

Conceptualizing Community Pathways: Key Questions and Considerations

This document is primarily designed to support child welfare agencies and their partners during the Exploration stage¹ of designing and implementing community pathways to prevention in the context of the Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First). The resource includes a list of relevant domains, guiding questions, and considerations for planning and implementation teams to carefully explore. Jurisdictions' responses to these questions can be helpful for informing and structuring planning and implementation strategies and work plans towards successful and sustainable community-based Family First prevention services.

Jurisdictions across the country are conceptualizing innovative pathways to prevention services through a variety of new public and private partnerships. Informed by these emerging efforts, “community pathway” is defined in this document as any mechanism or avenue that families can use to access title IV-E funded prevention services outside the traditional child welfare service delivery and case management context. Options include but are not limited to: 1) contracted community-based agencies; 2) specific evidence-based prevention service providers (e.g. home visitors); and 3) non-child welfare public agency partners (e.g. departments of homelessness, behavioral health, public assistance, etc.). Within a community pathway, any of these approved entities may perform the required Family First administrative functions including gathering information to support eligibility determination, developing and/or maintaining child specific prevention plans (CSPP), on-going safety and risk assessment, tracking and transmitting service participation and other data required for federal claiming and reporting, and delivering and/or referring families to identified evidence-based prevention services.

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¹Duda, II, & Blase (2013). NIRN Active Implementation Frameworks. Doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.2383.4962

Engagement and Partnerships

Guiding Questions	Considerations
Who represents the range of perspectives and expertise that should be involved in the design and implementation of your community pathway?	In addition to child welfare leadership and staff, consider community leaders and advocates, partners with lived expertise, partners from other public agencies (e.g., TANF, housing, childcare, etc.), law enforcement, legal community representatives, Tribal partners.
How and when will you identify and engage specific individuals to partner with you in this work?	Develop a targeted engagement and outreach plan customized to your specific audiences. Consider how you might leverage existing partnerships to identify individuals that may be appropriate members of your community pathway design and implementation teams. In addition to email, consider communication methods that are likely to reach your target audiences, including social media, community fliers, and text messages. Sequence outreach and engagement activities so they correspond to when your jurisdiction is willing and able to incorporate partners' ideas and feedback so that the engagement efforts are meaningful and authentic.
In what way will you assess, build, and strengthen trust with key partners that have not historically had positive experiences with the child welfare agency?	Be mindful of families' and communities' history with the child welfare system and the trauma that may have been inflicted. Invest in the time needed to build relationships and promote healing so that productive partnerships can be built and strengthened over time. Build in time to assess the quality and authenticity of your partnerships over time by formally checking in with team members regarding how they are experiencing the partnership, how they feel about their level of engagement and contributions, etc.
How will you prepare your partners for meaningful and equitable involvement in the design and implementation process?	Prioritize and plan for the time needed to help your partners be prepared and well-positioned to share their voice and expertise, including sharing relevant materials well in advance of meetings and holding individual conversations outside of the formal meeting context. Co-design planning activities with your partners that are accessible to individuals with diverse educational, professional, and life experiences.
How will you navigate the tension between political pressure and expectations around implementation timelines and the time needed to build and nurture authentic and trusting relationships with key partners?	Be cognizant of the potential misalignment between expectations around the timeframes for community pathway implementation and the time needed to establish authentic partnerships. Develop strategies to manage this dynamic.

