



CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COMMISSION
OF SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

Begin with the Children

Strategic Plan
2020 to 2024



“If we are to reach real peace in this world.....we shall have to begin with the children.”

-Mahatma Gandhi

First 5 SLO County strives to ensure that our communities' young children have the best possible present so that they may create a brighter future for us all. In unprecedented times, under the spotlight of a health pandemic and heightened racial injustice, the work of all First 5s across our state takes on even greater meaning. These challenges present a new opportunity to even more fervently dedicate ourselves to dismantling the root causes of systemic inequities and build safe, inclusive communities where children and families are surrounded by hope, compassion, optimism and equal opportunity.

For over twenty years First 5 SLO County has been a strong voice for putting our children first. We believe deeply that the wellbeing of children and families during the critical first five years of life are both an indicator of our status as a community and a strong predictor of the quality of our future.

A growing body of evidence confirms the importance of a child's early experiences. More than 80% of our brains are fully developed by the time we reach our third birthday. The more words we hear as infants and toddlers the better we read and do well in school. Conversely, when we grow up experiencing traumatic events, many of us may never fully recover, never reach our full potential. When our communities invest in our youngest children, we all prosper in the long run.

During the past year First 5 SLO County has mounted a complete redesign of our Strategic Plan. Through conversations with parents, surveys of community providers, and a strong look at our own evaluation data we have identified our priorities for the next four years. We fully intend to continue our legacy of *Beginning with the Children*, providing investment and leadership to reinforce the all-important early years of life for the youngest members of our community.

Bruce Gibson
Commission Chair

Proposition 10

Proposition 10 was passed by California voters in November 1998. Entitled the *California Children and Families First Initiative*, it added a 50-cent per-pack tax on cigarettes and tobacco products. The tax was ear-marked to **promote the early health, learning, and family support for children from the prenatal stage through five years of age.**

Most of the money (80%) is channeled into the 58 county commissions. The amount each county receives each year is calculated using its birth rate. The rest of the funding goes to the State Commission (First 5 CA).

*One generation plants the tree;
another gets the shade.*

Chinese Proverb

Each commission prepares a strategic plan that outlines its efforts to address the local needs of young children and their families. These plans are reviewed annually, and are revised periodically.

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Who We Are

First 5 San Luis Obispo (SLO) County works to give our youngest children the best possible start in life. We are an independent public agency created in 1998 by California’s Proposition 10. We are governed by a Commission of nine local leaders who are appointed by the SLO County Board of Supervisors. The Commissioners set policy and identify key activities that are overseen by a staff of five. Our community partners include funded grantees and other collaborators on shared work to help protect and improve the lives of young children and their families.

Our Commissioners

Bruce Gibson, Chair
Designated Representative
SLO County Board of Supervisors, District 2

Penny Borenstein, MD, Vice Chair
Designated Representative
SLO County Public Health Agency

James Brescia, EdD
Designated Representative
SLO County Office of Education

Devin Drake
Designated Representative
SLO County Dept. Social Services

Erica Ruvalcaba-Heredia, EdD
Representative at Large
Center for Family Strengthening

Melinda Sokolowski
Designated Representative
SLO County Child Care Planning Council

James Tedford, MD
Designated Representative
American Academy of Pediatrics

Alison Ventura, PhD
Representative at Large
California Polytechnic State University

Bob Watt
Representative at Large
Principal (retired) Cambria Grammar School

Our Staff

Wendy Wendt
Executive Director

Jason Wells
Associate Director

Misty Livengood
Outreach and Communications Officer

Kris Roudebush
Special Projects Administrator

Sarah Montes Reinhart
Special Projects Administrator

Our Partners

We are certainly not alone in working to give our children the best possible start in life. Other agencies, organizations, businesses, and individuals work with and alongside us. Collaborative funded partners include schools, public agencies, private providers, and nonprofit community organizations who use First 5 resources to provide specific programs that meet local needs. Additional partners in our work include business leaders, higher education, and other community members who join us in providing a powerful voice on behalf of young children and their families.

