

Background

Foster care rate payments are required to cover the cost of (and the cost of providing) food, clothing, shelter, daily supervision, school supplies, a child's personal incidentals, liability insurance with respect to the child, reasonable travel to the child's home for visitation and reasonable travel for the child to remain in the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement for children and youth placed in out of home foster care. These placements include: Resource Families, Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs), Foster Family Agencies (FFAs), Relatives (including Approved Relative Caregiver Placements), Guardianships established through Juvenile Court, Probate Guardianships, Non-Relative Extended Family Members, Dual Agency Placements, Kinship Guardianship Assistance Payment Program, Non-Minor Dependents residing in a home-based family care setting, Tribally Approved Homes, Intensive Services Foster Care, and other specialized models of foster care.

Since 2017, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) has been implementing interim level of care rates for Resource Families, STRTPs, FFAs, Intensive Services Foster Care (ISFC), and other specialized models of foster care.

On March 7, 2024, the initial Permanent Foster Care Rate Structure Trailer Bill Language was released, which detailed a new tiered rate structure consisting of three tiers developed by CDSS based on statistical analysis of the Integrated Practice-Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (IP-CANS) assessment of youth in foster care. The tier levels are designed to address the levels of care and needs of the children in each tier based on the IP-CANS assessment regardless of their placement setting, which is intended to be completed by the child's or youth's social worker in consultation with the caregiver and other supports.

Each tier includes:

- A Care and Supervision rate for the care and supervision of the child or youth in foster care;
- A separate amount of funding for Strengths Building, which could include activities identified by the Child and Family Team (CFT) or the youth and caregiver like clubs, sports, or extracurricular activities, or other supports like peer mentoring or art or other classes; and
- Immediate Needs funding intended to help families address urgent needs and/or action required to aid children or youth with serious emotional, behavioral, or health needs.

CDSS then considered feedback from three stakeholder workgroups, gathered through a series of meetings, and other stakeholder input, on each component of the proposed rate structure, and released a revised version of the proposal on May 14. On June 26, Governor Newsom signed the Budget Act of 2024 which adopted a revised trailer bill[1] detailing the Permanent Foster Care Rate Structure. The trailer bill establishes an implementation date of July 1, 2027, for the Permanent Foster Care Rate Structure, or whenever CDSS notifies the Legislature that the required automation is in place.

The new tiered rate structure will require the case plan to include the child's or NMD's most recent IP-CANS assessment and tier, and information relating to the child's or NMD's Immediate Needs allocation plan and Strengths Building spending plan and spending plan report.

Strengths Building funding will be available to any child or youth who has a tier established following the IP-CANS assessment. Following budget negotiations, the Care and Supervision rate for Non-Minor Dependents participating in Extended Foster Care living in Supervised Independent Living Placements will include the Strengths Building rate in one payment.

According to CDSS, the funding for strengths building is rooted in evidence that supports the need for investment in building strengths and maintaining healthful growth opportunities for a child. Participation in enrichment activities can help young people heal, promote supportive social connections, and provide opportunities to develop valuable skills. Children and youth in foster care may not have access to activities and pursuits available to young people with greater family stability due to a lack of funding or placement instability. Studies have shown that children who have strengths identified by the IP-CANS have a 50% reduction in serious mental health conditions, meaning that investing in Strength Building and maintenance can significantly impact mental health.[2]

Strengths Building Survey Summary

Background:

The Alliance for Children's Rights conducted a voluntary, online survey in June of 2024, targeting stakeholders in the child welfare system, including caregivers, parents, former and current foster youth, and service providers. The survey aimed to gather input on the Strength Building component of the Permanent Foster Care Rate structure proposed as part of the Fiscal Year 2024-25 California budget. [3]

The survey's primary goal was to identify activities and services to develop a pre-approved list for Strengths Building funding supporting the physical, emotional, and social well-being of children and youth in foster care. Additionally, the survey sought to understand the role of youth in identifying their Strengths Building activities, the role of caregivers and other supportive adults in supporting these activities, and to gather recommendations for administering and managing the funds effectively.

The insights from this survey will help shape a comprehensive funding structure that addresses gaps and barriers to better promote the well-being and stability of youth in foster care in California.

Respondents:

The survey on the proposed Permanent Foster Care Rate structure received responses from 53 diverse stakeholders in the child welfare system, offering a range of insights.