Governance and Decision-Making

Guiding Questions	Considerations
<p>What governance structure will you use to guide the design and implementation process?</p>	<p>Be intentional in how and when you come together with your partners, establishing meeting times and processes (e.g., virtual or in-person) that work for your participants. Consider atypical meeting times or asynchronous engagement mechanisms that respect team members' schedules and obligations. Develop a charter or related visual that outlines participants' roles and responsibilities in committees, teams and/or workgroups charged with the development of the community pathway, and revisit it over time to make sure the agreement remains actionable and current. Assess how and when your governance structure, teaming processes, and team membership may need to evolve over time as your jurisdiction moves different stages of implementation.</p>
<p>How will you ensure appropriate representation in planning and decision-making while ensuring implementation teams and workgroups maintain a reasonable size?</p>	<p>Consider additional ways to seek feedback and contributions from communities who stand to be most impacted by this work, including Town Halls, focus groups, and surveys. When engaging families and community representatives, consider holding community conversations at places where your participants typically gather and are comfortable, and provide food and refreshments.</p>
<p>How will you approach decision-making, transparency, and power-sharing?</p>	<p>Be mindful and transparent about how decisions will ultimately be made and explore how power can authentically be shared among partners and contributors. Be wary of inviting contributions from individuals and groups that will not have genuine opportunity to inform or influence decision-making. To the extent possible, create leadership roles such as committee co-chairs for community partners and team members with lived expertise. Be clear about what decisions and programmatic aspects are not open for discussion due to federal or state legislation or other pre-determined factors.</p>

Vision and Values

Guiding Questions	Considerations
<p>What values and principles will serve as the foundation of your planning and implementation efforts? How will equity issues be identified and centered?</p>	<p>Identify and elevate what is most important to the families and communities you are serving, ideally by asking them directly.</p>
<p>What is your jurisdiction's vision for leveraging Family First to advance prevention and serve candidates and their families in community?</p>	<p>Create your transformation roadmap and articulate the desired 'future state' of family engagement and service delivery. Clearly documenting what you intend your practice to look like will be helpful for operationalizing all the details during planning and implementation.</p>
<p>Which families do you want to engage and serve via the community pathway?</p>	<p>Clarify your target population(s) and how they are similar to or different from those families served directly by the child welfare agency. Determine what characteristics and assessed risk factors are appropriate for community-based prevention services.</p>
<p>What do you want to achieve through your community pathway to prevention?</p>	<p>Define your desired outcomes in partnership with the families and communities that will be most impacted by this work. Ensure that your desired outcomes align with the vision and values.</p>

Communication and Messaging

Guiding Questions	Considerations
How will you resource communication and messaging efforts throughout the design and implementation of your community pathway?	Prioritize communications and messaging as a key change and implementation strategy and engage communications partners from the onset. Identify and engage communications specialists as part of your community pathway design and implementation teams.
In what ways can you leverage communications opportunities to promote and sustain buy-in and commitment from key partners?	Develop and sustain a strategic communications plan throughout all phases of implementation. Co-create messaging and materials with your partners to ensure they resonate with your intended audiences. Identify and leverage existing communication platforms and opportunities with community and other internal and external partners.

Community Providers and Contracts

Guiding Questions	Considerations
What capacity currently exists at the community level within your jurisdiction to effectively provide community pathways to prevention?	Gain a preliminary understanding of the readiness of your community, provider, and public agency partners to administer and/or provide title IV-E funded prevention services, including an understanding of the services that are currently being provided.
How will you integrate the voices of community providers into planning efforts while being mindful of future contracts and potential conflicts of interest?	In order to create appropriate opportunities for community agency contributions to the planning process, consider strategies like making meeting materials and minutes publicly available so that all potential bidders have access to the same information, or being intentional about which planning conversations potential bidders can and cannot join as a participant.
To what extent do you have existing contracts with community-based agencies that might be amended/expanded to integrate the administration and/or provision of title IV-E prevention services?	Determine whether this work will require amended contracts, new Requests for Proposals, or some combination.

