

# Building Healing Systems & Thriving Families

Parent Voices Final Report to  
the California Department of  
Social Services

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In early 2021, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) partnered with Parent Voices and Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to bring California parent perspectives to inform the transfer of programs from the California Department of Education (CDE) to CDSS. Parent Voices and SPR collected parent perspectives via a series of listening sessions and a survey. Parent Voices' first step was the creation of a CDSS Transition Parent Advisory Committee (referred to as "the TPAC"), comprised of seven mothers across California, to help guide and inform the parent input process.

Primarily, the TPAC was tasked with identifying key areas of the CDSS transition plan and to offer preliminary feedback on the goals, systems, and policy proposals that directly impacted families. The TPAC then presented their experiences and recommendations to the Early Childhood Policy Council (ECPC) Parent Subcommittee meeting on March 23, 2021. Parent feedback centered on many of the issues discussed in the "Paths to Policy Change" section in the [CDSS transition plan](#), including: (1) consolidating CalWORKs stages; (2) creating a Statewide Verification Hub; (3) improving the waiting list; (4) expanding child care facilities; and (5) improving accessibility to family friend and neighbor (FFN) care. SPR, Parent Voices, and the TPAC drew on parents' insights and recommendations from this conversation to create a listening session protocol to gather additional parent perspectives on the CDSS transition plan. These groups were selected to include the unique perspectives of key constituencies that were not included in Parent Voices' focus groups conducted for the Assembly Blue Ribbon Commission on Early Childhood Education (referred to as "the BRC") in 2019; more information on these focus groups can be found in the report [Waiting to be Seen, Demanding to be Heard](#). Listening sessions were conducted during summer 2021, details about each are listed below.

- **Spanish Language Listening Session:** This listening session included ten parents, nine women and one man, from the Fresno, Marin, and San Mateo counties in California. All ten parents reside in mixed-status families, meaning that either they and/or their children have citizenship, residency, or are undocumented. Given the varying levels of English proficiency, this listening session was conducted in Spanish and facilitated by a Parent Voices member. Parents shared that they have between one and four children with ages spanning three years old to sixteen years old. Parents had a range of child care experiences, including CalWORKs and being on the waiting list, and utilized the mixed delivery system.
- **Cantonese Language Listening Session:** This listening session included ten parents living in the San Francisco Bay Area. All parents identified as Cantonese-speaking Chinese/Chinese-American women. Parents shared that they have between one and three children with ages spanning eight months to ten years old. Parents had a range of child care experiences, including center-based care, family child care, and FFN care. Furthermore, several parents were new immigrants (within the last five years). The listening session was facilitated in Cantonese and an interpreter was present to interpret the listening session into English for Parent Voices and SPR.
- **Black Mothers Listening Session:** This listening session included eight parents from San Bernardino, California. All eight parents identified as Black women. The majority were formerly incarcerated and experienced homelessness and interactions with the Child Welfare System. Parents share that they have between one and six children with ages spanning three months to eighteen years old. Parents had a range of child care experiences, including CalWORKs, Head Start, after school programs, and being on the waiting list.
- **Tribal Listening Session:** This listening session had eight parents, seven of whom identify as Native American and one with non-tribal affiliation that has a child with a Native American man.

Additionally, seven of the parents identified as women. The tribal affiliations represented were: Ajumawi Band of Pit River, Apache, Cherokee Nation, Ho-Chunk Nation, Hopland Band of Pomo Indians, Wilton Rancheria Miwok, and Yaqui. Two of the eight parents were single mothers, and three of the eight were also grandparents. Parents shared that they have between one and eight children, some of which are adopted, with ages spanning three months to twenty-two years old. Moreover, they described living in households where some of their children had or were in the process of obtaining tribal recognition. Parents had a range of child care experiences, primarily with utilizing county and tribal temporary assistance for needy families (TANF).

Summaries of key themes and recommendations were drafted for each listening session. SPR, Parent Voices, and the TPAC used these summaries to design a parent survey intended to collect perspectives on key CDSS transition topics across a broader group of parents. A total of 560 parents completed the survey with 548 parents completing the English language survey and 12 parents completing the Spanish language survey.

This report synthesizes key themes and recommendations across the initial ECPC meeting and four listening sessions, with parent survey data adding to and supporting the qualitative findings. Specifically, this report begins with key themes related to parents' positive experiences with CDSS, then goes on to share challenges that parents have experienced with CDSS. Key themes are grouped by overarching topics and share if/when a theme applies to a specific parent group. After presenting key themes, the report shares parent recommendations for CDSS as they continue to implement components of the CDSS transition plan. Lastly, the report concludes with parents' overarching perspectives on the child care systems and the changes they hope to see to support all California families.

## Parent Positive Experiences with CDSS

Parent perspectives highlighted that effective services and case management offered by compassionate, helpful CDSS staff can truly support parents and children to grow and thrive. Their stories illustrate how providing a whole-child, whole-family approach to meeting both a child and parents' needs can position families toward a better future and serve as examples for the type of experiences that CDSS should replicate for the countless families that rely on their support.

**Parents who were fortunate to access child care via CDSS's services and case management felt very grateful for the support.** They recognized the privilege they had to have access to child care and acknowledged that this support allowed them to work and generate an income, which in turn helped to pay rent, provide food, and cover living expenses.

- **For example, one parent from the Tribal listening session spoke about her extremely positive experience with TANF.** As a single-mother in recovery, tribal TANF gave her all the resources and support she needed to take care of herself and her child. In her experience, TANF went above and beyond her expectations of support. Her TANF case manager visited her while she was in recovery and assisted her in completing her application materials. Furthermore, TANF helped her return to school to obtain a business license, purchase a computer, and covered the cost for an out-of-state trip for her and her daughter to visit her tribe and elders.

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*“I've had pretty much nothing but wonderful experiences. I'm really sorry that everyone else hasn't so far, it's sounds pretty heavy...**I've just had nothing but good with TANF. I feel very fortunate.** I don't know if [it has] anything to do with me recovering so they work with me more, [but]...**Tribal TANF has made it all possible for me to be home with my daughter, to raise her.** As I mentioned, I'm a single mother and I am extremely grateful just to be with her. I can't imagine putting my child in day care....**they made that possible for me, and I'm eternally grateful.**”*

-Tribal parent

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- **Additionally, one parent from the Black mothers listening session had a very positive experience with CalWORKs.** She utilized the CalWORKs welfare-to-work program and smoothly transitioned to receiving support from the Child Care Resource Center (CCRC). As a result, she was able to enroll her child in an enriching child care environment that supported her development and prepared her to enter the first grade after completing kindergarten remotely (due to COVID-19) at her child care center.

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*“I was initially on CalWORKs going through a welfare-to-work program. So that's how I began my child care journey. I felt that it was a great help to me because I was going along with the program and always doing things that kept me able to receive child care. Once I became to the point of being self-sufficient and transitioning off of the CalWORKs program, I was then open to CCRC. **So I had a smooth transition with that and working. It's just, it's been a great help.**”*

-Black mother

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**While these positive experiences about the transformative nature of access to child care are powerful and inspiring, they were often not the norm.** Only one parent from each listening session spoke favorably about their interactions with CDSS staff and with child care subsidy programs. Those parents were disheartened to hear that other families in their listening session were facing challenges that impeded them from receiving similar support. These challenges are described in further detail in the next section.

## **Parent Challenges with CDSS**

Parents turn to CDSS for support with accessing child care and other social services, though they frequently run into roadblocks at each step of the process for accessing and enrolling in child care. The listening sessions revealed that parents are often confused or limited by eligibility requirements, which caused challenges when enrolling for care. They often were placed on long waiting lists to obtain child care subsidies even though some were eligible to receive child care because of their CalWORKs status. While FFN was often parents' preferred child care option, they encountered challenges that limited their ability to fully capitalize on it and the full range of child care options. This section dives deeper into the struggles that parents faced at each step of the process and demonstrates that accessing child care

often imposes additional challenges that parents must navigate on top of their already demanding responsibilities.

## Qualifying for and Enrolling in Care

When asked about their experience searching for child care options, all parents felt that the current income eligibility guidelines were unjust and other eligibility requirements are not sensitive to certain community context or circumstances. Additionally, across all listening sessions, parents consistently reflected on the tedious, time intensive, and repetitive application process that they had to complete each year. The following themes further elaborate on the eligibility and enrollment challenges that families faced.

### Meeting Eligibility & Requirements

**Income eligibility guidelines prevented parents from accessing the care they needed.** Currently, child care subsidy eligibility is determined by families' gross income, as opposed to their net income. Parents communicated that their gross income was not a true reflection of their "take home pay," which was significantly lower after factoring in taxes and was quickly spent on elevated rent prices and living expenses. Parents were fearful that a raise in their income could result in steep increases of family fees or a loss in their child care assistance completely. Meanwhile, those in two-parent households felt punished for having a high, combined gross income that is needed to cover the high cost of living.

