Once some next steps have been identified and prioritized, have the 20 Small Committee and CDSS track progress over the course of the next 12 months.
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Appendix A: Interview Scripts for Counties/Partner Agencies, Technical Assistance Providers and CWDA/CDSS Fiscal Staff

County Staff and Partners

Strengths and challenges:

1. Thinking about your journey as a small county, what, if anything, was helpful for you in planning and implementing FFPS so far?
 - What strategies, if any, were most effective for you in planning and implementing FFPS or other prevention services?
2. What were your biggest challenges?
3. How have you addressed those challenges?
 - [If they have not been addressed, what might have helped?]
 - [What else might help to better address these challenges?]

SBG Allocation:

As a small county, you received an allocation from the State Block grant of \$_____ for CWS, \$_____ for probation, for a total of \$_____.

4. Approximately how much of the funds have you been able to spend?
 - [If funds have been spent, what were the main items that you spent them on?]
 - [If no funds or very little have been spent, why have you not spent the funds?]
5. What do you plan to spend the allocation on moving forward?
6. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being entirely inadequate and 10 being completely sufficient, how adequate would you rate your allocation of FFPS SBG? Please explain your rating.
7. If you had additional funds available to you, what would you spend them on?

Other funding:

8. Have you leveraged any other funds for prevention-related or FFPS-related activities?
 - [If yes, what source of funding, and what did you use it for?]

Source	Activity/Activities

9. What other information is it important for me to know about the SBG allocation and funding?

Community and Tribal Engagement:

10. An important part of FFPS was engaging the community and people with lived experience in the planning and implementation process.
 - What was most effective for you as a small county to engage the community?
11. What were your biggest challenges in engaging community partners?
12. Was there anything that would have helped you to partner with them better?
13. Were you able to engage people with lived experience in your county? If so, what was most effective to do that?
14. What were your biggest challenges in engaging people with lived experience?
15. Was there anything that would have helped you to partner with them better?
16. How about partnering with tribes? How were you able to work with them in your FFPS/prevention work?
17. What were the barriers to engaging tribes, if you experienced them?
18. Can you think of any assistance that would have helped you engage and partner with tribes more effectively?

Technical Assistance and Support:

19. What technical assistance and support have you accessed to help you with FFPS planning and implementation?
20. Did you pay for this TA or support? If so, how did you fund it?
21. On a scale of 0-10, with 0 being not helpful at all, and 10 being extremely helpful, how helpful has this technical assistance and support been for you? Please explain your rating.
 - [Prompt for multiple ratings for multiple type of TA/Support]
22. What additional TA and supports would be helpful to you in planning and implementing FFPS/Prevention services?

Future initiatives:

23. Thinking about future large new initiatives or reforms such as FFPS, what would be most helpful for small counties in order for them to participate fully?
24. How might the allocation of funds be changed to assist small counties with future large initiatives?
25. What TA or support would help small counties to participate fully in future initiatives?
26. What other ideas do you have about how to help small counties in planning for and implementing future initiatives?
 - What could CDSS or other state agencies do differently?
 - What could CWDA do differently?
27. What else is important for me to know about small counties' implementation of new initiatives or programs?

CDSS and CWDA Fiscal Staff

1. How was the SBG allocation determined for each county for the FFPS program?
2. What special considerations were made (if any) for small counties?

3. Was this allocation methodology similar to a typical allocation to counties for initiatives? How was it different or unique?
4. How are allocations typically allocated to counties?
5. For other initiatives, have you attempted or considered different ways to allocate funds so that small counties might be able to better participate?
6. If yes, what did you do/consider doing?
7. Do you have any other creative ideas about how state funds could be allocated so that small counties might benefit from them more/be able to actively participate more?
8. Anything else that I should know about small counties and allocation methodologies?