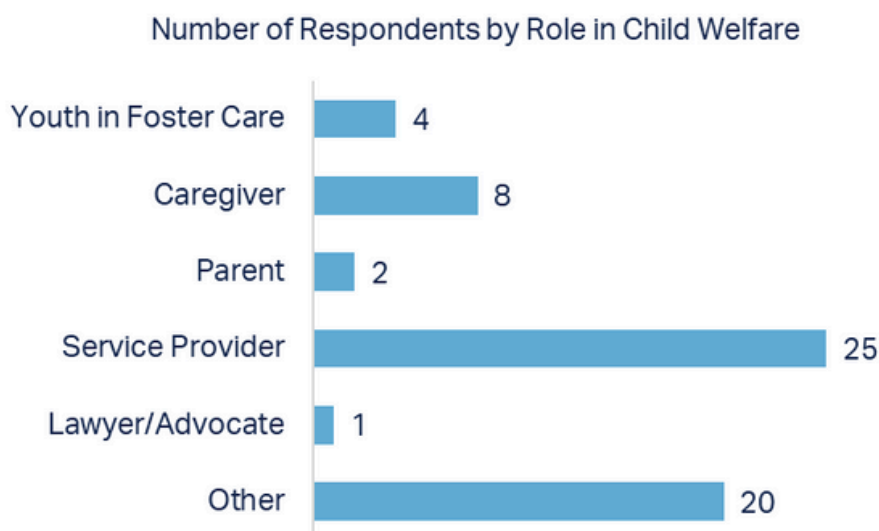
Service providers formed the largest group with 25 respondents, providing practical insights into the proposed changes. Caregivers of children and youth in foster care, the second-largest group with eight respondents, highlighted the potential impacts on daily care. Four youth currently in foster care and one youth formerly in foster care shared their perspectives, offering a direct view of how the changes could affect their lives. In addition, the Alliance gathered input from current and former foster youth through a listening session focused on the survey questions with eight youth.

Parents and lawyers/advocates had smaller representations, with two and one respondent, respectively, emphasizing family reunification and legal advocacy. Additionally, nineteen respondents identified as the "Other" category including Independent Living Program (ILP) Coordinators, social work managers, and child welfare administrators, reflecting the system's multifaceted nature.

Overall, the survey responses provide a comprehensive overview of stakeholder perspectives, essential for shaping a rate structure that ensures the well-being of children and youth in foster care.

Respondents' Stakeholder Interest by Category:

Fifty-three (53) people with a role in the child welfare system responded to the survey. Some respondents placed themselves in more than one category to signify they have been involved in the child welfare system from more than one perspective or role.



"Other" Category Sample Responses:

Some of the specified roles in the "Other" category include:

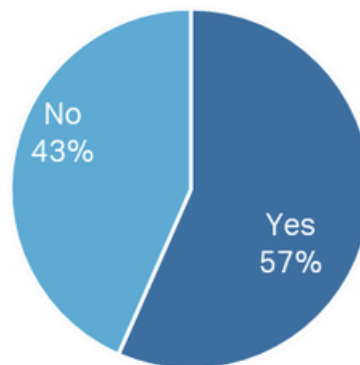
- Independent Living Program Coordinator
- Former Foster Youth
- Social Worker
- Court Appointed Special Advocate
- Program Administrators

Please note that the initial Trailer Bill on the proposed Permanent Foster Care rate structure referred to the rate as "Strength Building and Maintenance" as opposed to the final language which refers to the rate as "Strengths Building". When the survey was initially published our organization referred to "Strength Building and Maintenance", as noted in the question phrasing below. As well, note that Strengths Building funding is now included in the Supervised Independent Living Placement payment for NMDs.

Awareness of the Proposed Permanent Foster Care Rate Structure

Q1: Before this survey, were you aware that the California Department of Social Services is proposing a permanent foster care rate structure as part of the Fiscal Year 24-25 state budget process?

Respondents Aware of New Permanent Foster Care Rate Structure



Awareness Among Respondents:

The survey revealed that the majority of respondents, 30 out of 53 (56.6%), were aware of the proposed Permanent Foster Care Rate structure prior to taking the survey. This indicates a relatively high level of awareness about the upcoming changes among stakeholders. Despite the majority being aware, a significant number of respondents, 23 out of 53 (43.4%), were not aware of the proposed changes prior to this survey. This lack of awareness among a considerable portion of respondents highlights an area where further communication and outreach are necessary.

Ensuring that all stakeholders, particularly those directly involved in foster care, are well-versed regarding significant policy changes is crucial for efficacious implementation and informed participation.

Caregiver Perspective on Barriers to Accessing Higher Level Rates in Foster Care HBFC Settings

Q2: What Strength Building and Maintenance activities would you suggest should be included on a "pre-approved" list? (For example, fees and transportation for sports, clubs, and extracurricular activities; drama/art/yoga classes; tutoring/mentorship; mindful parenting programs; respite; transportation to and/or supervision at religious, spiritual, or cultural activities, etc.)

Diverse Range of Activities:

Respondents emphasized the importance of including a wide range of activities on any "pre-approved" list for Strengths Building funding. These activities encompass sports, arts, tutoring, mentorship, and holistic therapeutic approaches. Specifically, many highlighted the inclusion of fees and transportation for participation in sports teams and clubs, drama, art, and music classes, as well as yoga and other creative outlets. Tutoring services and mentorship programs were also frequently mentioned, underlining the need for academic support and personal development opportunities for children and youth in foster care.

Logistical and Financial Considerations:

Practical considerations were a recurring theme in the responses. Many respondents stressed the need for funding to cover not only the fees for activities but also the associated costs such as transportation, uniforms, and equipment. This comprehensive support is seen as critical to ensure that youth can fully participate in the activities without financial or logistical barriers.