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*"They always had that perception, that if two parents were working they almost always automatically did not qualify. One parent has to make this much money, while the other makes a little bit of money so that they qualify. **Instead of helping families to be united, we try to separate them because we think that it will be easier to qualify for support for our children.**"*

-Spanish-speaking parent

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- **For example, parents' income often disqualified them from receiving financial support from TANF.** Parents typically applied for TANF when they needed financial support. They were required to report their previous month's earnings, which determined their eligibility. TANF assumed that families still had access to last month's money and expected parents to use those funds to solvent their needs. In reality, parents used those funds to pay for their previous months expenses, as they were often living month-to-month. Thus, using last month's earnings as the eligibility requirement forced parents to apply for TANF multiple times. Even worse, some parents often spent at least two months with financial hardships and no income.

**Eligibility criteria and application requirements created additional burden for parents.** Oftentimes, the criteria and requirements for accessing benefits were not sensitive to parents' lived experiences.

- **For example, parents in the Black mothers listening session shared how their previous drug-related convictions prevented them from accessing CalWORKs benefits.** In order to seek treatment or avoid selling as a form of earning income, CalWORKs should be a benefit that entitles them to the child care they need to broaden their opportunities for recovery and



employment. As survivors of domestic violence, they expressed discomfort in and conflict with putting their child's father on child support in order to receive CalWORKs. These mothers were able to complete the single parent verification form to receive CalWORKs, though they shared that the form took much more time to complete.

- **Moreover, in order to receive benefits, parents who are in mixed status households had to provide additional evidence to make up for the lack of other required documents.** This often forced them to disclose their immigration status to apply for MediCal, CalWORKs, CalFresh, or other child care benefits. Many parents were concerned that their immigration status would be in jeopardy if they applied for these supports even though their children were eligible. Others feared that accessing services would label their child as a public burden, which would negatively influence their child's future to apply for scholarships or other government support. As such, some parents were more reluctant about applying and enrolling in services and benefits that could help them work toward economic stability.

## Completing and Submitting Paperwork

**The paperwork processes were time intensive and deficit-focused.** To verify eligibility for child care, parents described going through multiple income verification steps. This process was time intensive and often required parents to take time off from work. They described the process for re-submitting eligibility paperwork as lengthy, which added a burden to their already busy lives. While twelve-month eligibility has been a positive step for reducing this burden, parents still do not understand why recertification is needed if nothing in their lives has changed. Furthermore, the language used in the current paperwork conveys a perspective that the state is doing parents "a favor," and parents feel that this language lacks an equity perspective and has racist connotations.

**The paperwork process was repetitive with other CDSS programs and clashed with other benefits.**

Parents applying for multiple programs within CDSS were asked to complete a separate application for each new program and provide the same information they had already submitted through other CDSS forms. It was unclear to them why they needed to repeat the process every time they filled out new paperwork when CDSS had their information on file. Additionally, parents receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) shared that this precluded them from receiving child care benefits, which did not seem fair to those seeking the support so they could work.

- **For example, one parent from the tribal listening session encountered similar issues when enrolling in TANF after their Employment Development Department (EDD) payments were paused.** Since TANF determines eligibility based on the previous month's income, the parent did not receive TANF support because their EDD payments were included as part of their most recent income. With neither EDD payments nor TANF support to rely on, the parent went six weeks with no income.

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*"I found myself out of work due to COVID and there was a lot of inconsistency with EDD...So that was a problem for me because EDD would get cut off for six weeks and I would have zero income, but TANF is like, oh, but you got income last month – even if [EDD payments] shut off for like four weeks – and so we're not in a hurry to process your application and maybe EDD would kick back up, five or six weeks later. By the*



*time [TANF] would get around to asking me for additional paperwork my EDD was back in order. **But I had to go that timeframe with nothing, so there is no safety net whatsoever. And six weeks without income is a really big deal.***

-Tribal parent

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**There is a lack of accountability for CDSS staff whose actions delayed parents' application process.** In multiple instances, parents felt that staff were not held responsible for the poor service and support they offered to parents and instead got away with mistakes that have a real impact on a family's life.

- **For example, tribal TANF workers frequently lost important paperwork, which delayed a family's approval process.** These workers often accused parents of submitting an incomplete application, which pushed parents to track their application materials to prove they submitted everything requested. One parent discovered that her application materials, which included sensitive and identifiable information, were found outside of the TANF office at a nearby bank.

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*"It was color copies of all of our information – my children's birth certificates, their tribal enrollment forms, our social security information. **The director at the time ended up taking our applications to a bank across the street. So they [TANF] were like, 'We can't find your application. We've looked all over our office. You're going to have to come in and fill it out again.'** So then of course that's another month [without TANF]. Two months later I got a call from the bank across the street and they were like, 'We have some tribal forms. We don't know what this is, but it ended up in our office and we want to know if you want [these] copies.' And I was like, oh, those were the forms that they lost."*

-Tribal parent

*"The problem is there's no recourse. I think a lot of us on this call have probably learned to document what we send and who we send it to, and even get a mail receipt [so] you can prove 'I did send it to you, here's when I sent it to you.' **There's no accountability on the other end. And once that time has passed, it's, 'too bad. So sad.'"***

-Tribal parent

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- **Experiences such as the one illustrated above have pushed parents to demand that agency leaders and staff be held accountable for their work, especially because there are large amounts of public funds directed toward these services.**

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*"I think that it should be noted that it all comes back to accountability, right? There are big fat grants and lots and lots of money for folks to provide supportive services to the members of our communities. **The problem, I think, [is***

*that] it all goes back to accountability and the fact that the people who are supposed to be doing this aren't."*

-Tribal parent

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## **Navigating The Waiting List**

Once parents overcame the hurdles related to eligibility and paperwork, many then faced long waiting lists to obtain their child care subsidies. Parents went years waiting for their child care subsidies to be approved so they could seek services from subsidy-accepting facilities. Additionally, some parent groups felt deprioritized in the waiting list process. The following themes and reflections illustrate these challenges in further detail.

**The child care subsidy waiting list process was confusing and lacked transparency.** Parents who were placed on waiting lists explained that the overall process was challenging. They did not know their status on the waiting list and received no indication or estimate for how much longer they might remain on the waiting list. Needless to say, this affected their ability to access child care, leaving them feeling lost in the system and without support. There is also no protocol in place to conduct check-ins with families whose circumstances may have changed over time and who could otherwise be eligible for a child care program due to new CalWORKs eligibility, a child becoming eligible for Head Start or age eligible for state preschool for example.

**Parents stayed on child care subsidy waiting lists for unreasonable amounts of time.** Parents shared that they spent as little as two years to as long as five years waiting to receive a child care subsidy, which created challenges for parents hoping to access child care.

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*"I've been on the subsidies wait-list for four years and I have no idea of what that means. **Based on the work that I've been doing with Parent Voices in the last year, I've learned a lot but that's just because I've been in this space.** And that's when I learned about what [rank] I was in [and] how the [rank] that I'm in works. But there is no information for me to do that. And when I have called to get information, they can't tell me anything of where it is or where it's at or anything. It would be really nice to either have updated information on where the situation is, or what my status is as a parent."*

-TPAC parent

*"In Chinatown, some mothers are waiting forever, and then some kids cannot get any type of education until they're ready for kindergarten."*

-Cantonese-speaking parent

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- **Additionally, undocumented parents felt like they were placed at the “back of the list” because of their immigration status.** Many of the undocumented parents who had spent months to years on waiting lists knew about other mothers with U.S. citizenship who were quickly processed and contacted to receive child care support. As described in the proceeding quote, non-citizens have a more extended application process, which is inequitable and detrimental to these families’ well-being.

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*“I know many moms that qualified for CalWORKs for being citizens, so because of the way that points are given they are going to make the list. They take a few weeks, even days, because since they qualify for step 1 they immediately receive child care and assistance.”*

-Spanish-speaking parent

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**The current waiting list system reinforces problems with income eligibility.** Parents described that one of the main problems with the waiting list is that families must lower their income to become eligible for subsidized child care. In other words, parents felt forced to keep their income lower than what they could potentially make or else they might not receive a needed child care subsidy because they would get pushed further down the waiting list or removed completely.

## Accessing Child Care

Beyond the subsidy waiting list, parents encountered other challenges in attempting to access licensed child care providers. For one, they were not always aware of the available options in their community. This was further exacerbated by the fact that some providers did not accept families with child care subsidies given the problems and delays in subsidy payments and low reimbursement rates. These challenges, further described below, affected parents’ ability to work or advance their education to better position themselves to provide for their family.