Identifying Candidates and Engaging Families

Guiding Questions	Considerations
<p>How will families be identified and referred to the entity providing community-based prevention services?</p>	<p>Explore and articulate the multiple options by which a family may be identified and referred to the community-based prevention services provider, including and beyond the child welfare hotline. Consider what changes may be needed to screening protocols at the child welfare hotline and other entry points to determine eligibility and inform referrals to the community pathway to prevention. In addition, explore whether there are common groups of mandated reporters (e.g., teachers, guidance counselors, pediatricians) that may benefit from outreach, engagement, and education about the community-based prevention services and appropriate families to directly refer to this pathway in lieu of making a hotline call. Examine whether there is a need or opportunity to change mandated reporter laws or neglect statutes that inform mandated reporter trainings to align with community pathways to prevention services. Explore opportunities to educate and coordinate with 211, Family Resource Centers (if applicable) and other service referral platforms that may also represent a common referral source.</p>
<p>How might existing screening tools and assessment processes be leveraged for identifying children and families that align with your jurisdiction's candidacy populations?</p>	<p>Building on the previous question, consider how and where existing tools and processes may be used to identify candidates and their families. Partner agencies and community organizations may already have processes to identify families experiencing circumstances or risk factors that correspond to your jurisdiction's candidacy definition. These may present streamlined opportunities for identifying candidates and connecting them with the right entities or persons responsible for engaging families on the development of the child-specific prevention plan.</p>
<p>How will you approach engagement of families in prevention services while maintaining honesty and transparency about the 'imminent risk' determination?</p>	<p>Family First legislation states that candidates for prevention services are children/youth identified as being at 'imminent risk' of entering foster care. Consider how the community-based workforce will balance efforts to engage families in prevention services while being clear about the candidacy determination and its implications. A strategy such as Motivational Interviewing (MI) may be helpful for engaging and encouraging families to participate in services or receive supports that address their families' circumstances and risk factors that may result in maltreatment and separation from their children. Training the partner agency and community-based workforce in MI or a similar strategy would also build the capacity of those entities to fulfill their new roles consistently and with high quality.</p>

Child-Specific Prevention Plan Development and Candidacy Determination

Guiding Questions	Considerations
<p>What planning processes and tools will be used to develop the child-specific prevention plan?</p>	<p>Consider the extent to which existing planning processes and case plan development tools can be modified or enhanced to align with the requirements for a child-specific prevention plan, or whether a new tool and/or process needs to be developed.</p>
<p>How will you make sure that the candidates and their families are actively engaged in the development of the child-specific prevention plan?</p>	<p>Be mindful of centering the family in the development of the prevention plan and not letting the bureaucratic requirements drive or overly influence the family's experience. Explore whether a family teaming model or approach would be a good fit for your jurisdiction.</p>
<p>How will you ensure that Family First candidacy determinations (and redeterminations) occur in compliance with Federal requirements?</p>	<p>While community-based agencies and other partners can collect the necessary information and make Family First candidacy recommendations, only employees of the cognizant title IV-E agency (generally the state child welfare agency) can make candidacy determinations. It may be helpful to articulate the business process in which potential candidates are identified in child-specific prevention plans, and then that information along with any additional information about their candidacy is shared with the state title IV-E agency whose representative makes the final title IV-E determination. Explore and articulate this process for both the initial candidacy determination and any potential redeterminations that may be needed after the initial 12 months of service provision.</p>