Appendix B: Tribal Engagement in Small Counties: Summary of Interview Findings

The Foundational Challenge: Capacity on Both Sides

The most consistent theme across all interviews touching on tribal engagement is that both counties and tribes are under-resourced, and meaningful partnership requires sustained investment that neither party currently has the bandwidth to make. County staff shortages mean there is rarely anyone whose job it is to do relationship-building work. On the tribal side, directors are sometimes doing frontline social work themselves because they cannot fill positions. When both parties are operating in survival mode, the kind of slow, trust-based engagement that effective tribal partnership requires simply does not happen.

The interviews make clear this is not a problem of will or values — county officials and TA providers alike expressed genuine commitment to tribal partnership. The barrier is structural.

Historical Distrust and the County's Role in It

Several interviewees acknowledged directly that the history of child welfare involvement with Native American families — including forced removals, boarding schools, and documented failures to apply ICWA — creates a legitimate basis for tribal skepticism toward county-initiated partnerships. One county interviewee noted that only one of their county's ten tribes was willing to partner with the county at all, a reflection of decades of difficult history rather than any specific recent event. A TA provider framed this with particular candor, noting that it is philosophically uncomfortable to require tribal engagement as a compliance item, given that tribes are sovereign nations. The provider observed that the framing of engagement as a county-led requirement can feel disrespectful of that sovereignty, regardless of intent.

Turnover as a Persistent Barrier

Turnover was raised across multiple interviews as one of the most practically damaging barriers to sustained tribal engagement. Because relationship-building takes years, a single leadership change on either side can effectively reset the partnership to zero. TA providers who work across multiple counties observed this pattern repeatedly: a county builds a meaningful relationship with a tribal contact over two or three years, that person leaves, and the incoming tribal administrator has no context for the prior relationship, no institutional memory of commitments made, and sometimes no awareness of funding that may have been directed to the tribe.

This dynamic cuts in both directions. When county child welfare directors turn over — which happens frequently in small counties — tribal partners who invested time in building that relationship find themselves starting over with someone new who may not share their predecessor's commitment to the partnership.

What Worked: Going to Them

The clearest finding across all interviews is that tribal engagement works when counties go to tribal communities rather than asking tribes to come to county meetings. Multiple interviewees described this as the defining difference between counties that had strong tribal relationships and those that did not.

One northern county offered the most developed example. The First Five Director had spent eight years doing consistent community outreach — attending tribal events, hosting listening sessions on tribal land, showing up at community gatherings without an agenda — and this sustained presence had created genuine partnership. The interviewee described this approach as treating tribal communities as neighbors rather than stakeholders to be checked off a list.

Another county offered a related example through its probation department, which co-facilitates a parenting program with tribal partners — with approximately 13 tribal facilitators trained to deliver it. This program, rooted in Native American parenting traditions, was being considered for elevation to evidence-based practice status through a national grant. A TA provider who discussed this example noted that it represents exactly the kind of culturally grounded program that should be on the FFPS-approved list but has historically been excluded from state EBP clearinghouses.

Another county's First Five Director described building relationships through what she called bypassing county authority where possible — supporting community-based organizations and tribal entities directly rather than positioning the county as the intermediary for all services. She noted that tribal communities often distrust funding relationships that flow through the county, and that more direct pathways would strengthen engagement.

Several interviewees mentioned practical engagement strategies that made a difference: offering food at meetings, holding gatherings on tribal land rather than at the county office, embedding engagement into existing community events rather than creating new meetings, and going in without an agenda to listen first.

The ILT Engagement Problem

A recurring challenge is that tribal representatives are invited to Interagency Leadership Team meetings and other county-led planning processes, but the format and content of those meetings are not designed for them. Meetings are often highly technical, filled with acronyms and compliance-driven discussion, and do not provide a meaningful way for tribal partners to contribute to decisions. Several interviewees noted that tribal partners who attend such meetings often feel tokenized — present as a checkbox rather than as genuine contributors to planning.