**Providers often did not accept parents with child care subsidies.** Parents’ child care options were further limited because many providers would not accept child care subsidies due to the administrative process, low subsidy rates and the length of time it can take to get payments from the state. As a result, parents were often unable to use their voucher with their first-choice provider and struggled to identify eligible providers. Half of survey respondents (51%) stated that they were turned away from a child care provider because of their subsidy.

**Many parents lost their child care when transitioning from Stage 2 or Stage 3.** Of the survey respondents that received CalWORKs (299), half of them (151) lost their child care when they transitioned to Stage 2 or Stage 3.

**CDSS offered insufficient information about child care options available in the area.** Many non-English speaking parents from both the Cantonese and Spanish speaking listening sessions shared that promotional material for various child care options were often only in English, which posed a challenge for them to access important information. Instead, parents often relied on friends or family to tell them about child care providers that might have been a good option for them.

**Parents felt invisible because of their immigration status, which had a significant emotional impact on them and their families.** These parents were limited in the resources they had access to because of their status. As such, they felt as though they did not exist in the country and were not a part of society, except until they needed to pay taxes during which the government recognized them.

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*“For some things, because we don’t have a [social security] number, we don’t exist in databases or registration lists. But once it’s time to pay taxes with the [ITIN] number that we’re assigned, that’s when we become very visible. **We can have no rights for many things – to ask for unemployment benefits, to apply for rent assistance because we’re in a tight situation, or what have you – in that moment we’re not visible to the government, but we are very visible when we need to pay taxes.**”*

-Spanish-speaking parent

*“Our status has a big influence. It’s not so much that it affects financially, but that it affects us emotionally. **It makes us feel like we have no value, as if our existence doesn’t matter and doesn’t count.** Some of us, even if we’re in this situation, try to live the most legally possible within what’s permitted by following the rules of this country of which my children are citizens of.”*

-Spanish-speaking parent

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- **In fact, parents felt like their child was being denied their right to access services and resources as a U.S. citizen, all because of their immigration status.**

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*“Yes, [our immigration status] does affect [the services we receive]. It makes them put us at the back [of the waiting list], and **it’s unfortunate because it does not only affect a family’s economic situation, but it also affects the citizens of this country.***

***Our children who were born here are being denied a right. Here in California children and their childhood is very much protected, so it would be great to move away from being categorized for the simple fact of our [immigration] status.”***

-Spanish-speaking parent

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## **Interacting with CDSS Staff**

As parents navigated the child care system, many were faced with unfortunate experiences with CDSS staff. Across listening sessions, parents shared their lack of trust toward staff, whom they perceived to lack clear communication and preparation to support them. They came to realize that there were inconsistencies in the information that staff shared with families within and across regions, which was further exacerbated by language barriers between staff and parents. Often, parents found staff to be another barrier as opposed to a helpful resource, as illustrated by the following examples.

**Staff failed to communicate complete, relevant, and helpful information to maximize the support that parents received.** Across all listening sessions, parents shared how staff were not proactive in communicating or clarifying information with families, such as the full list of benefits they could access.

- **Very few survey respondents that received CalWORKs (299) knew that they were eligible for multiple services.** The table below shows the services in which less than 25% of respondents that received CalWORKs knew they could access.

**Exhibit I. Parent Knowledge of CalWORKs Services**

<b>Service</b>	<b>Percent of CalWORKs Recipients Indicating they knew of the Service</b>
Transportation Subsidies	24%
Infant Supplies (i.e., diapers and formula)	19%
Job Search Support	19%
Domestic Violence Resources	17%
Food Pantry	15%
Homelessness Assistance/Transitional Housing	15%
Substance Abuse Resources	14%
Unemployment Resources	13%
Information and Support to Foster Parents	11%
WIC	11%
Immigration services/support, particularly for mixed status households	2%

- **Despite conversations with staff, a few parents in the tribal listening session were unaware that they could access tribal TANF or other child care benefits.** In both instances, parents went months, often years, without tapping into the full range of support they could receive. Even though staff had access to their information, such as their demographics via their application materials, or knew their particular family circumstances, they did not do their due diligence to communicate the most useful and applicable information to parents. As a result, parents took longer to get the support they needed to truly begin shifting their circumstances.

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*“For the first couple years of my son's life, I was on regular TANF, and I had to meet their work and volunteer requirements. I think my son was three years old when I mentioned something to my worker in passing about being American Indian. He's like, ‘Wait a minute. You're Native American?’ I'm like, ‘Yeah. You didn't know that? I checked a box when it asked me what race or ethnicity I was. I wrote down my tribal affiliation.’ He's like, ‘Why aren't you on tribal TANF?’ I'm like, ‘What the heck is that?’ **Unless you're really tapped into the community and know what's going on, you might not even know about tribal TANF at all within the different benefits that could be offered to you in combination with food stamps and other types of benefits.**”*

-Tribal parent

*“It was when I was attending college. In terms of child care and them providing that information, it wasn't [provided]. **The information on child care, on bus passes or transportation, it was something that you had to ask for. They didn't volunteer that information.** I had been in school for a semester and a half. I didn't have a vehicle. So I'm like, you provide bus passes, you provide mileage? **How come I didn't know this? And they said, you have to ask for it if you want those services.**”*

-Tribal parent

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**There were inconsistencies in the information that staff shared with parents.** Parents often relied on staff to provide them with complete information regarding child care benefits. When parents do not have access to this information, they are not sure how to advocate for themselves or their children.

- **For example, parents in the TPAC listening session described how inconsistent communication between CalWORKs stages resulted in parents being dropped from their child care program.** County staff did not communicate consistent and thorough information about the different CalWORKs stages, eligibility requirements, status, and progress, which created confusion and resulted in parents losing their child care subsidy.

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*“When I was on welfare getting transferred into stage two, I got dropped because the people from welfare and the people from the stage two center wouldn't communicate with each other. They wanted me to go back and forth between them but they were never available. Every time I called they gave me the run around. I ended up getting dropped to where I didn't even get it.”*

-TPAC parent

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- **Similarly, in talking about their experiences with tribal TANF, parents in the tribal listening session received different guidance and support from their staff.** Some of them received full financial support for child care and preschool, full hours for contract work/cultural activities (like beading), and additional support for transportation, among other services, while others only received partial coverage and were eligible for fewer services.

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*“If I moved to the next county over, I'd qualify for full services with my child[ren] that are tribal members. **It's kind of where you're at [that determines] what you're receiving from TANF.**”*

-Tribal parent

*“One major barrier for Native folks and actually receiving child care is the fact that a lot of us do contract work, which is considered unstable or inconsistent. That's a major issue because a lot of Native folks do different types of contract work. A lot of our folks are artists. We have folks that are beaders and painters and regalia makers. I just feel like those folks are left out in the dark and we really need those folks.”*

*They're pillars. We can't all be beaders. We can't all be regalia makers. So I think those folks are unable to access benefits because their jobs aren't considered jobs [and they receive different guidance on what counts towards TANF]."*

-Tribal parent

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**There was a lack of trust toward CDSS staff who were perceived to be poorly prepared to support parents.** Parents felt disconnected from the staff they were meant to confide in and trust. Notably, only 13% of survey respondents felt that their case worker had “a great deal” of shared lived experience or could relate to their context/background.

- **For example, parents from tribal communities shared that non-tribal workers lacked sufficient knowledge on Native American culture as well as experience as social workers, which often led to receiving inadequate support that was not culturally conscious.** They felt that there were inadequate requirements to become a TANF caseworker, which contributed to the staff's poor preparation.

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*"A lot of our TANF offices, a lot of our caseworkers, aren't qualified caseworkers. **It's a very minimal stipulation for them to become caseworkers with the TANF partnerships.** A lot of them just don't know what the extent of case working is and how to provide those services effectively for families...I think that's where a lot of glitches are too; **there's a lack of experience or just not knowing.**"*

-Tribal parent

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- **In addition to CDSS staff, Black mothers felt that Child Protective Services (CPS) case workers lacked empathy for their situations.** They felt that all case workers needed to demonstrate a higher level of empathy in order for the CPS system to truly change. Parents felt judged by case workers, who were unable to identify with their struggles. Additionally, parents did not feel supported nor prioritized by CPS caseworkers, some of whom were slow to return phone calls and emails. Furthermore, once parents got ahold of their caseworker, they received guidance that was not useful for helping parents reunite with their children.