The wide range of activities suggested by respondents underscores the necessity of a flexible and inclusive approach to Strengths Building funding. By accommodating diverse interests and needs, the program can more effectively support the holistic development of youth in foster care. The emphasis on practical and logistical support highlights the importance of addressing financial barriers to participation. Ensuring flexibility and broad eligibility criteria in the funding guidelines can enhance the program's effectiveness.

Supporting Academic Success and Transitions to Adulthood:

Many respondents expressed a desire for Strengths Building funding to support long-term growth opportunities for the youth as they transition into adulthood. These include transition to college needs like ACT/SAT/GED prep, college application fees, high school senior costs, and stipends for college or vocational training supplies or work clothes. Some respondents also mentioned driver's education and related costs, including driver's education courses, car insurance, and money for a first car. Others suggested tuition for credentialing programs and attendance fees for conferences.

Suggestions for Flexible Funding:

Several additional activities were mentioned including ongoing and one-time wellness and travel support. One respondent mentioned potentially using funds for internet service to support other activities. Gym memberships, summer camp fees, costs associated with obtaining a US passport, and childcare fees were also noted. Some respondents alluded to activities that support caregivers and youth, such as group therapy with the caregiver and youth, and vacations for the entire family. The wide interpretation of activities that would support the well-being of youth-led respondents emphasizes the need for flexible usage of funds without restrictions.

While some activities might be better supported with funding from other programs, respondents' diverse needs highlight the importance of both flexibility and comprehensiveness in supporting youth in foster care with Strengths Building funding. Any pre-approved list should cover a variety of activities and supports to address individual perspectives on their healing and development. Responses varied in prioritizing long-term versus short-term support, emphasizing the need for services that aid successful transitions to adulthood: This underscores the importance of considering age when developing a list of approved activities and identifying age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate supports.

The survey respondents emphasized the need for caregivers and youth to understand the intended use of funds to ensure funds are expended appropriately and to be aware of any changes or adjustments to the rate. Clear, concise communication and detailed fund allocation breakdowns are essential for transparency.

Role of the Child and Family Team in Supporting Activities

Q3: What role do you think the Child and Family Team (CFT) should/could play in supporting Strength Building and Maintenance activities, including identifying activities and supporting the child/youth in accessing the activities?

Identification and Planning:

Respondents emphasized the critical role of the CFT in identifying and planning activities that support youth development. The CFT environment was deemed the most appropriate for listening, uplifting, and validating youth voices. Respondents expressed that CFT members can help support a sense of belonging, foster cultural and community connections, and support positive identity development. Many responses additionally highlighted the important role the CFT should play in actively identifying activities that align with the child's or youth's interests and strengths. Respondents suggested the team should be involved in creating comprehensive plans, establishing goals, and brainstorming suitable activities that promote healthy development.

Support and Facilitation:

The CFT's role in facilitating access to activities was another major theme. Respondents suggested that the CFT should assist in enrolling the child or youth in various activities, ensuring transportation is available, and providing necessary resources and support to explore different options. The CFT's knowledge of the child's or youth's schedule and lifestyle was cited as important when engaging in conversations with youth and caregivers to determine if the Strengths Building activities fit in with the youth's schedule and school responsibilities. Additionally, respondents mentioned that the CFT should delegate responsibilities for enrolling the youth in activities, minimizing logistical hurdles.

CFT in Advisory Role for Non-Minor Dependent:

For Non-Minor Dependents (NMDs), respondents felt that the CFT should primarily serve in an advisory capacity, allowing the NMD to exercise choice with support from their adult supporters. The CFT should be involved in advising on activities but should defer to the NMD's preferences unless direct intervention is requested. The team of trusted adults should act as a "cheerleader" for youth to have the confidence to pursue specific activities or programs. Lastly, NMD respondents believed the CFT should have a more limited involvement in the decision-making process as the NMD should have more autonomy in their own life decisions as they approach adulthood.

Documentation and Accountability:

Ensuring proper documentation and accountability was a key concern. Activities identified during CFT meetings should be thoroughly documented to support the need for those activities. Additionally, there should be mechanisms to verify that Resource Families are facilitating the youth's participation in these activities and not misusing the funds.

