



ISSUE BRIEF

SAFE STRONG SUPPORTIVE

September 2024

What do we know about Family Resource Centers?

While child maltreatment occurs in all strata of society, and most families with low incomes never will come into contact with a child protection agency, [poverty is the most consistent and strongest predictor of having an open child protection case](#) due in part to [families living in poverty being overreported](#) to CPS for neglect. About three-quarters of the nearly [560,000 victims of child maltreatment](#) in 2022 were found to be victims of neglect, and [neglect was the associated primary reason for removal in 62% of all cases](#). Research makes clear that individual poverty is a significant risk factor for neglect.^{1,2,3,4} A high concentration of poverty in a community also has been associated with increased rates of child abuse fatalities. One study found that the rate of child abuse fatalities was three times higher in poor counties compared to wealthier counties.⁵

A number of programs seek to limit the impact of poverty and reduce the risk of child neglect by strengthening families' protective factors before hardship turns into crisis. Others address [concrete needs](#) such as [housing](#), child care, and food. Some interventions also seek to reduce parental isolation by building parents' social connections and strengthening their ability to deal with stress.

Given that families living in poverty often live in communities with limited resources, **place-based programs** can be an effective way of offering individual and community services that mitigate the challenges that can lead to involvement with a child protection agency. One strategy for providing community-based family support has been the development of **family resource centers**. This issue brief addresses the following questions:

- What are family resource centers (FRCs)?
- What are the defining characteristics of an FRC?
- What do we know about the effectiveness of FRCs in reducing involvement with child protection ?
- What is the return on investment?
- What is missing from the research base?

What are family resource centers?

[Family resource centers](#) — also referred to as family centers, family success centers, family support centers, parent-child resource centers, or parent education centers — are community-based resource hubs where families can access formal and informal supports to promote child safety and child and family well-being. FRCs can be located in apartment complexes, schools, health centers, libraries, community centers, storefronts, or houses of worship. FRC services vary widely but typically include some combination of the following services: parent skill training, job training, substance use disorder prevention, mental health, housing support, crisis intervention, literacy programs, and concrete supports such as food or clothing banks.

FRCs are distinct in that they are uniquely community-focused, driven by families' needs, and offer a multitude of programs and resources. Though FRCs are locally focused, a number of jurisdictions have developed statewide, regional, and county [networks of family resource centers](#), which provide opportunities for relationship-building, capacity-building, and [sharing of best practices](#). Most aim to be **one-stop shops for children and parents** that address all [five family protective factors](#) (parental resilience; social connections; concrete support; knowledge of parenting and child development; and social and emotional competence of children). The FRC prevention model seeks to increase parenting skills and protective factors, and reduce the likelihood of formal involvement with a child protection agency. FRCs are designed to help stabilize families *before* CPS intervention or family separation is warranted.

“It was just so welcoming. The help was quick. Everything I listed that I needed — they started making phone calls, making it happen right away. Telling me about programs, getting me signed up for free ... I don't know where I'd be without this place, in terms of being a parent and how I treat my son, his mother, and even myself.”

— Jeremiah Shaffer, Father, San Francisco Safe and Sound;
2019 Jim Casey Building Communities of Hope Award Winner

FRCs often are funded through a patchwork of sources, including private grants and local and state funding. In [Washington](#), the state Department of Commerce appropriated \$5 million annually to support FRCs. The [City and County of San Francisco](#) has successfully leveraged Medicaid funding to support its FRCs. In [Massachusetts](#), the UMass Chan Medical School (part of the University of Massachusetts system) supports the FRC Network's administrative operations and evaluation activities, while the state's Department of Children and Families supports network functions such as training of all FRC staff, including training on a validated parenting assessment tool.

What are the defining characteristics?

Given that FRCs are community-driven, they naturally differ in terms of services, interventions, populations, and target outcome measures. Despite the challenge this creates for documenting and evaluating FRCs within and across networks and jurisdictions, this tailoring of services is essential for responding to the unique needs of communities. While they may be located in different facilities and have diverse approaches to service selection and service delivery, FRCs share a common goal of improving outcomes for children and families. There are also several common elements and components found across most FRCs:

1. Operate using a **set of standards or a framework** for implementing programs and assessing outcomes, such as the National Family Support Network's [Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening](#) or the [Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework](#) developed by the Center for the Study of Social Policy. **Alabama** adopted [state standards](#) for its family resource network, and **New Jersey** contracted with the National Implementation Research Network to develop a [practice profile](#) for its network of Family Success Centers.