Our Children and the Communities in Which They Live

If you are a child, aged 0-5, living in San Luis Obispo County as of 2020, you are one of 15,807 in that age range, who represent about 6% of the county's population of 284,010. You are slightly less likely to be female (49%) as male (51%). Your peers are 62% White, 36% Hispanic/Latino, 4% Multi-Racial, 3.0% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American or Native Alaskan, and 0.2% Black/African American.

Your home is nestled mid-way between Los Angeles and the Bay Area in the 15th largest county in California. Much of your county is rural and uninhabited, which can make it challenging to get services like healthcare and education.

Most of your peers live in two-parent households (62%), while one-in-three live with a single parent. About half of your age group (53%) live with brothers and/or sisters older than six, and the others (47%) are only-children or live with siblings under six. The median income in SLO County in 2017 was \$67,175, or 6% lower than the state as a whole, but the cost-of-living here is quite high. The housing market in SLO County was the seventh least affordable in the country in 2018. Your parents probably rent, and the rent is higher than in many places, because, in SLO County the vacancy rate is 2.6%, compared to 5.1% in Los Angeles or 3.2% in San Francisco.

One in seven of your peers' families (14%) in SLO County lived in poverty in 2017, which is up from one-in-ten (10%) seven years earlier. If you look at what it takes to make enough money to support a family, 21% of two-parent families make less. It's 60% for single-parent families in which mom works.

Another measure of the economic pressure on your family is the number of your older siblings who are in free or reduced-lunch programs. The schools call that socio-economically disadvantaged, and just under half of the older kids who are in school (45%) qualified in SLO County in 2018.

If you are old enough to talk, you probably speak English, but one-in-seven of you (13%) is learning both English and Spanish.

If your family needs child care for you or your siblings, they find it difficult to get. In 2019 there were only 5,792 slots in licensed facilities for the 10,707 children, 0-5, with parents in the workforce. That's only a bit over half as many spaces (54%) as the number of children who need them. The picture is pretty good for preschool-age children, as most (88%) can find a spot. But, for infants and toddlers (ages 0-2) only one-in-six (18%) can find one. When your family finds child care, it's expensive. If you are in child care or preschool, it costs your family considerably. Full-time child care can range from \$9,989 to \$14,977 per year, and preschool can cost between \$9,329 and \$10,298.

Our Commitment to Equity

First 5 – both in SLO County and across California -- has always been driven in our funding and our advocacy by questions of equity and inclusion – how do we contribute to ensuring that all of our communities' youngest children and their families have the best shot at a healthy start in life, that the most vulnerable are supported and lifted up, and that all are empowered toward positive change? The COVID pandemic and related life pressures are being disproportionately felt by families living in poverty, by immigrants, by rurally isolated communities, and by people of color. The inequities that existed prior to COVID have drastically increased and pose a real threat to the well-being of an entire generation of young children". Now more than ever, First 5's advocacy work in San Luis Obispo County and throughout the state must focus on championing lasting societal changes that acknowledge and address a systemic imbalance of opportunity and support that unfairly prevents too many children from reaching their potential. This is our work and our promise, not only during times of crisis.

What We Do

The experiences young children have and the conditions in which they live greatly influence the kinds of adults they will become and the kinds of lives they will lead. The premise behind First 5 is that, as a society, we must concentrate on giving our children a good start in their first five years of life.

Our Vision: Our vision is to ensure children thrive in nurturing respectful environments and enter school healthy and ready to learn.

Our Mission: Our mission is to allocate funds and advocate for quality programs and services, supporting children, prenatal to age 5, to ensure that every child is healthy, developing to optimal potential, and ready to learn in school.