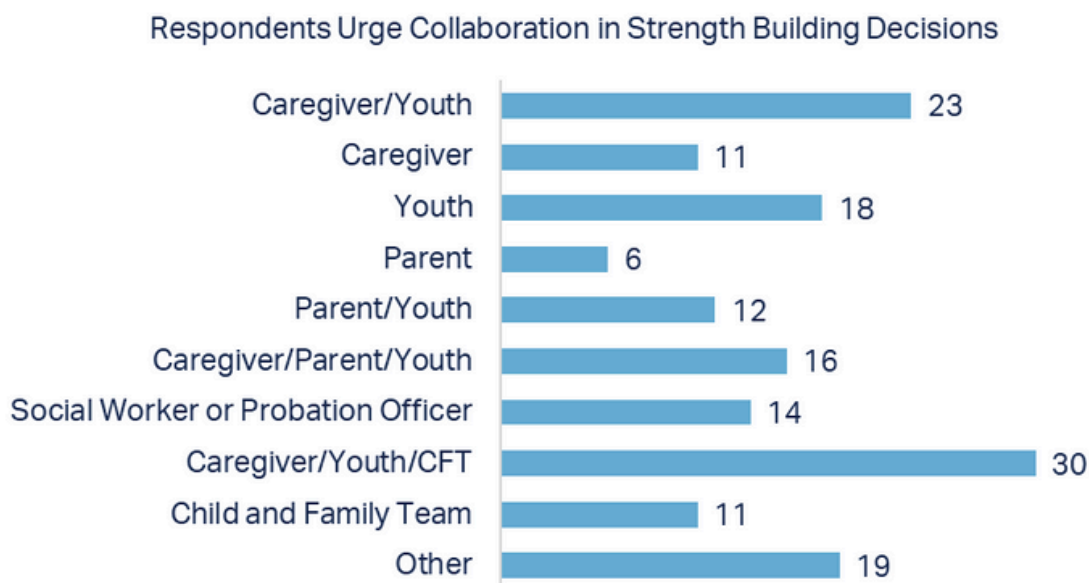
Limitations and Potential Concerns:

While CFT meetings were identified as the most ideal environment for Strengths Building discussions, some respondents expressed concern with the frequency of these meetings and the possible impacts on accessing Strengths Building funding. The frequency of the meetings often depends on the CFT members' availability, and if every member cannot be present, the meetings are delayed for potentially significant periods of time. If these delays occur, the youth's ability to participate in an activity could be stalled as well. Scheduling additional meetings to solely discuss Strengths Building funds was cited as a solution to combat this barrier. Respondents also expressed concern about the decision-making process in the meeting. Responses highlighted the need for clear guidelines on the decision-making process to be provided to the team in the event of disagreement on selected activities. Some respondents expressed concern about who would be the tie-breaking decision-maker if the youth and caregiver, youth and CFT, or youth and social worker/probation officer disagreed on specific Strengths Building activities.

Responses highlight the importance of a holistic decision-making process in CFT meetings, considering diverse information and perspectives to serve the child's or youth's best interests. Emphasizing the youth's voice, respondents view the CFT as an advisory body supporting the youth rather than making decisions for them. Acknowledging the challenges in planning and executing activities, respondents emphasized the active role of CFT members in facilitation, planning, and documentation to enhance developmental outcomes. The CFT is also seen as vital for ensuring effective and transparent use of funds, underscoring its multifaceted role in supporting Strengths Building activities. Developing processes to support expeditious Strengths Building funding approval is also critical to prevent barriers to accessing the supports in a timely manner in certain extraordinary circumstances (previously unknown opportunities, deadlines for signing up, etc.)

Youth-Centered Collaboration to Determine Activities in the Spending Plan

Q4: Who should be responsible for determining which activities will be included in the child's/youth's Strength Building and Maintenance spending plan?



Collaborative Decision-Making:

Respondents overwhelmingly favored a collaborative approach when determining the activities included in the Strengths Building spending plan. The consensus was that decisions should be made jointly by caregivers and youth, with significant input from parents, social workers, and the CFT. This collaborative model is seen as essential to ensure that the chosen activities align with the child's or youth's interests, strengths, and developmental needs. Specifically, 30 respondents preferred a collaborative decision-making process involving caregivers, youth, and CFT.

Individual Responsibility Preferences:

Some respondents highlighted specific preferences for individual responsibility in the decision-making process. Eleven respondents believed caregivers should make these decisions, while 18 felt the youth should have primary responsibility. Additionally, six respondents indicated that parents should be the main decision-makers, while 14 respondents favored the social worker or probation officer taking on this role.

Combination Approaches:

Several respondents suggested various combination approaches: Sixteen respondents preferred a model involving caregivers, parents, and youth and 12 respondents recommended decisions be made collaboratively between parents and youth. The importance of integrating multiple perspectives to tailor activities effectively to the youth's needs was a common theme. The "Other" category garnered 29 responses, with some unique suggestions that further highlight the diversity of opinion on how best to support decision-making. Responses included roles like ILP Social Worker/Coordinator, FFA social worker, and a consensus that all involved parties should provide input, emphasizing the proverb "It takes a village to raise a child."

The diverse responses indicate a strong preference for a collaborative decision-making process involving multiple supportive adults. This approach not only ensures that the activities are well-suited to the child's or youth's interests and needs but also fosters a supportive and inclusive environment for decision-making.

Information Needed by Caregivers to Support Youth and Funding Activities

Q5: What information do caregivers need to best support the Strength Building and Maintenance activities funding?