2. Seek to be **welcoming spaces** that can be utilized by a mixture of diverse community members.
3. **Partner with families and whole communities** using strengths-based, multi-generational, family-centered approaches.
4. Provide services that are grounded in a **strengths-based** approach, are **culturally sensitive**, and are offered in **various languages** that reflect the families and communities being served.
5. Focus on **strengthening families** and improving parents' **protective factors**.
6. Coordinate, implement, and/or make **referrals** to a multitude of services, including evidence-based practices and concrete supports, to provide comprehensive and flexible individualized and group-based support to address families' complex needs.
7. Develop **parent and [community leadership](#)** to provide input, as well as support advocacy efforts and family and community resilience.
8. Have a diverse, high-quality, and **well-trained staff**.
9. Be an integral part of the community — serving as a **link between families, schools, support services, and the community** — and sustain strong partnerships with a variety of other community-based providers, system leaders, and key stakeholders to adequately address local needs.
10. Be **reflective and adaptable** to address the specific needs of the community in which they are located.

In addition to these common elements, FRCs typically provide or can make referrals for the following services:

1. **Comprehensive case management**, including assessments, crisis intervention, and ongoing support and referrals to resources and services.
2. **Concrete supports**, including assistance with housing, public benefits, educational pursuits, employment, food, clothing, child care, health care, and transportation.
3. **Differential response programs**, family reunification activities, and, to some extent, foster care and adoption support.
4. **Treatment programs** addressing substance use disorder, mental health, and domestic violence.
5. **Parenting education and supports**, including family navigation services, parenting classes, fatherhood programs, home visitation services, peer support groups, crisis counseling for parents, and parent drop-in programs.
6. **Formal services for children**, including early care and education services, screening for developmental delays and disabilities, playgroups, and after-school programs.

While this is only a snapshot of the type of services FRCs provide, the comprehensive array illustrates the complex, extensive, and varied needs of the families that come into contact with FRCs. Many of the services offered at FRCs have the potential to be paid for using federal dollars through the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#), which can provide Title IV-E funding for evidence-based family strengthening and child maltreatment prevention interventions. Through Family First, FRCs also could be leveraged as a [community pathway](#) for families to access services without coming into contact with a child protection agency.

Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA) in Portland, Ore.

The [Native American Youth and Family Center](#) (NAYA) provides numerous services to American Indian families from across the Portland metropolitan area. Founded in 1974, NAYA integrates traditional cultural values into services provided to over 10,000 people annually, including family services, a domestic violence healing circle, food pantry and clothing closet, youth educational advocates, early childhood education, community development, a community garden, and housing and stabilization services. For families involved with the child protection agency, NAYA offers a foster care support program, culturally specific parenting programs, and opportunities for children in foster care to visit with siblings and other family members. NAYA also provides opportunities for both local and national legislative advocacy.

What do we know about the effectiveness of FRCs in reducing child protection involvement?

An [appendix to this issue brief](#) provides an overview of what is currently known about the impact and effectiveness of family resource centers, with a particular focus on their ability to strengthen protective factors and reduce the risk of child maltreatment and family separation. Results include:

- Significantly lower rates of child maltreatment investigations in communities with FRCs in **Allegheny County, Pa.**
- Statistically significant gains in family self-sufficiency and health in **Colorado.**
- Decreases in risk of child abuse through differential response case management visits at an FRC in the **City and County of San Francisco.**
- Lower rates of referrals to CPS in areas served by FRCs than in comparison areas in **Orange County, Calif.**
- Improvement in protective factors such as parental resilience, social connections, and nurturing and attachment among all FRC participants in the state of **New York.** Families who were at higher risk showed even greater improvements in these protective factors.

All FRCs have reported successes from their family and community strengthening programs. Few rigorous research studies have been conducted regarding their effectiveness, however. Given the sheer number of families served through FRCs and the flexibility of FRCs to adapt to local community needs, additional research on the ability of FRCs to support family well-being is warranted.

What is the return on investment?