Our Roles: First 5 San Luis Obispo County works to bring its vision and mission to life in three ways:

- We **advocate** for policies and systems changes that put young children and their families FIRST. Children don't vote. Those of us who care about and work to benefit children and families need to represent them in the worlds of public opinion and policy. We have a number of ongoing initiatives that are reflected in the Commission's Advocacy Agenda.
- We **fund** programs and services with over \$1 million per year. We take this responsibility seriously, and have worked diligently to fund effective activities that contribute to a comprehensive and coordinated system of services and supports that address unmet needs. We also evaluate all of our funded activities – both to determine their effectiveness and to measure their impacts.
- We **connect** with others in collaborative activities to share resources, educate, and bring people together to address emerging issues surrounding early childhood. We do this in our strategic planning. We do this in our advocacy work. And, we do this when we join in with work organized by others, such as Action for Healthy Communities, Child Abuse Prevention Planning Team, Oral Health Coalition, HEAL-SLO, SLO Health Counts, and the local SLO Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors.

Why We Do It

The Critical Foundation of Early Childhood

Intuitively we've known for a long time that the first few years of a child's life are important. Relationships are established, lessons are learned, and a child begins to develop into the person they will be for the rest of their lives. Now we have data to prove it.

- Science:** tells us it's critical. The first years of a child's life are the phase when the most growth happens. By age three, a toddler's brain is more than 80% developed. This rapid growth period gives families and communities a unique opportunity to build a strong foundation for our children. There are many simple things we can do to help reinforce this foundation, and prevent avoidable problems early.
- Economics:** tells us it's smart. A dollar invested in a young child's early development can save as much as \$13 dollars in costs to society later on. Nobel laureate James Heckman has measured and quantified a range of long-term benefits that accrue from effective early childhood programs, including health, quality of life, employment/income, and reduction in crime and other costs to name just a few.
- Our Hearts:** tell us it's the right thing to do. Children are at their most vulnerable when they first arrive in the world. Children count on the adults in their lives to nurture and protect them – not just their parents, caregivers, and family members, but all adults, including community leaders, business leaders, and members of the public. Communities have a moral obligation to ensure that children's needs are always at the forefront of our minds.

What's in Our Plan

The Strategic Planning Process

The Commission completed its strategic planning process in June 2020 with the adoption of its Strategic Plan 2020 to 2024, *Begin with the Children*.

Beginning in October 2018 and leading to completion of the plan, the Commission accomplished the following:

Reviewed population-level data: First 5 staff collected data related to early childhood in SLO County from a variety of sources. The areas covered included: demographics; poverty; food insecurity; oral health; health insurance; English and math proficiency; WIC enrollment; special needs; and child abuse and neglect. The data were reviewed by the Commission to give context to the strategic planning process.

Performed an analysis of current funded activities: Using evaluation data from the most recent Outcome Evaluation Report, plus data from 2020 Mid-year Evaluation Report the Commission assessed return on investment, and considered options in the context of strategic planning for continuing, modifying, or sunseting activities.

Held a series of family focus groups: Structured focus groups were co-facilitated by a Commissioner/staff pair in all four SLO County regions. Ninety-six parents/primary caregivers participated in nine groups (six in English and three in Spanish), offering their thoughts and priorities in each of the three Focus Areas. The focus groups tapped a cross-section of local stakeholders, including participants in such programs as a breastfeeding support group, a public library, Oak Park Public Housing, Parent Café, Parents Helping Parents, and WIC, among others.

Conducted an online community survey Eighty-one respondents (38% parents, 38% early childhood educators/ service providers, 13% educators, and 6% community members); prioritized *the things children need in order to live a healthy and happy life*; identified *barriers and challenges families face when accessing programs and services to improve their wellbeing*; and ranked *programs and services that provide important support, advice, or assistance to families with young children*.

Reviewed complementary initiatives The Commission reviewed and considered its planning in relation to parallel initiatives and planning processes in SLO County that

connect with three Focus Areas around which the new Strategic Plan has been developed – Health and Development, Early Learning, and Resilient Families. These include:

Health and Development - Community Health Improvement Plan/SLO Health Counts, Help Me Grow, and the SLO County Oral Health Strategic Plan;

Early Learning - California Apprenticeship Initiative, Inclusion Education planning, Quality Counts 2020, and *We Are the Care*; and

Resilient Families - CAPSLO Community Needs Assessment, Child Abuse Prevention Plan, and data on homeless families.