Details about Funding and Activities:

Respondents identified that caregivers need clear and detailed information about the Strengths Building funding and the types of activities it may be used for. Specifically, caregivers require transparent information about eligible activities and need to have a clear understanding of all related processes including timelines for approval and funding, reconciliation (including overpayments), and any funding limitations. It is also essential for caregivers to know which activities are not covered by the Strengths Building funding to manage expectations and plan accordingly.

Access and Navigation:

Many respondents emphasized the potential setbacks a bureaucratic process could pose when effectively implementing a new program. Respondents expressed concern over a complex process involving large amounts of paperwork which could pose barriers to successfully enrolling the child or youth in Strengths Building activities.

To combat this phenomenon, respondents emphasized the importance of providing caregivers and youth with clear step-by-step instructions on how to access the funding quickly and efficiently. Clear instructions on the process will help caregivers and youth access the necessary support without unnecessary delays. Additionally, clear direction and communication will assist in limiting conflicts or confrontations with the Strengths Building third-party administrators.

Logistics and Support:

Managing expectations and supporting a child's or youth's Strengths Building could prove overwhelming to caregivers in addition to existing care and supervision needs while balancing their home/career/family. Practical logistical support is essential for caregivers. Information about transportation and supervision plans, transportation reimbursement, and other associated costs is necessary to ensure that caregivers can facilitate the child's or youth's participation in various activities. Caregivers expressed concern with potential constraints transportation issues could have on the child's or youth's participation in Strengths Building activities. They want clear and proactive communication on what manner of commitment the activities would require of them before the child or youth is enrolled so they can plan accordingly and ensure their role is manageable. Additionally, caregivers need to be aware of compliance and accountability requirements, such as the submission of receipts and proof of funds used, to ensure transparency and proper fund allocation.

Understanding Youth Needs and Benefits:

Respondents highlighted the need for caregivers to have detailed information about the child's or youth's interests, strengths, and growth goals. This understanding ensures that the activities align with the child's or youth's needs and contribute positively to their development. Emphasizing the benefits of these activities on the youth's emotional, psychological, and physical development can motivate caregivers to actively support and promote participation in these activities and for the youth to play an active role in identifying and achieving their growth goals.

Ensuring that caregivers have clear guidelines, practical logistical support, and detailed information about youth needs and benefits is crucial for the successful implementation of the Strengths Building funding. Comprehensive training and resources, along with effective communication and documentation, will empower caregivers to utilize the funding fully and support the holistic development of youth in foster care.

Information Needed by Children and Youth to Utilize Funding

Q6: What information do children/youth need to best take advantage of the Strength Building and Maintenance activities funding?

Awareness and Knowledge:

Respondents emphasized that children and youth must be informed about the existence of the Strengths Building activities funding, what the funding can be used for, and what activities are available in their communities. Providing a comprehensive list of ideas and options helps youth make informed choices that align with their interests and needs.

Access and Process:

Clear instructions on how to access the funding ensures that children and youth can take advantage of the possibilities without excessive administrative or other barriers. Respondents note that information about the timing and scheduling of activities is also important to avoid conflicts with schoolwork or other commitments. This helps in planning and ensures consistent participation.

Decision-Making, Participation, and Support:

Ensuring that youth know their input is valued and that they have an essential role in making decisions about activities fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility. Respondents commented that ongoing encouragement from caregivers, social workers, and other supportive adults is vital. Youth benefit from having a support system that explains and encourages participation in activities. Follow-up support from social workers and probation officers can further motivate youth to engage and take full advantage of the Strengths Building opportunities.

Financial Information:

Understanding the budget available and any financial limitations is crucial for young people, particularly older youth. Respondents suggested the implementation of financial literacy courses once the youth turn age 12 so they can learn financial management and literacy skills to help them make informed decisions about spending and managing their funding effectively.

Benefits and Impact:

Youth need to understand how activities can help them develop their strengths and achieve their goals, build self-esteem, and support their overall development. Encouraging them to try new experiences and reassuring them that it is okay to explore and decide whether they want to continue with an activity is important for fostering a growth mindset. Respondents emphasized the need for flexibility in changing the Strengths Building activities from month to month, so youth are not stuck in an activity they no longer want to participate in.

The responses highlight the necessity of providing clear, comprehensive, and supportive information to empower children and youth. Ensuring that youth are well-informed about the funding, how to access it, and the benefit of participation allows them to make the most of the Strengths Building activities.

Encouragement from caregivers, other adult supporters and social workers and probation officers, along with practical financial and decision-making guidance, can significantly enhance their engagement and development. Respondents emphasized how important youth autonomy is in this process so they can exercise some control over their lives and learn how to effectively manage their time and resources.

Reunification Through Strength Building and Maintenance Funding

Q7: How could Strength Building and Maintenance funding support reunification?

Joint Activities for Bonding:

Respondents highlighted that Strengths Building funding could be used effectively for joint activities that foster bonding between the child or youth and their parent(s). Shared experiences through activities that both can enjoy together can help develop mutual interests and strengthen their relationship. The involvement of parents in their child's or youth's activities provides high-quality time together, which can create common goals and interests, essential for building a strong family unit.