A few studies have found significant return on investment for FRCs:

- In **Alabama**, for every \$1 invested in the Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers in 2014, the state received [\\$4.70 in immediate and long-term financial benefits.](#)
- A study of the Community Partnership Family Resource Center in **Teller County, Colo.**, attributed the entire reduction in child maltreatment cases in 2018 to the FRC and found that the county saved \$2.92, or a [292% return on investment](#) for every dollar invested in the FRC. While this attribution may overestimate the impact of the FRC, even a smaller impact by the FRC would result in cost savings, as demonstrated by a similar [study](#) of the Westminster Family Resource Center in **Orange County, Calif.** Attributing half of the reduction in child maltreatment cases in 2017 to the FRC, this study found that for every dollar invested in the FRC, the county saved \$3.65, for an [estimated savings of over \\$1.84 million.](#)
- Recent and ongoing research co-led by [Safe and Sound](#), an FRC in **San Francisco**, indicates that if only half of the money currently spent on dealing with the repercussions of child maltreatment were redirected to efforts to strengthen families' protective factors, child abuse and neglect would

be [reduced by almost 50%](#). Calculations reveal an estimated lifetime economic burden of child maltreatment of [about \\$630,000 for each child with a substantiated report of child maltreatment](#) in San Francisco County in 2023. This translates to a cumulative financial impact of \$331 million over the course of the year, based on a conservative estimate.

- The **Vermont** Parent Child Center Network saved the state [\\$210,000 \(in 2010 dollars\) per family](#) that would have otherwise been spent on addressing the effects of child abuse and neglect, including \$33,000 in childhood health care costs, \$11,000 in adult medical costs, \$144,000 in productivity losses, \$8,000 in child welfare costs, \$7,000 in criminal justice costs, and \$8,000 in special education costs.

Family Service in South Texas

[Family Service](#), a San Antonio-based nonprofit serving 14 counties in South Texas, directly served nearly 39,000 individuals in 2022, most of whom are Latino. Programs address each of the five social determinants of health: economic stability; education; health and healthcare; neighborhood supports; and social and community engagement. In 2022, families participating in financial empowerment activities [reduced their debt by a collective \\$2.5 million](#). Almost all parents (96%) participating in parenting education through Family Service's rural area programs reported a decrease in negative parenting attitudes and an increase in appropriate expectations for their child, and 95% demonstrated an increase in parenting knowledge.

What is missing from the research base?

The adaptable nature of FRCs enables them to adjust to the specific needs of local families and evolve as communities change. The FRCs' varied services, structures, and delivery models, however, make it difficult to analyze impact and outcomes, and to extrapolate general findings. Many of the programs reporting data do not use a comparison group, a longitudinal approach, or randomized control group design, making it unclear whether families *not* served by FRCs could achieve the same results. Many of the outcomes reported by FRCs and FRC networks are demographic statistics and activity outputs, such as numbers of families served and specific services provided. In addition, when outcome data is gathered and reported, it often is focused on a single program offered at an FRC, not necessarily the impact of the FRC as a whole. In addition, many jurisdictions report collective outcomes across their FRC network instead of individual-level outcomes for each FRC in the network, which may mask differential impacts between FRCs.

Since many FRCs have lacked the capacity to record and monitor outcomes over time, there have been missed opportunities to evaluate FRCs' successes and challenges. Greater investments in rigorous evaluation studies are needed, particularly for FRCs that primarily serve communities of color, such as NAYA in Portland and Family Service in South Texas. While some formal evaluations of FRCs document their role in reducing involvement with child protective services, existing research does not provide a comprehensive picture of successful FRC program models, service delivery approaches, and return on investments, such as strengthening families and preventing family separation. This makes it difficult to assess the utility of FRCs in general, as well as their specific role in supporting child safety and family well-being. Further research is needed to understand what makes FRCs successful and what services work best for which populations, such as Latino, Black, and American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children and families.

Given the findings from the few existing studies, however, there is reason to believe that FRCs can be instrumental in increasing protective factors and supporting child safety and child and family well-being. Given states' flexibility under the Family First Prevention Services Act to use Title IV-E funds for evidence-based prevention services, and the ability to deliver them outside of a child protection agency, it is imperative that the positive effects that FRCs have on families and communities are well documented. Moreover, if the findings from some of the most promising studies can be replicated, there is no better time than the present to deepen investment in FRCs.

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Casey Family Programs is the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building Communities of Hope for children and families in the United States. By working together, we can create a nation where Communities of Hope provide the support and opportunities that children and families need to thrive. Founded in 1966, we work in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and with tribal nations across North America to influence long-lasting improvements to the well-being of children, families and the communities where they live.

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