

In November 2022, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) gathered a diverse group of stakeholders together for our first statewide Family First Prevention Summit in Champaign, IL. Your engagement, contributions and feedback at that event were invaluable. We were excited and challenged by what was shared at that event, and our enthusiasm and commitment has not waned. We are now eager to share what we have been doing since the last summit, and how we hope to move forward.

Since the last summit, Illinois DCFS recognized the need for a leadership position to help spearhead the efforts around prevention-focused transformation. DCFS created the role of the family first prevention services administrator, which was subsequently filled by Ms. Melissa Box, who has a background in child welfare, clinical services and public health. Melissa joined DCFS in July 2023, and has been focused on Family First Prevention Services Act implementation, as well as overseeing additional projects, including the summit and transformation-related work. Thank you for your patience and understanding as she has settled into her position.

In response to YOUR recommendations, here are some changes, current work, and future plans.

Vision:

Developing a 21st century child and family well-being system rooted in equity.

Your Recommendations	Our Response
Craft Strong Communications. We see cross-agency communication as an essential part of Family First. Shared communications would need to establish key shared definitions (including wellbeing and prevention) and shared norming.	
How do we describe the work and purpose of Family First to each other and for the families we serve?	We have crafted consistent messaging about the work and purpose of Family First, through an updated website and manual, accessible on the DCFS website . Regular presentations about Family First have occurred to DCFS advisory councils as well as to other state agencies and to legislators.
What mechanism can we use to share our communications with each other and the families we serve (e.g., website, written materials, podcasts, webinar)?	While each state agency has its own mechanisms for communicating with families (podcasts, newsletters, websites, and events calendars, etc.), DCFS seeks to increase communication before and during decision-making processes, so that DCFS can be better aligned and reduce barriers for families seeking services. DCFS has developed a shared communication platform for state agencies. One of our next goals is to increase utilization, functionality and accessibility of that platform.
What information do we need to master to effectively serve families (e.g., what professional development will be needed)?	We are currently developing additional training presentations to share across the health and human service system to promote alignment of vision around a transformation to a child and family well-being system. Clearly and consistently communicating about a shared definition of well-being is central to that alignment, so DCFS has developed training presentations on this topic as well as Family First and delivered these presentations to increasingly wide audiences. Professional development focused on the impact of trauma, the value of prevention and the role of concrete supports in the prevention of child abuse and neglect will be critical at all levels of the human service system.

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Your Recommendations	Our Response
<p>Expand Partnerships. Prevention work is being done by a wide range of agencies including our sister agencies, community-based agencies, policy-based agencies, and taskforces.</p>	
<p>Who is contributing to prevention efforts across the state?</p>	<p>DCFS, DHS, HFS, DPH, ISBE and IDOT visionaries and leaders have met regularly with an emphasis on prevention-focused transformation. Engaging and onboarding new members through transitions has been a major focus, as well as educating staff across state agency divisions as to our vision and goals. Existing projects include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving financial supports for families entering and leaving the child welfare system. • Improving the care for pregnant persons with substance use to increase the safety of and reduce the child welfare involvement of substance-exposed infants. • Increasing access to and collaboration between Family Advocacy Centers (DCFS) and Family and Community Resource Centers (DHS). • Assessing accessibility to prevention-related resources through collaboration with public transit.
<p>How do we work collaboratively to engage our partners?</p>	<p>Regular meetings and consistent communication have been key, including developing a shared virtual space for documents and records. Spreading the vision through cross-agency informational presentations has been the primary focus of the past year. The focus of 2025 will be on developing a cohesive communications plan and visioning.</p>
<p>Who needs to be included in the conversation and what are the best mechanisms for engaging them?</p>	<p>From front-line workers to the highest levels of leadership; from public to private organizations; from Cook County to the most rural communities; engagement from everyone is needed! Electronic communications and invitations to join discussions have worked well so far, but a systematic approach in order to saturate the many systems with this transformational vision is needed.</p>
<p>How do we do this work with respect to the balance of statewide partnerships and local/regional partnerships?</p>	<p>We are centering and actively listening to individuals with lived experience, which is the best way to ensure that individuals, families and communities have as much control as possible over the transformation process. The DCFS Office of Research and Child Well-being has engaged these individuals in a reflective, collaborative process of developing a well-being framework for the state of Illinois. This framework can be viewed here: <i>Child Well-Being</i>.</p>

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Your Recommendations	Our Response
<p>Explore Concrete Supports. Concrete supports are critical for helping families meet their basic needs and preventing abuse and neglect.</p>	
<p>What concrete supports are offered statewide and what are the gaps?</p>	<p>IDOT, DHS and DCFS have been working together to compare and consolidate their respective geo-maps indicating resource availability and gaps. Illinois is also utilizing multiple national maps of county and regional data indicating community needs, as well as state and federal data sources, to inform localized efforts and strengthen communities in need. Our team holds equity as a central value and this is critical to our transformation efforts, so all data is being viewed and analyzed through that lens.</p>
<p>What can be done to improve the process of accessing these supports and how can reduce any associated stigma?</p>	<p>DCFS and DHS are currently working to improve the access to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) benefits for families on the edges of the child welfare system (parents with children returning home, kinship caregivers seeking guardianship of a child). DCFS is also working with IDOT to improve the coordination between our shared resources (including FACs, FCRCs, and public transit) to increase access to these services in under-resourced communities.</p> <p>To better support access to behavioral health resources, multiple state agencies collaborated to issue this publication: <i>Interagency Resources for Children's Behavioral Health</i>.</p>
<p>What concrete supports are available at the regional level?</p>	<p>DCFS is currently sharing and reviewing data across state agencies to gain a fuller picture of regions in Illinois that need additional concrete supports. The team is utilizing a unified framework and shared definition of well-being that includes domains of physical health and safety; education and cognitive health; social, emotional and mental health; economic security; and racial and ethnic equity. Through this framework, we are prioritizing access to housing, food, transportation, medical and behavioral health services and education as core supports. Our next steps include developing and formalizing an assessment of well-being in each of these domains to gain a clearer picture of well-being (and therefore needed supports) across Illinois.</p>
<p>How can we bridge statewide and regional support for families?</p>	<p>DCFS is committed to fortifying community networks for primary prevention, which means empowering individuals, families and communities to have power over the process of system transformation. A human-centered approach to policy and practice will ensure that all possible decisions will be made through collaboration with youth and families at regional and community levels, with active engagement of individuals with lived experience in the systems we seek to change. Ensuring legislation, rule and procedure are aligned to support effective community networks is a key part of that process.</p>

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The above work is ongoing and updates will continue to be shared. Keep in mind that much of the work described above is what one might call “tinkering” – working to improve the existing system. This is vital work, but substantively different from transformation – a complete change in form and function, resulting in a system that looks and works completely differently than the system that came before. We are committed to both types of work.

To that end, please join us at an upcoming meeting of the Illinois Partners for System Transformation. This is an opportunity for you to be part of co-creating a new system of child and family well-being and to share what your vision of what that new system might look like: collaborative, human-centered and equitable.

Please join us!

Envision a Well-Being System
Illinois Partners for System Transformation

January 15, 2025

10-11 a.m.

Webex Meeting Link



Questions? DCFS.FamilyFirst@Illinois.gov

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