Compiled and analyzed the results: The following are the priorities that stood out throughout the planning process within each of the Focus Areas:

HEALTH/DEVELOPMENT

- Affordable preventive healthcare, including dental and mental healthcare
- Prenatal and postnatal care and support
- Developmental Screenings and interventions

EARLY LEARNING

- High-quality affordable child care and preschool
- Flexible hours/back-up emergency child care
- Parent/child interaction groups

RESILIENT FAMILIES

- Parent education and support/counseling
- Assistance with basic needs (e.g., housing, stress, eligibility for services)

The Plan

The Strategic Plan is guided by our local *Children's Bill of Rights*, which calls on all of us in our communities “to cultivate an understanding of child development, and use it to nurture, guide, challenge, and encourage our children along their many paths.” This set of aspirational statements regarding our community’s commitment to children’s wellbeing offers First 5 and our partners a “north star” that guides our efforts in both advocacy and program funding.

There are two primary types of activities under each of the Focus Areas. They are the Advocacy Agenda and Funded Activities. More details about the activities (including goals for the Advocacy Agenda and specific objectives for our Funded Activities) can be found in the Evaluation Plan 2020, an attachment to this plan.

Advocacy Agenda: The activities conducted under the Advocacy Agenda, which lays out First 5 SLO county's plan for mobilizing societal commitment to young children. The agenda presents general goals under each of the Focus Areas, and identifies activities being undertaken to meet those goals. In the course of their duties, the Commissioners and staff of First 5 SLO County are constant advocates for young children and their families.

Funded Activities: The Commission provides funding for people, programs, and agencies to provide programs and services intended for children, ages 0-5, and their families, either directly, or through building the capacity to do so. We work closely with our partners to create a connected community of child and family support. We know that through collaboration, our collective impact will be greater and more sustainable. We rely on these partnerships to ensure that the spotlight on early childhood remains ever-bright, both now and in the years to come.

During the strategic planning process, the Commission identified a number of funded activities from its previous plan that it opted to continue funding in the present plan. Some programs will receive continued funding for at least two years, when all activities will be reviewed and reconsidered for an additional two years. The amounts listed under each activity are annual funding levels.

The Commission also identified several areas for future funding. A request for proposals will be developed that asks the community to identify programs, services, and activities that fit within the Strategic Plan. These will be funded thru at least the remainder of 2021/22, when they will be reviewed and reconsidered for an additional two years.

Note: The following activities funded in the prior Strategic Plan will carryover for the first six months of 2020/21, after which they can either apply for the future funding described above, find funding elsewhere, or be allowed to sunset: Baby's First Breath (Public Health Dept.), BEST PALS (Pediatric Physical Therapy Services), Early Childhood Family Advocacy (Center for Family Strengthening), and Georgia Brown School Readiness (Paso Robles Public Schools).

COVID-19 Recovery

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic during the strategic planning process stressors were significantly increased on many children and families. Many family-serving programs experienced increased service requests by families coupled with a loss of funding due to the economic downturn. In response to this unprecedented crisis First 5 SLO County will work to understand and address emerging needs that result from the pandemic. Our involvement could include: addressing child care challenges related to COVID-19; advocacy related to equity in digital access; financial relief for vulnerable families made more so by the pandemic (e.g., homeless, immigrant, foster...); addressing child abuse and domestic violence; and tracking unforeseen challenges that emerge over time (e.g., dips in immunizations and other basic healthcare, potential future COVID-19 surges). First 5 has already adopted an Emergency Response Funding policy to deal with unforeseen local emergencies and urgent needs. The Commission allocated \$75,000 to be used to respond to these kinds of budget decisions that fall outside of the normal process (i.e., between meetings). As of the adoption of this Strategic Plan, these funds will be distributed through the Community Foundation SLO County Disaster Support Fund. The Strategic Plan includes an annual budget allocation for Emergency Response, only to be used according to the Commission’s established policy regarding “local emergencies.”