Emotional and Behavioral Support:

The Strengths Building funding can play a significant role in providing emotional and behavioral support. Activities can help build the child's or youth's self-esteem and resiliency, which are crucial for emotional stability. Furthermore, these activities can aid in developing the child's coping and communication skills, essential components in fostering better relationships with parents and aiding in the reunification process.

Holistic and Therapeutic Approaches:

Respondents suggested that funding could support holistic therapy methods and anger management programs, benefiting both the youth and their families. Parent-child therapy funded by the program can help build mutual trust and support, essential for successful reunification. These therapeutic approaches can address underlying issues and promote healthier family dynamics.

Encouragement and Parental Support:

Parental encouragement to support and be present at their child's or youth's activities is crucial for building connections and supporting the child's or youth's development. Respondents emphasized the idea of parents actively attending events so they can engage with the child or youth during these positive developments. This involves keeping the parents informed about the activities and making efforts to include them in the process. One example is for parents to provide transportation assistance for visits and activities to alleviate logistical burdens and ensure consistent familial interaction.

Long-Term Assistance:

Respondents emphasized the importance of continuing Strengths Building activities post-reunification. Continuing funding during and after the transition home can ensure stability and ongoing development, providing a safety net that supports the family's long-term success. They highlighted the need for parents to be held accountable for continuing these activities post-reunification and continue to actively engage with the child and youth during these activities to support their well-being. Some respondents expressed concern with the parents' financial ability to maintain these activities post-reunification. They suggested increasing funding support in programs like Bringing Families Home to ensure the children and youth can stably participate in these crucial activities.

The responses indicate that Strengths Building funding can play a crucial role in supporting family reunification by fostering joint activities, providing emotional and practical support, and allowing parents to be actively involved in the positive development of their children. By focusing on therapeutic approaches, logistical assistance, and ensuring ongoing support and stability, the funding can address various facets of the reunification process. Ensuring continued access to these activities post-reunification can further strengthen family units and support the long-term well-being of children and youth in foster care.

Key Information for Caregivers About the Monthly Strengths Building Funding

Q8: What do you think is the most important information that should be communicated to the caregiver about the monthly rate?

Purpose and Usage:

Respondents highlighted the importance of clearly communicating the intended use of the Strengths Building funds. Some respondents felt caregivers need to understand that the funds are specifically allocated for the child's or youth's activities and needs, rather than for family or caregiver use. This is an important distinction as caregiver respondents expressed interest in using the funds for group activities such as family vacations or group exercise classes. Additionally, many caregivers expressed interest in using the funding for respite care or to help them support some basic needs such as providing clothing or hair and nail appointments for specific events. These answers exemplify the diverse opinions caregivers hold about what usage of the funds means and suggest more clarity and specificity are needed on what can be funded with Strengths Building funds.

Accountability and Verification:

The necessity of accountability and verification was a recurring theme. Compliance requirements and expectations for fund usage need to be clearly outlined in plain language and processes. Some respondents expressed concern that funds could be used improperly and highlighted the importance for caregivers to provide receipts and proof that the funds are being used to appropriately support youth. Respondents urged clear communication with caregivers on the intended use of the funds and potential repercussions for misuse to ensure that the funds are allocated correctly and effectively support the child or youth.

The responses highlight the necessity of clear, concise, and comprehensive communication with caregivers regarding the appropriate use of funds, with clear, established expectations about what is not allowed. Ensuring that caregivers understand the purpose, use, and accountability requirements of the funds is crucial for effective implementation and to mitigate the misuse of funds. Providing specific examples of allowable use of the funds helps set expectations. Informing caregivers about the consequences for noncompliance or failure to use the funds appropriately, such as re-evaluation and changes to the rate, ensures that caregivers are aware of the importance of adhering to the guidelines.

Recommendations and Concerns for Third-Party Administrator

Q9: CDSS is proposing a third-party administrator to manage the Strength Building and Maintenance funds. What recommendations or concerns do you have on how the Strength Building activities should be paid to the provider (i.e., a music therapy provider)?

Direct Payment and Timeliness:

Respondents emphasized the importance of ensuring that providers are paid directly to avoid delays and guarantee timely participation in activities. Caregivers emphasized direct payments as a preferred method as reimbursements place the burden on them to provide up-front funding that they may not be capable of providing. Timeliness of payments is crucial to prevent disruptions in services and avoid situations where youth are not able to participate in activities due to delayed payments. If reimbursement methods are needed, caregivers emphasized the process needs to be streamlined and simplified to avoid delays in funding. Clear guidelines need to be developed to ensure caregivers have a straightforward and easy method to submit receipts and an established reimbursement period, such as 14 days from invoice submission, for caregivers to receive reimbursements if they are required to make upfront payments.

Flexibility and Access:

The need for flexible payment methods that cater to the preferences of providers was highlighted. Respondents emphasized that activities vendors may require a wide range of payment methods (i.e., credit card, checks, direct wiring of funds) and emphasized that third-party administrators must be prepared to distribute the funds in more than one method and in a timely manner.