Service Identification, Referrals, and Coordination with EBP Providers

Guiding Questions	Considerations
What assessment tools will be used to identify family strengths and service needs?	Identify what assessment tools, including functional assessment tools (e.g., Child and Adolescent Needs & Strengths [CANS]) may currently be in use within the child welfare agency or its partners. Explore whether it makes sense to use an existing tool or whether something new or different may be more appropriate.
How will your community pathway serve families whose service needs do not align with the EBPs reflected in your jurisdiction's approved title IV-E prevention plan?	This issue should be addressed in the early stages of your planning efforts. Consider how robust your jurisdiction can make your community pathway. Determine whether there are other partners and funding sources that exist or can be created that will support prevention service provision for: 1) families that do not meet title IV-E eligibility criteria, or 2) families who do meet the eligibility criteria, but their service needs do not align with your jurisdiction's approved EBPs, or 3) families whose service needs do align with your jurisdiction's approved EBPs, but the programs are not available in the service area where the family resides.
How will you ensure that the child-specific prevention plans are comprehensive and include the range of services and supports that may be needed to promote child safety, stability, and family well-being beyond the Family First EBP(s) that may be appropriate?	Candidates and their families may have prevention service needs that extend beyond the available Family First EBPs, including economic and concrete support needs. Consider how the community-based workforce will be supported in developing and executing comprehensive prevention plans that include and extend beyond the Family First EBPs (when appropriate), including any coordination with other services funded by title IV-B that the family may be receiving.
Will the Family First EBPs be provided within the same community agencies that are administering the child-specific prevention plans with candidates and their families? Or will they be provided somewhere else? Some combination of the two depending on the EBP model?	Specify how and where the EBPs will be provided to candidates and their families and how the referral process will function. Business process mapping is a helpful exercise for articulating the different steps in the process. In addition, consider how your prevention workforce will follow-up on any referrals to promote greater uptake of prevention services by candidates and their families.
What will communication and coordination look like between the EBP provider (and any other referred prevention service providers), and the professionals charged with administering and overseeing the child-specific prevention plan?	Clarify expectations for how and when the community-based prevention workforce and the EBP providers will communicate with one another to address progress on the prevention plan and the extent to which the prevention services are achieving the intended outcomes. These conversations will be helpful for informing any adjustments to the child-specific prevention plan, promoting integrated risk and safety monitoring practices, and informing any candidacy re-determinations that will be needed.

Risk and Safety Monitoring

Guiding Questions	Considerations
How will you approach ongoing risk and safety monitoring with candidates and their families receiving Family First prevention services via the community pathway?	Given that candidates for Family First prevention services are determined to be at imminent risk for foster care entry, the Children’s Bureau places high priority on ensuring that there are processes in place to monitor risk and safety throughout the prevention services period. Strategies can include both formal and/or informal risk and safety assessment processes and tools and can be a shared responsibility between the EBP provider and the professionals charged with administering and overseeing the child-specific prevention plan. It is essential that jurisdictions think through and clearly articulate how risk and safety monitoring will occur.

Information Technology (IT) Infrastructure, Data Collection Requirements, and Data Sharing

Guiding Questions	Considerations
How will your jurisdiction approach the establishment or expansion of an IT infrastructure with the required functionality to effectively serve families and collect the required data for Family First prevention services?	Establishing an effective IT infrastructure is a major part of the design process for community pathways and should be considered from the onset. It is important to think about the timelines necessary to build required IT functionality and how they align with your jurisdiction’s intended timelines for implementation of the community pathway. In addition to being able to capture the Federally required data elements, the IT system should also be able to store the child-specific prevention plans, family assessment information, data required for federal reporting, and any other data collection and reporting functionality that your jurisdiction wishes to maintain for monitoring and continuous quality improvement purposes.
How will this work align with or be integrated within broader efforts to design and build your Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS)?	All possibilities for aligning and integrating these efforts with your jurisdictions CCWIS plans should be carefully considered to streamline efforts and maximize opportunities for federal reimbursement. Explore how existing EBP provider or community-based information systems can be incorporated as potential CCWIS modules by adding bi-directional data sharing capability. If the timelines for CCWIS development do not align with the timelines expected for community pathway implementation, consider what short-term IT solutions may be applied in the interim.
How will your jurisdiction approach sharing the required data elements with your state child welfare agency?	It is important to carefully navigate the tension between collecting and transmitting the required data elements and maintaining family privacy and consent. Efforts to promote voluntary engagement in prevention services can be hindered if/when other parties may learn about families’ involvement without their consent. Consider modular approaches to IT system development so prevention services data are contained within a specific module separate and apart from a broader child welfare IT system with appropriate firewalls. Strategies like this can help ensure that no child- and family-level data are shared with external partners that do not have to be and potentially place families at risk for adverse consequences to receiving prevention services.