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*"I feel like they're not doing their job. She [the case worker] was supposed to put in a referral and here we are getting ready to go to court and I still ain't got that referral put in. I called her numerous times, [sent] emails over and over again, and the best they can tell me is to get a mental health evaluation. I said, 'I've been on my meds for five years and have consistent paperwork to back myself up.' I just don't get it."*

-Black mother

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- **Furthermore, instead of supporting families to find stable housing, CPS immediately decided to separate children from their parents.** Instead of viewing CPS as a supportive agency that can



provide families with resources to help them overcome their housing challenges, unhoused families ran from CPS out of fear that they would take their children away.

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*“CPS removed my son from me for being homeless. So doing all of the work for CalWORKs, getting him to his daycare on my own, getting him to speech therapy. All of that on the bus and then having family issues with unstable members and then becoming homeless. They decided to just remove him from me while I was at parenting class. So I had three things going on, his school, my job, and the regional center for speech therapy plus parenting class. I reached out to social workers several times for vouchers for Mommy and Me shelters, all types of things. Instead of helping, they just removed him and they took him the day I graduated from parenting class.”*

-Black mother

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- **Parents have experienced discrimination and differentiated treatment from staff at facilities once it is known that they are undocumented or non-citizens.** Parents expressed the lack of urgency from staff in supporting them to access services. In fact, staff were often critical of parents and families.

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*“In my case, I’m not saying I speak perfect English, but I can communicate. So I arrived speaking it and the attention was great, but once we got to the small detail of the ID I proudly showed my green card and that’s where everything changed – I could see and feel a different attitude. You could see it. ‘Were your children born here or not?’ ‘Yes, here are their birth certificates showing they were born here.’”*

-Spanish-speaking parent

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**Language barriers limited non-English speaking families’ access to information and staff.** Parents with limited to no English proficiency felt uninformed about services and disconnected from facilities that lacked the capacity to attend to their language needs.

- **For example, parents in the Cantonese-speaking listening session shared that they had limited access to staff they could speak to in their native language.** One parent waited eight hours at a county welfare office to speak with the only person on staff who spoke Cantonese, while another had to return to the office multiple times before she was able to speak with someone in Cantonese, and a third parent had to return with an English-speaking family member. Additionally, not all CDSS child care information and application forms were translated, leaving parents unable to access certain materials. Notably, parents reported that some of the translated material was not as detailed as the English version, leaving parents with gaps in their knowledge of child care services and benefits.

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*“So I used to apply in this food stamp application center, but **all the staff there speak English. So it's kind of hard for us.** The only thing that I can do is just stand there until I can get the confirmation. So I stand there for over an hour. I would just keep on feeling that I need[ed] service, but no Cantonese-speaking staff are available. I was waiting for five or six days.”*

-Cantonese-speaking parent

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**Parents needed to be insistent and intense with workers in order to receive support.** Some parents shared that they were only able to get a positive response from staff after making their needs and demands clear. Parents felt that they should not need to push so hard to get support, especially when they might already be in emotionally challenging circumstances and in a time of need.

## **Securing Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care**

Though FFN was parents’ most preferred child care option (see text box on the next page), they encountered obstacles that prevented them from taking full advantage of this care. Some parents were unaware of how to access this resource, while others felt it was unfair that undocumented family members could not receive FFN payments because of their immigration status.

**Several parents were not sure how to access publicly funded FFN care.** Some parents were told that they needed to be a CalWORKs recipient to access FFN care, while others were told that they needed to prove that they were experiencing significant challenges to qualify for FFN care. This lack of consistency in information resulted in general confusion around the availability of publicly funded FFN care. For parents that tried to utilize publicly funded FFN care, they found the information to be confusing and were told the benefit was no longer available and had not been available for the past ten years. As stated in the previous section, this can be even more confusing for non-English speaking parents who face language barriers that limit them from accessing accurate information in their preferred language.

**Parents felt that FFN providers were not adequately compensated.** Specifically, 44% of survey respondents said they faced challenges with accessing FFN care due to the minimum wage requirement/cap and the lack of comparable wages to center providers.

**Parents were frustrated that they could not use child care subsidies to pay undocumented FFN providers for their services.** They felt that it was unfair for a person’s immigration status to limit their ability to receive child care subsidies when there were expectations and obligations to contribute to the county in other ways, such as through paying taxes.

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*“If the ITIN [Individual Taxpayer identification Number] works for many things, why can’t it work for my son to receive child care? **My mom [has an ITIN and] is at home because she’s older, but she takes very good care of my son. Why can’t my mom watch over him?** My son would stay at home where he has his toys, a place to rest, feels safe, and I go to work very calm. I won’t be worried that if I get stuck in traffic during my one-hour commute, that my son will be left elsewhere because the center closes at a certain hour. This would help countless families.”*

### **Value of Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Care**

**To support CDSS with understanding parents' child care preferences, it should be noted that parents across all listening sessions shared that FFN care is the most desirable and valuable child care option.**

Families often chose FFN care for the following reasons: trust, cultural needs, language needs, and variable hours.

- **Parents immediately turned to relatives and FFN providers when in need of child care because of the established relationship and level of trust they already possess.** It can be very challenging for any parent to build trust with center staff, especially when there is no previous relationship or communication with them. It can be even more difficult for Native American parents to trust these individuals when they work for institutions and systems that attempted to eradicate their people and culture. As such, parents sought child care support from relatives, primarily women and elders, which reassured them that their children were in good hands.
- **Parents in the Tribal listening session appreciated that FFN providers can offer authentic, cultural teaching and care to their children.** FFN providers are typically tribal members from an older generation that can teach children about their history, traditions, and customs. As such, FFN providers are passing on knowledge and information to children that ensures their tribal traditions are kept alive across generations.
- **Parents felt a sense of flexibility when their child was with an FFN provider.** Because of the established communication and trust, parents knew that these providers could be much more flexible with child care hours as compared to a center. Parents felt more comfortable knowing that their child would be cared for even if they had to work late or were stuck in traffic during pick up. Additionally, FFN providers were more flexible than centers and family child care homes to working over the weekend. Ultimately, this flexibility reduced the amount of stress that parents felt around child care services.

### **Addressing Parents' Needs**

In addition to the challenges that parents face as they attempt to access child care, they also expressed a need for tailored supports. Parents shared how the pandemic sparked a need to attend to their mental health and wellbeing. Those who were essential workers found themselves needing to prioritize their work and income to financially provide for their family. Their experiences serve as examples that providing quality child care in tandem to attending to parents' needs can provide comprehensive supports that benefit the entire family.

### **Specific Supports for Parents**

**Parents' mental health needs to be prioritized and supported.** Parents expressed the desire for more education about mental health and how to identify if they need mental health support. As described in the preceding quote, some parents were unsure of when to seek help and would like to deepen their knowledge around mental health and the supports available to them. Furthermore, parents shared that the pandemic negatively impacted their mental health, emphasizing the need in our current context.

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*“I think we need support for education about mental health. **Because we don't understand how to define when we are having emotional turbulence, and how to identify whether that is a moment that we would see a mental health specialist, or it's just an emotional feeling.** We don't have enough knowledge to understand what's going on in our feelings. I'm a single mom with one child, and also I'm pregnant. So when people ask me that, ‘If you feel like that way, why don't you go to see a therapist.’ But the problem, I feel so helpless. We don't even know that is something we need to look for help. Because we don't [know] how to identify whether it's a situation that we would [need to] see a doctor, and what kind of doctor. We don't have the knowledge.”*

-Cantonese-speaking parent

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- **In some instances, parents' mental health was used against them.** For example, Black mother's mental health was often used against them in custody decisions. Those who took medication for their mental health felt that CPS expected for their prescription to prevent any sort of mental health challenge. Thus, when parents did experience a mental health crisis, they felt that CPS was not empathetic and used the mental health crisis as a basis for removing their children.
- **Moreover, lack of access to therapy or domestic violence counseling has impacted parents' ability to qualify for or maintain child care.** Specifically, of the survey respondents that receive CalWORKs (299), 59% have said that the lack of access therapy and counseling has impacted their child care access.

