

CALIFORNIA'S CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE: USING DIGITAL TOOLS TO IMPROVE CARE



California is home to roughly one in seven of the over 400,000 children and youth in foster care nationally—with significantly more children and youth in the system than in any other state. The Children's Partnership is working to promote the use of technology to benefit this uniquely vulnerable population.

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE NEED ALL THE SUPPORT WE CAN PROVIDE

Children and youth in foster care typically have more intense, often chronic, health and mental health conditions than other children. Among the mix of challenges foster children and youth face nationally:

- They are two to three times more likely to have a disability than children who are not in foster care.
- They are three to six times more likely than children in the general population to have significant psychological or behavioral problems.

In California:

- Nearly half of foster children suffer from chronic illnesses, such as asthma and diabetes.
- Foster children make up less than 4 percent of children in Medi-Cal, but use 41 percent of the mental health services delivered through the program.
- Every year, between 2,700-5,000 youth age out of foster care, many without adequate supports and life skills.

ELECTRONIC CARE COORDINATION CAN IMPROVE THE SAFETY NET FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

Electronic care coordination is the use of electronic information exchange and associated electronic records to improve the quality of information available to the caregiving team and equip them to deliver the most effective care and treatment, at the moment needed.

Care coordination has been shown to support the healthy development of children and adolescents through improved screening, referrals, and follow-up while also maximizing efficiencies in care delivery. Digital tools can make this coordination easier, helping connect care providers and critical care-related information more effectively and efficiently across settings and sectors.

[In the foster care context, electronic care coordination can help overcome the discontinuity in care that is caused by frequent changes in placement, school, and providers that results in a patchwork of disorganized, often incomplete and outdated paper records that can lead to gaps or missteps in care.](#) Working in a digital environment, a care team can securely

share information about a specific foster child in a manner that protects privacy, allowing them to provide much-needed services in a more effective way.

[The few initiatives in other states](#) that leverage electronic records to enhance care coordination in foster care have demonstrated the value of this approach, with corresponding reductions in inpatient psychiatric hospitalizations, residential treatment, and psychotropic medication usage—as well as related Medicaid savings—and increases in recommended well-child visits.

OPTIMIZING ELECTRONIC INFORMATION EXCHANGE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE IN CALIFORNIA

An Action Plan

Given the complex health and social needs of children and youth in foster care as well as their shifting placements and caregivers, care coordination presents an exceptional challenge—[one that can be tackled more effectively with the help of electronic tools and information exchange](#).

The Children’s Partnership has outlined key strategies for state, local, and philanthropic leaders to make the most of this digital opportunity in California:

1. [Support Well-Designed Demonstration Projects](#): A number of foster care e-initiatives are being developed across California that require funding from federal, state, and local governments, and the private sectors to achieve their full potential and to identify best practices and replicable models that can benefit children across the state. Examples of such initiatives include an electronic [Health & Education Passport in Ventura County](#), an [electronic backpack for use with emancipating youth in Sacramento County](#), and a digital lockbox in Los Angeles County, all of which aim to engage caregivers and/or foster youth in their own care while also supporting the child welfare team. Other counties, like Orange, San Mateo, and San Diego, are improving data systems to share information across county agencies in support of better service planning and provision. Several other efforts in California are developing electronic communication hubs to improve education outcomes.
2. [Promote Well-Designed State Information Systems](#): California is in the process of developing a new Child Welfare Services case management system that will allow for data exchange across state databases. For this effort to achieve its fullest impact, the new system must also support county-level e-initiatives and be able to exchange information with appropriate members of the care team, at the point of service, as well as with foster parents and older youth directly.

3. Encourage Appropriate Information Sharing with Privacy Protections: At this pivotal time, state policymakers ought to work closely with stakeholders to develop guidelines and agreements that facilitate appropriate sharing and make sense of the numerous, often confusing, state and federal laws that govern this issue. These guidelines must help caregivers understand their role while also protecting children's and youth's information.

4. Transform Care Delivery: To have a deep impact on a child's care, readiness for independence, and ultimate well-being, foster families and older foster youth must be directly engaged in their own care. State-level policy, cross-sector funding, and incentives are needed to promote coordination across care sectors as well as greater engagement. Stakeholder involvement is needed to help develop the policy and practice guidelines required to make this happen.

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The Children's Partnership is a California-based national nonprofit organization working to ensure that all children, especially those at risk of being left behind, have the resources and opportunities they need to grow up healthy and lead productive lives. The Children's Partnership has offices in Santa Monica and Sacramento, CA and Washington, DC.