Focus Areas

Health and Development

GOAL: All children prenatal through age 5 and their families thrive through access and use of the full spectrum of healthcare and developmental screenings/services needed to enhance their wellbeing.

Advocacy in Health and Development

Help Me Grow

Help Me Grow is a community system that ensures timely support for families related to developmental milestones in early childhood. Help Me Grow includes an emphasis on regular and comprehensive developmental screening and connections to appropriate resources that help children maximize their potential and address

developmental challenges early in life. This local initiative joins a growing network of Help Me Grow communities across California and the nation.

Funded Activities in Health and Development

New Investments

Early Intervention and Treatment \$90,000

The Commission has directed staff to solicit proposals in support of developing early intervention and treatment services as part of the Help Me Grow initiative. Increased capacity will be needed in order to help a growing number of children identified as having developmental, behavioral, and social/emotional delays. The goal is to minimize the effects of the delays and help children reach their maximum potential.

Continuing Investments

3 by 3 Developmental Screening Partnership \$184,876

The 3 by 3 Developmental Screening Partnership is a project to test several methods for integrating early developmental screening into several different existing systems such that children receive up to three developmentally-appropriate screening encounters at well-child visits before the age of three – at nine months, 18 months, and 24-30 months. The project is funded through a grant from SLO County Behavioral Health. First 5 is partnering with Community Health Centers of the Central Coast and Bravo Pediatrics on this project.

BABES (Babes at Breast Education & Support) \$179,370

BABES is a breastfeeding support program operated by the SLO County Public Health Department. The goal is for women to breastfeed for at least six months. BABES offers breastfeeding support in two ways. The first is the availability of an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) to offer education and support to women. The second support activity is individual mother-to-mother peer support for pregnant and breastfeeding women.

County Oral Health Program Manager \$40,000

The County Oral Health Program Manager (COHPM) operates out of the SLO County Public Health Department. The COHPM works in concert with the SLO County Oral Health Coalition to implement policy and systems changes in support of the Coalition’s Oral Health Strategic Plan.

The COHPM also coordinates/facilitates direct services to children, ages 0-5, through oral screenings, fluoride-varnish treatments, and referrals to a dental home. These activities take place at preschools, WIC clinics, and substance abuse recovery programs. The Program Manager also provides oral health education to parents of young children, and offers screening and fluoride varnish treatments to pregnant women.

Health Access Trainer \$25,000

The Carsel Consulting Group is funded as the HAT. It provides professional development and support in children’s healthcare access to family advocates, ECE providers, and others who work with children 0-5, and their families. The intent is to keep people informed regarding emerging issues related to the health of young children.

Help Me Grow Centralized Access Point \$200,000

The Centralized Access Point is a key element of SLO County’s local Help Me Grow systems effort, and functions as a one-stop shop where parents can connect with the resources their children need to assess questions/concerns related to early developmental milestones, and get help in addressing them. The Community Action Partnership of SLO County (CAPSLO) will operate the Centralized Access Point (called SLO Help Me Grow), which includes a Family Resource Center, a call-line and a care coordination system that can assist families at any stage of need.

Tolosa Children’s Dental Center Central Region Dental Access \$20,000

Tolosa Children’s Dental Center (TCDC) operates a clinic in San Luis Obispo to serve children, 0-18, from low-income families who live in the Central Region of the county. First 5 SLO County funds cover preventive services for children, 0-5, including oral health screenings & assessments, parent education, dental exams, cleanings, and applications of fluoride varnish and dental sealants.

Vision Screening

\$20,000

Optometric Care Associates has, since 2001, operated a First 5-funded program to screen children, 2-5, for vision problems, and then refer them for treatment if indicated. The program uses a group of optometrists who perform vision screening for children, 2-5, at various early childhood development and care sites. The screenings are quick and effective. When a child is identified as having a problem, they are referred to a local provider for more testing and treatment, if necessary. The screenings are rotated through sites such that each site is visited every three years, thereby ensuring that all children in the county are screened at least once before they enter school.