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*“When it comes to our mental health, I think nine times out of 10...they use it against us. And of course it's their first instinct to just remove our kids...they neglect to offer the services first, before removing. So maybe, because we're still dealing with our childhood. I don't care how old a person is going to be. There are things that we probably will never heal from, or things that's going to come up as a trigger, but it doesn't necessarily mean that we're taking it out on our children. I'll speak for myself, I internalize it a lot. To my child, I'm the happiest mom. What he doesn't see, it's not for him, because he's a baby, but **they don't offer the services first. They only use that against us in court when they decide no, we're going to keep them [the child].**”*

-Black mother

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**Parents want to deepen their child development knowledge to better support their children.** Some parents shared that they are not aware of the right questions to ask to know if their child is on track with their development. They also were not sure where to seek services to support children with special needs, such as speech delays or attention deficit disorder. Over half of survey respondents (55%) did not know where to go to learn about trainings, support groups, resources, and information to learn more about child development. Parents want to interact with their child care provider in a way that allows them to understand their child's development, but this can be challenging when the parent does not

know what questions to ask, does not speak the same language as their provider, or does not trust the provider.<sup>1</sup>

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*“We would like to have comprehensive information, because we have [knowledge gaps] when we enroll the kids and then we don't really know what's next step for child development. What's the next stage? What are resources? What are the things the parents can do to support development? So I would like to think if your kid is going to child care or medical centers, then if we have some information there in different languages, so it's in Chinese, then we can learn what we need to do for different stage of their development. That would be valuable.”*

-Cantonese-speaking parent

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**Parents need access to support that will help them manage or overcome a crisis and ensure their child's wellbeing.** Oftentimes, parents faced roadblocks caused by CDSS' system and structure. Instead, parents need access to the support that will best position them to support their family.

- **For example, parents in jail or prison, and those who were recently incarcerated, need support to reunify and retain custody of their children.** One mother shared that parenting classes, a requirement for reunifying with her child, were not offered at her facility. Unfortunately, a judge would not transfer her to a facility with parenting courses and as a result this parent fell behind in her timeline to reunify with her child. Once parents are released, they must show CPS that they have a stable job, income, and place to live in order to acquire and retain custody of their children. However, without support to access and pay for child care, parents are challenged with finding and maintaining a stable job and place to live. When parents are expected to work full time and go to parenting courses, challenges will inevitably arise; however, parents are not afforded any grace as they attend to their multiple responsibilities.

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*“We have to have time management because oh, you need to have a job, even though you're doing eight-hour classes. Oh, but you need to have a job because how you going to take your kid? They give you all this stuff. And the minute that you slip up one time, no, she doesn't know how to deal with real life. So you wasn't really trying to help...I have to sit down and say, 'If I don't go to this class, I don't get my child back. But if I don't go to this visit, I don't seem like I'm a good parent.’”*

-Black mother

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- **Similarly, Native American parents did not receive the immediate support they needed from tribal TANF and often faced additional barriers that created a disservice to parents and children.** For instance, one parent was told that she and her three children, including a

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<sup>1</sup> Parents might find themselves leaving their child with a provider that they do not trust for a myriad of reasons detailed in this report. For example, they do not always have access to information about available child care options. It is hard for parents to obtain care, so they enroll in it when they are given the opportunity, even if the provider does not meet all of their preferred qualifications (speaks their native language, is close to home, offers flexible hours).

newborn, needed to exhaust their time at a shelter before qualifying for motel vouchers. Another parent recalled a time when tribal TANF tried to force his high-risk, bed-resting, pregnant wife to complete hours, even after their caseworker agreed that he could do all of their hours for the family – a decision the caseworker later reversed. In both instances, parents were not given the support they needed and instead were forced to navigate requirements that ultimately jeopardized the safety and wellbeing of the parents and their children.

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*“I was facing a rental foreclosure at the time. And so when I went to tribal TANF and said, ‘Hey, this is the situation, I need to figure out a place to move.’ I had a newborn baby and just couldn't find places that were willing to rent me with a new baby and [I was a] student. What I have understood is that within emergency situations they [TANF] can provide motel vouchers whether it's even a week of a place to stay. And they said, ‘no, **we can't actually provide you with that option until you go and stay in a shelter**, so you can go stay in the salvation army with your children **and then once you've exhausted your time there then we'll provide you with a motel voucher.**’ And that just really was not a safe option at the time, especially having three children.”*

-Tribal parent

*“Well, the caseworker said it was fine [for me to do all of our hours, including my wife's hours]. So I made all the hours for both of us, and then **the caseworker changed her mind** and said I can't do it like that, even though at first she said it was fine. And then she was like, ‘No, your wife has to do a couple of hours as well.’ I was like, ‘But she's on bed rest.’ I even showed them the note from the doctor and all of that. The doctor tried to reach out to them, explain to them she's on a high risk pregnancy...The outcome that I got and received from when my wife and I was on TANF, I didn't really care for it...Especially because **they tried to force her into something, knowing she was on high risk bed rest as well...And then right after that, we just got off of it. I dropped out of college and just went back to work.**”*

-Tribal parent

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## Impact of COVID-19 on Parents Who Are Essential Workers

**Families constantly faced challenges as essential workers during the pandemic.** On a daily basis, these families put themselves at risk of exposure to COVID-19 when going to work in the fields or at grocery stores. This, in turn, had the risk of exposing their family members upon arriving home. At the same time, undocumented parents were often unpaid for days they took off to get tested for COVID or to recover from sickness. They did not feel comfortable asking to be paid in fear of the repercussions this could have on their employment and position in the U.S.

- **For example, parents needed to work additional hours over the weekend to earn sufficient income to cover their living expenses.** Unfortunately, this often left them struggling to find additional child care that was either not available or offered at an additional cost. One parent shared her financial struggles living in San Mateo County while making a grocery store worker

income and trying to raise three children. She knew that working the eight additional hours over the weekend would increase her income during a time of need. However, she was unaware of any child care centers or staff that worked on the weekends and relied on expensive FFN care.

**Families that received food stamps during the pandemic have since returned to work and lost access to this resource.** This was a difficult transition for many families who continue to struggle financially to cover all of their living expenses. Food stamps were a helpful support that relieved some of their financial pressures, which unfortunately they no longer have.



## Challenges with Child Care Facilities

In addition to the previously named challenges, parents shared other obstacles that they encountered with child care facilities. These challenges are part of parents' experiences when seeking child care and should be acknowledged given their intersection with CDSS' services and their impact on the child care field.

**The lack of child care services impacted parents' ability to search for and engage in employment opportunities.** Even though parents wanted to and needed to work, without child care, they had to cut their work hours or stay at home to care for their child. Almost all parents agreed that this significantly impacted their economic stability, as it made it difficult to cover the cost of living expenses. In two-parent households, this situation added pressure to the sole parent that was bringing in an income.

*"I definitely lost employment opportunities. I was told 'Well, you qualify for the job' but the question was where do I leave my two children. I think I'm not the only person who has to deal with the need to look for work and not be able to work because I have to stay at home to take care of my children, which greatly impacts our family's economic situation."*

-Spanish-speaking parent

**There are not enough child care facilities in lower-income neighborhoods.** Parents shared that facilities in residential neighborhoods are typically located in high-income areas and are not accessible to most families. Parents shared that increasing facility availability in communities of color and in lower income areas is critical for supporting racial and economic equity.

**It is stressful and difficult to accommodate strict child care provider hours.** Across all listening sessions, parents had alternative schedules that required them to work evenings, weekends, and sometimes even holidays, which meant they needed care outside of traditional child care provider hours. This often meant that parents had to pay additional fees to cover the extra hours of child care or pay for FFN care outside of their provider. They felt economically challenged with needing to pay extra on holidays or longer work days and believe that they should not have to incur additional child care costs due to their work schedules. Some families with child care vouchers may have been eligible to have a second provider but often times they are unaware this option is available to them.

**Parents were challenged with finding a provider that met their child's needs.** For example, some child care providers were unprepared to care for a child with special medical circumstances or needs, which negatively impacted the trust that parents felt toward providers. One parent from the Spanish-speaking listening session shared the challenges she faced in looking for a child care provider to care for her daughter who has kidney failure and needs additional care. Unfortunately, this family was turned away from centers who did not have the capacity or training to provide the needed care.

**Parents with multiple children want to receive care from the same facility.** In general, parents preferred to have one place to drop-off and pick-up their children. This can be challenging when children are different ages because some providers are unable to care for children of a certain age. For example, some facilities do not care for infants/toddlers, so parents must find separate facilities for their children.

**While parents saw many benefits with FFN providers, they also recognized that these individuals did not have the same professional training as licensed providers.** One parent, who worked as an FFN provider that cared for her own child and three other children, expressed her concern about not being officially CPR or First Aid certified like licensed providers. She recognized the huge responsibility that she had in caring for others' children and identified an area of weakness and discomfort she herself felt knowing that she could not provide the same level of care as other providers.

## Parent Recommendations

The countless challenges that parents have encountered has informed their perspectives around ways that CDSS can improve its services and supports to families. The following section outlines recommendations that parents shared to improve CDSS services, which are categorized by each stage of the process that parents go through to acquire child care.

### Qualifying for and Enrolling in Care

Similar recommendations shared in the 2019 BRC report, parents across all listening sessions discussed the challenges they faced to access useful, complete child care information, identify eligibility and successfully enroll in the child care option best suitable for them. In response to this known challenge, the transition plan states that CDSS is committed to “simplifying, streamlining, and modernizing eligibility processes as much as possible” (40) and has proposed creating a Statewide Verification Hub to facilitate this process. Overall, parents agreed that this type of system would be helpful and had the following recommendations regarding how to create a potential Statewide Verification Hub and corresponding regulations that has the information, requirements, and processes that best support families.