Accountability and Oversight:

Maintaining accountability for data tracking, receipts, and handling overpayments was a major concern. Respondents recommended regular audits and close monitoring of the program to ensure that funds are used appropriately and transparently. In addition, clear and consistent communication with caregivers and youth about expenses and available fund balance is critical.

Customer Service and Support:

There were concerns that involving a third-party administrator could introduce delays and add complexity to the process. Respondents articulated concerns about contacting third-party administrators with questions and emphasized the need for multiple points of contact to be available. Some respondents suggested that administrators should have an accountability method in which caregivers and youth can provide feedback to ensure high-quality service. Streamlining the process and making it efficient and easy to navigate for all parties involved was recommended to mitigate these issues.

Third-Party Administrator's Role:

Some respondents suggested a third-party administrator should have a more nuanced involvement in the process than just distributing funds every month. This was a contested notion as many other respondents wanted them to have a more hands-off approach that focused on just administering funds and associated reporting. Those who wanted a more active involvement for administrators believe the third-party administrator should understand how the funds would be used to strengthen specific areas of growth for the youth to be another trusted adult that ensures youth development is the goal when funds are distributed. They advocated for the administrator to provide resources and support to the caregivers to help them navigate the process effectively to ensure that the funds are used as intended.

The responses indicate that ensuring timely, accountable, and flexible management of the Strengths Building funds is crucial for maximizing their impact. Direct payments to providers, maintaining rigorous accountability measures, and offering flexible payment methods are key recommendations. Addressing concerns about delays and complexity by streamlining processes and providing clear guidelines can enhance the program's efficiency. Additionally, the involvement level of a third-party administrator was questioned, with respondents sharing differing perspectives of what role is appropriate for them to play. This demonstrates the need for their role to be clearly outlined through guidance and communication early in the implementation process to ensure third-party navigators support caregivers and youth.

Additional Thoughts on Strengths Building Funding

Q10: Other thoughts on the proposed Strength Building and Maintenance funding you would like to share?

Many respondents provided positive feedback on the proposed Strengths Building funding. They believe the funding could significantly improve the lives of children and youth in foster care by normalizing their experiences and supporting their development. The flexibility built into the stipend was appreciated, as it empowers youth to make choices that shape their identities and futures.

Recommendations for Improvement:

Respondents suggested several improvements to enhance the effectiveness of the funding. One common recommendation was broadening eligibility to include older youth up to age 24 who may still need support after aging out of the system. There were calls to minimize restrictions on funding to make it more accessible and effective. Additionally, it was suggested that unused funds should be designated for the child's or youth's college fund, ensuring long-term benefits for their education and future.

Focus on Youth Needs:

A holistic approach was recommended to support youth, including addressing anger management and emotional well-being. Several respondents emphasized empowering all youth to benefit from and participate in the program, not just those whose caregivers are proactive in accessing and using available funding. This inclusive approach ensures that no youth is left out of the benefits provided by the funding.

Concerns about CANS:

Several respondents expressed concerns about the reliability and validity of the IP-CANS assessment as a tool for determining needs. A few respondents mentioned worries about potential worker bias and subjective analysis in IP-CANS scoring, which could affect the fair distribution of resources.

While there is strong support for the idea and its potential benefits, careful implementation is essential to address concerns about third-party administration, assessment tools, and ensuring broad eligibility. Flexibility and accountability must be balanced to make the funding accessible and effective.

Conclusion

As CDSS implements the Permanent Foster Care Rate structure, it is imperative to consider feedback from diverse stakeholders in the child welfare system to ensure the Strengths Building funding is implemented in the most effective manner. The survey responses show the varied needs of children and youth in foster care and the potential for Strengths Building funding to promote growth and development. Critical to the implementation of any structure, we urge clear and comprehensive communication between child welfare agencies and probation offices and youth and caregivers to allow them to meaningfully take part in discussions that inform the development of processes and procedures to implement Strengths Building funding. More transparency regarding access, availability, and processes will allow youth and caregivers to make informed decisions to ensure the best possible outcome for their well-being and development.

Survey respondents expressed a desire for clear, precise, and comprehensive guidelines regarding the process of utilizing and allocating Strengths Building funds. As exemplified in the survey, stakeholders held varying ideas about the appropriate use and access to the funds.

To address these discrepancies, CDSS should articulate precise expectations with caregivers and youth regarding what is not allowed. The successful implementation of this new funding hinges on the State's and local agency's ability to clearly inform caregivers and youth what is expected of them throughout the process, as well as the crucial steps they need to take to ensure funds are administered and utilized timely, efficiently, and appropriately.

Strengths Building funding can play a crucial role in supporting children and youth by fostering growth mindset activities, providing emotional and practical support, and offering youth more autonomy in their lives. As the program is implemented, youth voices must be at the forefront of decision-making so they can derive the greatest benefit from funding. The supportive adults in the youth's life, including their caregiver, their CFT, caseworker or probation officer, and other supporting adults, should provide encouragement and financial and decision-making guidance to aid the youth, but their voice must be included in the decision-making.

