The Small County Experience with FFPS & Other Initiatives

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

Prepared in collaboration with CDSS, CWDA & the Child and Family Policy Institute of California (CFPIC)

Based on 15 interviews with county leaders and TA providers

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, 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 ACL 24-90
3. Alignment with existing planning and coordination structures, such as the 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 use FFPS as a primary lens to identify barriers small counties face when implementing initiatives 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 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 X.

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 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.

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. Interviewees across multiple counties described this floor as often insufficient to accomplish what is being asked of them.

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.

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. 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 the delay in CARES implementation.
- 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.

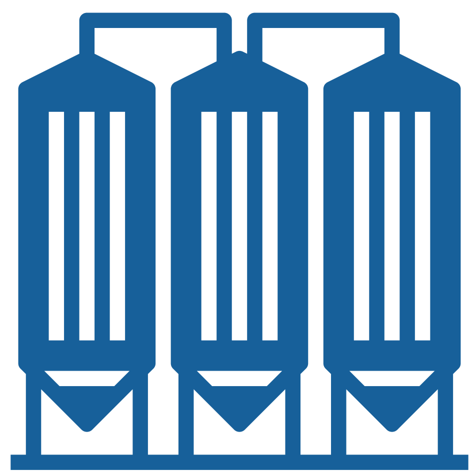
Theme 4: Timely and Translated Guidance

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.

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 drafting 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:

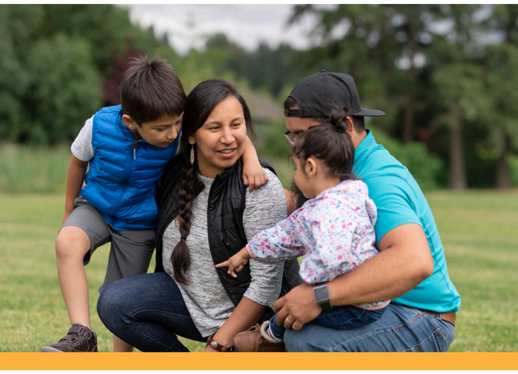
- Broad, process-heavy facilitation that produced meetings about meetings about meetings.
- TA that provides direction but doesn't actually do the work alongside the county.
- Free TA that still requires significant county staff time to engage with.
- Statewide training formats designed for specialists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

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 CWS, 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.



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.

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 X.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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 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.