### Establishing & Maximizing a Statewide Verification Hub

1. Create smoother processes and systems for the paperwork process such as electronically storing documents that multiple programs require. This can streamline the process so that parents do not need to re-submit repetitive information when applying for multiple programs or recertifying eligibility, and can help minimize the amount of missing documents and application materials.
2. Offer multiple ways for parents to complete paperwork processes. This can include online applications, phone appointments, and in-person appointments.
3. Ensure that the Statewide Verification Hub is offered in multiple languages.
4. Centralize the Statewide Verification Hub so that it communicates directly to counties. For example, the hub should function like the IRS portal where all information is in a single place and it is easy to track progress.

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*“I was thinking maybe a way that could help is that maybe think of like when I filed for my taxes. When I just can go to the IRS website, I put in my certain information like my social security and then it pops up. They show me the progress of when I'm going to get my return. **I think in the same aspect for child care resources and everything on one website where you could put in your information and it would pop up and it'll tell you the progress and where you're at and what else you could apply for all in one place.** I think would make it easier for all of us to see ourselves. Not really relying on a person to call us or something like just that information is there for you to access whenever you really want to go check it out.”*

-TPAC Parent

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5. Allow parents to upload, save, and safely store sensitive documents. Parents, especially those in the tribal listening session, felt that saving and storing these documents would create a more streamlined application process for them, while at the same time reducing the risk that CDSS staff lose very important documents.

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*“I know [another parent] mentioned the need for colored birth certificates and several copies and proof of Indian citizenship and all these things that are required from us, and **it would be really, really wonderful [for services] to talk to each other, without taking from tribal sovereignty...Each tribal person is, in a legal sense, a dual citizen, and I think that can...complicate the application for services, and jurisdiction becomes an issue when you work with tribal communities.**”*

-Tribal parent

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6. Allow parents to self-identify as Native American early on in the single-verification hub registration process. They believe that it is necessary to ensure that their classification remain consistent and automatically populated across any and all applications within the hub, so as to ensure that their tribal status is well-documented and well-known. Ensuring that tribal families are identified is very important to maximizing their opportunity to receive follow-up information regarding the services and supports they qualify for.

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*“I also think that being able to check a box in that initial application that states **American Indian, tribal affiliation, and Native American, would be really wonderful. I know in my own experience, that was a huge barrier to getting services. Clearly, I don't look Native to a person that doesn't know or understand that Native communities are diverse. So, I know that I'm not alone in that experience. Even folks who do look what we would call full blood in our community, a different race is prescribed to them in the application process for other types of benefits. Without proper identification or that box check right up front, I think often times we miss out on a lot of services and different works and benefits that should be, and could be, and even are talking to one another. For me, it was TANF...I think even identifying that we are, in fact, Native. Because Tribal TANF is, for the most part, better than TANF for the broader, non-Native community. They're able to do more if they choose to. I think that just identifying who's who is a major barrier that could be dealt with via a hub.**”*

-Tribal parent

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7. Prioritize including the following information to the Statewide Verification Hub, as over half of all survey respondents noted this information as a priority (exact percentage noted in parenthesis):
  - a. Mental health resources for children (78%)

- b. Child care options generally available to parents (72%)
  - c. Nutrition education for children five and up (72%)
  - d. Clarity on what information is needed to determine eligibility (58%)
  - e. Qualification limits and documents/income eligibility guidelines – particularly for single and coparents, and students (56%)
  - f. Local resource and referral program contact information to find child care (55%)
  - g. Mental health resources for parents (52%)
8. Prioritize including the following features to the Statewide Verification Hub, as over half of all survey respondents noted these features as a priority (exact percentage noted in parenthesis):
- a. Save and return to partially completed forms/documents (52%)
  - b. Send a direct message to a case worker, including an ability to save a record of communication outreach (51%)
  - c. Upload documents for any program under CDSS one time, instead of over and over (50%)
9. Create an interactive frequently asked questions and service navigation portal for parents to navigate and identify their eligible programs.

## Improving Access to Information & Child Care Options

1. Offer more comprehensive training or orientation events to help parents understand the network of child care options that are available to them. These trainings or events can also be offered to agency staff so they can inform parents of their available, eligible options to reduce information gaps.
2. Establish a centralized resource center to share all information related to child care and child development. This resource can be online and should be translated into multiple languages.
3. Promote CDSS services and resources in ways that are understandable and clear to all parents, with particular attention on non-English speaking parents and recent immigrants. Parents want as much information about their child care options as possible so that they can make the most informed decision for their family.

## Revising Income & Eligibility Requirements

1. Revise income eligibility guidelines to factor in a parent's geographic location, net income, and cost of living factors. This may include, but should not be limited to, these specific revisions:
  - a. Account for agricultural working conditions and schedules, which can limit or clash with existing policies. Their longer workdays in certain seasons generates a higher income that disqualifies them from benefits, such as CalFresh, or child care subsidies, which are resources that families still need to regain stability after economic losses incurred during the pandemic. These higher incomes are not sustained during rainy or slower seasons.
  - b. Base TANF eligibility decisions solely on a parent's income at the time of application, as opposed to their income from the previous month.

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*"I feel like there shouldn't be an income eligibility because we all need child care, period. As working families and working parents, we need child care to keep on continuing our growth and career and it sucks to feel like, "oh, I make too much and I can't receive that child care anymore." So to me, a lot of times **I felt like I had undermined myself just to keep underneath that limitation and it just limits you and it keeps you in the system and we really don't want to stay there.** So it's like, if we're going to offer the help, then let's really give the help."*

-TPAC parent

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2. Eliminate parent fees for eligible families.
3. Expand access to child care benefits for parents with drug-related crime charges. Parents reuniting with their children post-incarceration want access to child care benefits.
4. Modify county and tribal TANF so that a) parents are allowed to enroll in school full-time without also needing to work and/or volunteer and b) contractual employment opportunities (such as artistic and cultural work, like beading, painting, and making regalia) are considered real, credible work that merit full credit hours.
5. Allow parents to receive child care benefits while receiving SSI. Receiving SSI does not preclude a parent from working; therefore, parents believe that they should still be eligible for CalWORKs benefits.
6. Ensure that parents with immigration sponsors are able to apply for benefits and child care.
7. Eliminate immigration questions on child care service forms.

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*"Honestly, they should eliminate it because this beautiful state and beautiful country is full of immigrants from many countries. I think the simple fact of whether we're immigrants shouldn't be a question because there are many of us who struggle being in this situation, because if it were for us of course we would have wanted to do things differently and overcome and move ahead in this beautiful country. I think it would be great to remove that question, eliminate it completely, because it is a question that emotionally affects anyone. **We can work and pay taxes, but, for example, during the pandemic we couldn't apply for unemployment, we couldn't apply for many things, we don't exist for many things.** So yes, we are affected if we are asked about our [immigration] status in any form we fill out, and more so when it's for child care because many of us search for that support because we really need it."*

-Spanish-speaking parent

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## Improving CalWORKs Processes

1. Eliminate disruptions to CalWORKs child care due to transitions, job changes, income fluctuations etc.

2. Ensure that the consolidation of stages also preserves the intent to fully fund the subsidy program.
3. Create a 'Know Your Rights' one to two pager that is simple and available in multiple languages. This can include the right to submit a single parent verification form, obtain a second provider if needed, explain that they are eligible for full time child care from the first day they are approved for CalWORKs, etc.

## Navigating The Waiting List

Another main concern expressed by parents in the listening sessions, which aligned with parents' comments in the 2019 BRC report, was the extensive amount of time parents often remain on the waiting list. While the waiting list is not explicitly discussed in the CDSS transition plan, CDSS recognizes that it is something that should be included in post-transition planning, as it is a primary area of concern for families. Specifically, parents described the following proposed recommendations regarding the child care waiting list.

1. Create more transparency and provide consistent updates to parents regarding their status on the waiting list. Parents want easily accessible updates regarding their status on the waiting list.
2. Provide information about additional resources that parents can access while they are on the waiting list, such as CalFRESH, WIC, or other public assistance programs that they qualify for.
3. Revise the income eligibility requirements so that parents do not get removed from the waiting list when their income level exceeds the threshold and they still are in need of a child care subsidy.
4. Provide a set number of families from the waiting list with a child care subsidy each month so that more parents on the waiting list can access subsidies more quickly.