Monitoring and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

Guiding Questions	Considerations
<p>How will state child welfare agency staff monitor and oversee the work of contracted community agencies administering Family First prevention services?</p>	<p>The state child welfare agency is responsible for ensuring effective administration of the state 5-year title IV-E prevention services plan. Clarify the roles and responsibilities of title IV-E agency staff in providing effective oversight over the activities performed by the contracted community agencies.</p>
<p>What roles and responsibilities will contracted community agency staff have related to CQI activities?</p>	<p>Consider what CQI activities may be required by staff employed by the contracted community agencies and public system partners and integrate these expectations into any Requests for Proposals, contracts, and Memoranda of Understanding. CQI activities may pertain to the fidelity and quality of the EBPs as well as the quality and fidelity of prevention practice. If sufficient CQI capacity does not yet exist within community agencies, consider how those skills and expertise can be developed over time and/or how other CQI partners (e.g., University partners) may be leveraged to address gaps in the immediate.</p>
<p>How might your jurisdiction approach collaborative and integrated continuous quality improvement processes and involve staff from the child welfare agency, community-based agencies, and EBP providers?</p>	<p>Community pathways to prevention create opportunities for innovative and integrative CQI processes involving a wide range of partners, including community-based staff, EBP service providers, and state and local child welfare agency CQI staff. Consider developing a comprehensive CQI plan that addresses domains related to both prevention practice and the effectiveness of EBPs that involve staff representing all entities involved in the provision of Family First prevention services.</p>

Staff Selection and Human Resources Considerations

Guiding Questions	Considerations
<p>What workforce will be used to engage families in the development, administration, and oversight of the child-specific prevention plans?</p>	<p>Determine what education and experience levels will be required for prevention practice with families, and how and where there may be opportunities to expand the workforce to include more professionals with lived experience. Consider ways in which you may think innovatively about your potential prevention workforce, while ensuring that staff charged with developing and overseeing child-specific prevention plans have the appropriate clinical skills and supervisory support around engagement, assessment, collaborative service planning, and risk and safety monitoring.</p>
<p>What strategies might you employ to ensure alignment between your jurisdiction's values around prevention and the values of your workforce?</p>	<p>Reorienting around prevention requires a major cultural shift in child welfare and human services more broadly, and it necessitates a concerted and sustained effort to operationalize prevention values in practice. Depending on who comprises your community-based workforce, they may be more or less in alignment with desired prevention values. Involving prevention staff in the development and articulation of your jurisdiction's vision and values can be helpful, along with identifying lived experience or living in local communities as desired characteristics in job descriptions. In addition, exploring goals and values around prevention may be helpful to integrate into decision-making around hiring and staffing assignments.</p>

Training and Coaching

Guiding Questions	Considerations
<p>How will your community-based workforce be trained to administer Family First prevention services?</p>	<p>Determine how your jurisdiction will approach initial and ongoing training with the community-based prevention workforce. Consider what state-provided training the contracted community-based prevention workforce will receive access to and what training expectations you might place on your contracted community provider. Key training topics might include a Family First overview and how the community pathway aligns with your jurisdiction's strategic plan for maltreatment prevention; identifying and engaging appropriate candidates for community-based prevention services; collaborative assessment, developing child-specific prevention plans and identifying relevant prevention services and supports in partnership with families; strategies and processes for ongoing risk and safety monitoring; and expectations for coordination between EBP providers and staff charged with developing and overseeing child-specific prevention plans. Determine what changes may be needed to your title IV-E training plan to integrate any new or expanded training curricula and requirements.</p>
<p>What new or enhanced training curricula are needed about community-based pathways to prevention?</p>	<p>Determine where new or enhanced training curricula may be needed related to the community-based pathways to prevention and who needs to receive the training. Identify who will be involved in developing the curricula. Develop a training plan that addresses how this content will be integrated into initial training for new hires and ongoing training opportunities and expectations for the existing workforce.</p>