One TA provider made a pointed observation: tribal partners are sometimes asked to commit to things in county plans without having a clear understanding of what they are committing to. This is partly a function of how quickly county planning processes move, and partly a function of the complexity of programs like Family First that are difficult for even experienced county staff to fully understand.

Tribal Engagement TA: A Gap

Multiple TA providers noted a significant gap in the quality of tribal engagement support available to counties. The critique was consistent: available training and TA tends to focus on why tribes should be engaged — the rationale, the history, the legal framework — rather than how to actually build and sustain relationships in specific community contexts.

One consultant provider made this explicit, describing a training curriculum she had reviewed that she had hoped would address advanced tribal engagement strategies but instead focused on basic rationale — which she described as useful for awareness but not for counties that already understand the why and need practical tools. She observed that counties that say they need help with tribal engagement are often already further along than counties that don't recognize the gap — and that the available TA does not meet them where they are.

One specific structural gap raised was that counties sometimes assume they have no tribal engagement obligation if there is no federally recognized tribe within their county boundaries, not recognizing that families of tribal heritage may live in their county regardless of where the tribe's regional office is located. Another TA provider noted that non-federal recognition does not eliminate a county's obligation to honor the spirit of ICWA — and that historical unrecognition of tribes does not diminish their cultural identity or the relevance of culturally informed practice with their families.

A proposal raised in one interview was that CDSS's Office of Tribal Affairs (OTA) could play a more active brokering role — helping counties navigate initial tribal outreach, connecting counties with tribes that may not have a presence in the county but whose members live there, and providing culturally specific guidance. Other counties reported that they felt well supported by OTA.

Tribal Capacity: Under-Resourced Partners

Several interviewees described tribal governments as facing their own staffing crises that make them difficult to engage as consistent partners. Tribal directors are sometimes doing case management themselves because they cannot fill positions. The expectation that tribes will attend county planning meetings, review county plans, and participate in multi-agency collaborative structures is an additional burden on organizations that are already stretched.

One TA provider made the observation that this is framed as a tribal engagement problem but is in part a tribal capacity problem — and that addressing it would require investment in tribal infrastructure, not just in county outreach skills. The suggestion was raised that prevention funding should be able to flow more directly to tribal entities — not just through county contracts — so that tribes have resources to build their own capacity to participate as genuine partners rather than as guests at county-run processes.

Tribal Parenting Program: A Model Worth Replicating

Multiple interviewees — both county and TA provider — cited a county's Native American parenting program as an example of what meaningful tribal partnership looks like in practice. The program is co-facilitated by probation and tribal partners, has approximately 13 tribal facilitators trained to deliver it, is open to non-Native participants as well, and is grounded in Native American parenting traditions. It had recently received a significant federal grant to pursue formal evidence-based practice status.

TA providers noted that this kind of program — community-rooted, tribally co-designed, and actively seeking evidence-based classification — is exactly what the FFPS EBP clearinghouse should be creating pathways for, and that California could play a role in supporting its elevation so that it could be used as an approved FFPS program statewide.

Summary of What Counties and TA Providers Recommend

Across the interviews, a consistent set of practical recommendations emerged for improving tribal engagement:

- Going to tribal communities rather than expecting them to come to county meetings is the most fundamental shift needed.
- Sustained, multi-year relationship building before any program or funding ask is made is what differentiates counties with strong partnerships from those without.
- Compensating tribal participants for their time in ways that are administratively feasible — including through CBOs or other flexible intermediaries rather than through county procurement processes — is essential to authentic engagement.
- Recognizing that tribal communities within a county's service area extend beyond federally recognized tribes with local offices addresses a common gap in county outreach.
- Supporting the elevation of culturally grounded programs, like the Native American parenting program, to evidence-based practice status would align available FFPS programs with actual community strengths.
- Having CDSS's OTA play an active, practical brokering role could meet counties at a more advanced stage of engagement than current TA does.