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*"Each month go to that list and pull off those parents that are on a long-term waiting list that way they can trickle in. Because no matter what, somebody always has a need and they keep moving down and don't ever make the list. But if we had a system that allowed the agencies to go in and pull at least 10 families off a month, 10, 20, whatever, 30 families off of a month of the long-term list, that way they can trickle in and we won't have the four year waiting list. We won't have people on the waiting list for 10 years that really need the childcare. That's a part of servicing the whole family."*

-TPAC parent

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5. Improve the speed of getting off the waiting list, given that the current length of time is unreasonable.

## Expanding Access to Child Care Facilities and Options

The transition plan also stated that "CCDSS will explore existing fund options and coordinate in partnership with LPCs to create data-informed plans and establish technical assistance capacity to aid in facility expansion," (25). Furthermore, the transition plan states that CCDSS will support facilities

expansion in underserved communities, recognizing the need for equitable access to child care. Parents agreed with the need to support facility expansion in underserved communities and the need for equitable access to child care. They shared the following recommendations underscoring these needs.

## Expanding and Improving Child Care Facilities

1. Survey parents about their child care needs to help inform facility expansion.
2. Prioritize expanding child care options in the following contexts:
  - a. Counties with the longest child care center waiting lists;
  - b. Areas with minimal child care facilities; and,
  - c. Agricultural/rural areas.
3. Build or expand child care programs in neighborhoods near schools to streamline the distance parents need to travel each day.
4. Ensure that new facilities have sufficient open and outdoor spaces. The pandemic highlighted the importance of children being able to play outside to support their development.
5. Allocate resources for provider facility expansion and involve companies (e.g., Google and Apple) who can fund child care facilities to support expansion efforts.
6. Consider co-locating child care facilities with major workplace centers so parents can easily get to their children, if needed. Over half of the survey respondents (52%) prioritized child care close to work/home.

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*“I think we should also look at where parents are working. Because when I was looking for my child care, I wanted to find somewhere that was closer to my job. Because if anything happened and I needed to get to my son, it would be easier if it was closer to my work than he was to my home because it would have took me longer to get back home than it would have been from him to be closer to my job. So I would think that if you're going to be looking at child care providers, it may be... we have all of these companies and things like that, that maybe you can company, or you could go in partnership with some of these places, especially places that are county businesses or something like that and provide child care centers at the workplace.”*

-TPAC parent

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7. Ensure child care facilities are located near transit centers so parents can drop off their children as part of their commute to work.

## Supporting Child Care Accessibility

1. Incentivize and expand child care access to programs and providers that offer care outside of traditional hours, during the weekends, and on holidays so that parents can continue to engage in



employment opportunities. Notably, 43% of survey respondents said that additional weekend child care options would make it easier for them to access the child care most needed by their family.

2. Improve access to more full-day child care programs for parents that need continuous care. Publicly funded programs such as Head Start and State Preschool should have extended hours to accommodate parents that work full-day schedules. Nearly half of survey respondents (49%) shared that they would like more full-day child care options to best meet their family's needs.
3. Support providers with expanding their child care availability to include multiple age ranges so that parents can send all their children to one facility.
4. Establish consistency among county and tribal TANF guidelines and support services, so that families have access to the same benefits across counties and regardless of where they live.

### Supporting Child Care Affordability

1. Pay child care providers based on the true cost of care, not low reimbursement rates tied to market forces.
2. Incentivize child care facilities to charge their service fees according to the number of hours that they dedicated to caring for the child, as opposed to charging a rate per day.
3. Improve the process for paying child care providers who accept subsidies so that parents have more options when trying to find a facility.
4. Support expanding child care center and family child care availability for parents utilizing publicly funded child care so that parents have access to the child care options that best meet their preferences and needs.
5. Increase the amount of financial support that county TANF offers for school-aged children, so that it includes funding for academic and extracurricular activities.

### Interacting with Staff

Parents across all listening sessions shared their unpleasant interactions with CDSS staff, whom they rarely related to or trusted. CDSS should consider ways to hire more qualified, experienced staff with shared identities or experiences as the families they will serve, as well as build the capacity of its current personnel. Parents provided the following recommendations to support bridging the trust between staff and families.

### Recruiting and Hiring Staff

1. Evaluate and modify the qualifications and requirements for all workers so that all staff have prior experience as case managers and in social work. Tribal parents were particularly critical about non-tribal workers hired to oversee tribal TANF.
2. Hire more staff and caseworkers with lived experiences similar to the families they will support. In fact, 67% of survey respondents indicated that they would be interested in a job pilot program to become a child care subsidy caseworker.
3. Create pathways that support and license community members with similar lived experiences to become case managers and social workers. Parents in the tribal and Black mothers listening session

felt it was important for Native American community members and formerly incarcerated mothers to become staff, since they can relate to and empathize with these situations.

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*“Who will advocate for us better than us? Period... that's most beneficial for a client for them to see someone who looks like them, who can relate to them.”*

-Black mother

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4. Incentivize additional community members and non-English speaking providers to enter the workforce and hire more non-English speaking staff, specifically Cantonese-speaking individuals.

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*“I think they should consider licensing members of the Native community, or members of the community that folks live in. I think that there should be much more attention put towards licensing and preparing folks who we trust to watch our children... they should be paid for that and they should be trained for that and they should be licensed for that. I think there should be pathways for that to happen. Who we trust isn't going to change.”*

-Tribal parent

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5. Build support systems that work within and directly support communities. Tribal parents believe that CDSS should consider supporting internal systems and networks as opposed to inserting external workers or attempting to replicate Native environments or culture in an external setting.

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*“License folks who we trust, instead of trying to replicate our culture in spaces that are void of culture. **Why not build our communities up from within and get our folks licensed?**”*

-Tribal parent

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## Providing Quality Support

1. Foster a culture of accountability within CDSS so that case workers are incentivized to act in the best interests of parents.
2. Hold CalWORKs and child care staff, especially those who have close contact with families, accountable for their work and actions, particularly with regards to missing paperwork and inadequate follow up to parent emails/phone calls.
3. Support the professional development of providers by offering culturally responsive trainings or empathy workshops, so that staff understand and do not have negative biases based on a person's immigration status. This can help to center racial equity and combat xenophobia as parents seek support from CDSS.

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*“I’ve gotten to a point where I feel guilty because I feel like I affect my children because of my situation and many, millions, of us aren’t here because we just said, ‘Oh how cool, let’s cross the border.’ No, some of us were cornered to come to this country to escape violence, or because of family situations, or for many other reasons. A status doesn’t make us bad people.”*

-Spanish-speaking parent

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4. Provide refresher courses for caseworkers to promote consistency in the information caseworkers share with parents and the information they ask from parents. Local county welfare offices and child care subsidy agencies should engage parents by conducting listening sessions about how the agency can improve the services they provide.
5. Require caseworkers, specifically those that work with Native families, to share any and all benefits and supports that families qualify for, recognizing that many parents are unaware of what they are eligible to receive.
6. Incentivize case workers to prioritize keeping Black families together and require anti-racism training and refresher courses to address an anti-Black racism within CPS.

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*“Until the whole, every single person who interacts with people trying to get help from the system, until every interaction is positive and people don't seem, come off like "What do you want?" or tired like, "It's another person", or however they talk to the people. Until every single last person has a good attitude, then we're always going to think that they don't care about us.”*

-Black mother

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7. Provide support for non-English speaking providers to expand their child care slots and ensure that there are enough non-English speaking staff in facilities so that parents can receive timely and comprehensive support with navigating and accessing child care benefits. This was particularly expressed by Cantonese-speaking parents.
8. Provide accurate and clear information to community and parent groups to further distribute services across established networks. Parents and families create network and support systems to recommend services, share information and tips, and help one another navigate what can often be a confusing and convoluted system or application. Their collective efforts intend for others to learn from previous mistakes, with the hope of having better experiences. CDSS can support these established support systems and networks among families by generating clear content related to their services and conducting targeted outreach to parents.
9. Fund a cultural navigator program led by paid members of the community who serve as guides for other families looking to access CDSS services. Community members are often the ones sharing relevant and helpful information regarding child care and support services to other families. Parents

were frustrated that community members went unpaid for distributing information and keeping families informed, especially because there are staff who are paid to do this work.

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*“We answer phone calls and Facebook messages and texts every day through the night, on the weekends, on holidays. And a lot of us women who've already experienced these programs and the voids and services end up functioning as quasi-informal social workers to the younger girls or the newer moms. **Of course we're always going to do it, but it becomes burdensome because there are people who get paid to do this and we don't get paid to do this.**”*

-Tribal parent

*“We don't place enough value on the lived experiences of those who function like informal social workers in our community. So picking up somebody who has an MSW but no connections and no clue as to what goes on in our community doesn't fill the void...**We need to get our people trained and our people educated and our people scholarships and our people licensed to be navigators and social workers.** It doesn't work to just insert someone with an MSW into our community.”*

-Tribal parent

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## Securing Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care

The CCDSS transition plan also recognizes that equitable pay is needed for FFN care. The 2019 BRC reports highlighted that often, FFN care is the best option for families; however, current payment structures have created challenges for families for accessing FFN care. CDSS hopes to create FFN care policies that are more supportive for parents. Parents offered the following comments and recommendations regarding the need for and improvements to FFN care.