Lastly, the responses indicate the importance of establishing an effective process to administer funds. Participants shared concerns about potential delays and complexities they may incur when trying to access funds and urged the third-party administrator to provide funds in a timely and efficient manner. The process should account for a wide variety of payment methods and ensure they can effectively fund directly to the provider to prevent delays in participation. Flexibility is crucial as the youth may want to frequently alter their activity choices as they discover and learn what best suits their development.

By addressing these concerns and actively engaging with those with lived experience during the implementation process, the funds can be implemented in a clear and streamlined method. The State and counties can ensure that children in care do not miss essential childhood activities through Strengths Building funds and these funds contribute to the care and stability youth deserve while in foster care.

Recommendations for Design and Implementation of Strengths Building:

1. Establish Clear and Detailed Activities Guidelines

Ensure caregivers and youth have a clear understanding of what can be funded with Strengths Building funds. Guidelines should start with examples of approved and unapproved activities and include a process for evaluating whether an activity fits into the category of approved activity. Regularly scheduled training courses or other communications (for example, through county communications systems like Binti) could also prove useful for sharing information on Strengths Building funding, processes, and guidelines.

2. Create a Supportive Environment in CFT Meetings:

Ensure caregivers and youth have a clear understanding of what can be funded with Strengths Building funds.

Guidelines should start with examples of approved and unapproved activities and include a process for evaluating whether an activity fits into the category of approved activity. Regularly scheduled training courses or other communications (for example, through county communications systems like Binti) could also prove useful for sharing information on Strengths Building funding, processes, and guidelines.

3. Clear Communication with Caregivers and Youth Regarding Processes:

Caregivers and youth need clear and detailed information regarding processes and administrative requirements, including contact information for third-party administrators and detailed information on each step they must take to access funding. Caregivers and youth need to understand how to choose activities, get approval from appropriate individuals, and navigate funding processes, including any required process to add or change activities. Clear guidance regarding how decisions will be made between CFT meetings and/or when urgent decisions must be made (i.e., deadlines for payment, etc.) should be developed and communicated.

4. Clear Payment and/or Reimbursement and Appeals Processes:

CDSS should create guidelines on how activities will be funded, including a form of payment to the activity provider and/or reimbursement to caregivers and deadlines and timelines for payment and reimbursement, including monies held on account for children and families in reunification and permanency. Counties should make a direct deposit option should be available for faster processing. In addition, CDSS should develop clear guidance on appeals processes related to expenditures and reimbursements.

5. Accessibility:

A mobile-friendly website should be established for caregivers and youth to access the details of their Strengths Building fund account. The website should detail a monthly fund balance, transaction history, a portal to submit any paperwork or reimbursement requests, and contact information for questions or concerns.

6. Accountability:

Caseworkers, caregivers, and CFT members should work collaboratively to ensure that youth are actively involved in their Strengths Building activities and able to participate/attend all events. Also, regular audits and feedback mechanisms could aid in participation and reporting compliance. Anonymous surveys of the third-party administrator may prove useful to gather feedback and identify areas for improvement.

7. Limit Transportation or Other Participation Barriers:

Transportation is a potentially significant limit to youth participating in activities. Caseworkers, caregivers, and CFT members should ensure a transportation plan is developed so youth can safely and consistently attend all event activities. Transportation fees should be considered when allocating funding. This may include providing mileage reimbursement to caregivers or other trusted adults who will transport youth.

Partnering with local transportation agencies/services or an external service provider (such as Hop, Skip, Drive) could combine to fulfill transportation needs. Other participation barriers, including uniforms, unanticipated costs, etc., should be addressed promptly by the caseworker or probation officer in consultation with the caregiver and CFT members.

8. Financial Literacy:

Strengths Building fund plans involve a financial planning aspect in which caregivers, youth, and CFT members are responsible for planning and spending an allotted amount of funds every month. To ensure all participants are aware of the financial records and the required forms, complementary financial literacy skills-building training would prove beneficial for young people. This course should involve a thorough explanation of creating funding plans, budgeting, and Strengths Building funding specifics. Such training could be provided as part of the Independent Living Program (ILP) curriculum or through community-based organization mentoring or other skills-building programs as age-appropriate.

References

- [1] Assembly Bill 161 (Chapter 26, Statutes of 2024). Retrieved at [Bill Text - AB-161 Human services. \(ca.gov\)](#)
- [2] "The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS)," Praed Foundation. Accessed July 30, 2024. <https://praedfoundation.org/tcom/tcom-tools/the-child-and-adolescent-needs-and-strengths-cans/> (See "Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths: Standard CANS Comprehensive 3.0," Praed Foundation. https://praedfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/REFERENCE-GUIDE_Standard-Comprehensive-CANS-3.0_CWBH_Final_Hyperlink_2021.01.13.pdf).
- [3] California Budget 2024-25. Retrieved at [California Budget](#)