1. Direct more resources and incentives to support families, friends, and neighbors in their efforts to provide care.
2. Create consistent and transparent regulations around FFN care and ensure that this information is provided to all parents seeking child care benefits.
3. Provide parents with more information about the Alternative Payment Program to support paying for FFN care.
4. Pay exempt providers more than \$2-\$3 per hour to support equitable access to FFN care. Exempt providers should be paid a fair wage.

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*“I feel very strongly about FFN care because I usually care for my kids because they're little. Like people have said, we can't [just] trust anybody with our kids. I feel we*

*definitely need to revamp the pay structure for the FFN care because that's what a lot of our families are using."*

-TPAC parent

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5. Support FFN providers with accessing medical and professional trainings (First Aid, CPR, TIC, child development, etc.) so they are further equipped to care for others' children.
  6. Allow immigrant FFN providers with an ITIN to receive payments and access benefits for child care services. This has the potential to influence the trust that immigrant groups have toward state government departments and staff.
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*"So, in the same way that we are visible when we pay taxes, they [government and state leaders] should see that those [ITIN] numbers are producing work for them, doing the agricultural work [and] the construction work that we do with our aching backs and that no one else wants to do. **For that we are visible, to do the work that no one else wants to do. But when it comes to having benefits, conveniently, that [ITIN] number that they gave you doesn't work for anything.**"*

-Spanish-speaking parent

*"I think that what they can do so that we trust them is... start to see us differently, and that they see a way to help us have a better future. And the truth is that this would greatly help the state and the country because having a social security number let's you have property and access many things that offer support. In that way, we would also trust them. **Because right now we only exist to file taxes, but we don't exist when we need a break or support.** For us to trust in them, they should expand certain benefits to us for the simple fact that we're working in this beautiful country so that we all have a better future."*

-Spanish-speaking parent

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## Addressing Parents' Needs

The listening sessions revealed that child care is just one (very important) element to helping families position themselves to attain a more balanced physical, emotional, and financial situation. However, it is clear that parents' needs must also be met in order to best position them to meet their family's needs. Parents provided the following suggestions as a potential approach to meeting their current needs at the time of the listening sessions.

1. Support child care providers with sharing child development information with parents, including information specific to children with special needs.
2. Ensure that all materials related to child development are translated into multiple languages to meet family needs.

3. Provide mental health resources and supports to parents experiencing mental health challenges. Survey respondents' top priorities for mental health services included: (1) information on the benefits of mental health services; (2) family therapy; (3) individual therapy; and (4) links to non-profit mental health organizations.
4. Provide automatic child care vouchers for parents with post-partum depression.
5. Incentivize CPS to provide housing resources for families that are unhoused, prior to separating them from their children.
6. Allow parents with felony charges to access public supports for reuniting with their child. More specifically, parents with drug charges want the same access to reunification programs as other non-violent offenders.
7. Provide more supports for parents with navigating the requirements for regaining custody of their children. Specifically, parents are asked to take on a number of activities as part of the reunification requirements, but with all the requirements, parents need support with knowing what and how to prioritize competing demands.
8. Support programs that help parents to reunite with their child when they are in jail or prison. Currently, not all facilities offer parenting courses, which forces some parents to fall behind in their timeline for family reunification.
9. Create more efficient systems for family members to care for children when a parent loses custody. As expressed in the following quotation, the current system does not easily support the process for family to obtain temporary custody of another family member's children which has created the perception that CPS is not a trusted agency.

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*“Just because I lose my kids, why do they got to go to a whole different system of people that they don't know, a whole different culture that they don't know instead of just sending them with my aunt or my mom, you want them to have a foster care license in order to take them? I've had my cousin who lost her kids and her grandmother, had her grandmother not already been dealing with childcare in foster care, her kids would have been placed with somebody. And her child was nine days old, which is ideal for the system. **Quit looking at our kids as a dollar sign, quit looking at them as human warehousing and stuff like that. Like you preying on our kids, you know what I mean?”***

-Black mother

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## Concluding Reflections

In addition to the specific policy areas highlighted throughout this summary, parents commented more generally on the importance and value of child care, which should be made available to all. They also spoke to other issues they face within the child care system, particularly around the elevated cost of child care and misalignment with other programs and benefits. Ultimately, parents hope to see CDSS

address these named challenges using their proposed recommendations, thus centering equity and the whole family when transitioning and looking to improve its services.

**Parents believe that universal child care can benefit and support all families and children.** Parents are mindful of the benefits that access to child care can provide: supporting the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of a child and allowing parents to engage in the workforce, all of which can positively benefit the state and country at large. Unfortunately, the current income eligibility guidelines disqualify parents from receiving child care and other supports, such as MediCal. This forces families to choose between paying for living expenses (rent, gas, groceries, medical needs, etc.) or child care. For example, parents who work in agriculture were accustomed to fluctuating child care subsidy and MediCal eligibility given their shifts in pay range during specific seasons. At least two parents admitted to purposefully neglecting their medical and dental needs given the elevated out-of-pocket fee they would pay while not eligible for MediCal, which they judged was better used to cover basic needs. Parents want to improve themselves with academic and professional opportunities to ensure they are attending to and providing to their family as best as they can, but they cannot dedicate time to this if they do not have the adequate supports. CDSS can play an important and supportive role by improving accessibility to child care via the recommendations included in the previous section.

**Parents want to see a higher success rate of family reunification.** Given that Black families often feel targeted by child welfare, the CDSS transition could mark a turning point in providing meaningful supports and opportunities to remedy dangerous circumstances without separating families. At the very least, the transition could focus on improving the success rate of family reunification until it is possible to stop the practice of separating families prior to offering support. Currently, parents feel that they are constantly in a battle to either gain or maintain custody of their children just because they are in the poverty. CDSS can recognize the role they are playing in separating families and take specific actions (per the recommendations outlined in this summary) to intentionally improve the success rate of family reunification, particularly for Black families, as described in the following quotation.

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***“But if I had something to say to DSS, I would tell them, give us a chance before you take our children. Give us a chance to do everything that we need to do before you decide to take our children. Give us the resources. Lead us to the class, if you take this class. Before you even think about removing the kids, unless it's in a detrimental situation, I get it. Give us the opportunity. Open up those doors where we can have resources for classes. Help us out of poverty by giving us housing and child care or whatever it is that you see we have lack of. If you come into our home and you see our kids are starving, why can't you give us some gift cards instead of deciding to take our kids? If you come in our house and see that our clothes ain't clean, why not give us some vouchers to go or have a place where they can wash their clothes or whatever it might be. Give us a clean clothes voucher. You hear me? Do something to help us. If you come in here and see that we got all our kids in one bedroom, help us out with housing so that we can be better. Don't just come in here to take our children. Help us be better to our children. **Instead of using the resources and giving*****



*it to foster parents, give it to us as parents so that we can better ourselves to be better for our children. So you won't even try to take them.” -Black mother*

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**CDSS needs a plan to ensure that equity, justice, and the whole family is being served by the transition and its training of case managers.** Parents expressed deep concern about families who fall through the cracks and highlighted that families are coming to CDSS and trusting they are receiving all the information they need, which is sometimes incomplete. Furthermore, parents shared that they have experienced bias and a lack of compassion among some case managers. Thus, parents recommended that case managers have a standard set of information that is given to every family.

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*“What happens is that you have some case managers who might look at that parent a little differently. If that parent comes in in pajamas. If that parent comes in looking a certain way, the case manager looks at that parent little negative perhaps. We don't know that. So how are we going to make sure that the parent is given all the information. Perhaps there is a required form that each agency or contractor is to give each parent that has everything that they need to know that's available to them. **No parents should be left behind or left out of any information. But the problem is that this is what happens.”***

-TPAC parent

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Throughout this report and partnership with Parent Voices, SPR has outlined pertinent tension points that parents across all listening sessions have encountered when seeking out, enrolling, and engaging with programs and resources that CDSS has and will now handle. It is crucial for CDSS to acknowledge and address these challenges, which not only exist in different parts of the current system but also negatively affect families who are most in need of support. As CDSS restructures and refines its offerings to families, it should institutionalize parent engagement by establishing Parent Advisory Groups at the state and local level that is informed by today's hardships and tomorrow's hope.