Early Learning

GOAL: Ensure that from birth, children have rich, varied and equitable opportunities to promote their physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development, both in families, early childhood education, and other enriching environments.

Advocacy in Early Learning

Quality Counts

Over the past five years, First 5 SLO County has been the administrative and fiscal agent for IMPACT SLO, First 5 California's investment in blended statewide investment called Quality Counts that is designed to address quality in early care and education. Beginning in 2019/20 this responsibility will be handed off to the SLO County Office of Education. Moving forward, First 5 will remain directly engaged in Quality Counts for at least one year with staffing to continue providing coordination of the program with partners at the San Luis Obispo County Office of Education and Community Action Partnership of San Luis Obispo County (Child Care Resource Connection and Local Child Care Planning Council). Key elements of the continuing work that will be funded via IMPACT, and that First 5 SLO County will remain a part of, include a focus on promoting quality early care and education in private providers and Alternative Sites.

Talk. Read. Sing.

First 5 SLO County partners with the State Commission and First 5 Association in a public awareness campaign that promotes early and frequent interactions between parents and their children. Messages encouraging *Talk. Read. Sing.* can be found all over town, at signs at baby-changing stations, on screens at movie theaters, on billboards on the highways, and on the sides of buses on the streets. The message even appears on onesies distributed by First 5 through its Kits for Newborns program.

But, we've gone beyond the statewide campaign. First 5 SLO County now produces a social media session over a live Facebook feed that showcases *Talk. Read. Sing.* in action. When the show began, it was hosted by our Associate Director. It has since had a revolving cast of hosts. First 5 Commissioners, staff, funded partners, nurses, teachers, musicians, and even children have all hosted shows where they talk to a very young audience, read them stories, and share songs together. There have been shows in English and Spanish, and all can be viewed any time on our Facebook page.

We Are the Care

We Are the Care is an advocacy initiative begun by First 5 SLO County with our convening of *Where Is the Care?*, a townhall hosted in May 2019 that brought together 150+ people from all over the county to discuss the challenges involved in early care and education in our communities. Out of this event emerged the *We Are the Care* Initiative, which engages three task forces focused on 1) Public Awareness, 2) Cross-sector Collaboration, and 3) Local Government Engagement.

A parallel effort on the part of First 5 SLO County that supports the work of the third task force is research into public policies that support early childhood development activities. Four public entities have stepped up to fund a Collaborative Child Care Study designed to develop and pursue a suite of policies that can be applied locally to ease and incentivize the creation of child care programs to serve both their own employees and other families in their communities. These partners include California Polytechnic University, the City of San Luis Obispo, the County of San Luis Obispo, and the San Luis Coastal Unified School District.

Funded Activities in Early Learning

New Investments

Early Learning Innovation/s \$295,980

The Commission has directed staff to solicit proposals in support of developing programs and services in the areas of early care and education. The Commission opted not to predefine specific types of activities to be funded, instead allowing the community leeway in identifying their needs and proposing creative solutions. Some of the areas of need that were identified in the community input efforts during the strategic planning process were: *more preschool slots, all-day programs, after hours/emergency care, parent/child interaction groups, green spaces/community playgrounds, arts experiences, and unstructured play.*

Continuing Investment

CSPP/First 5 Preschool \$192,104

The California State Preschool Program offers high-quality early childhood education for families who are low income. First 5 funds invest in quality education for families who need it but can't afford it by subsidizing children whose families are above CSPP's income requirements, which have not kept pace with the rising cost of living.

Resilient Families

GOAL: Support parents, families, workplaces and communities to build stable, nurturing and strong home environments for young children and families.

Advocacy in Resilient Families

Family-Friendly Workplaces

Families have changed dramatically over the past 50 years, yet family-workplace practices have lagged. Family-friendly practices are a win-win situation. They're good for children, parents, and elders; they are in the best interest of employers; and, in the long run, they benefit our communities. For children and families, the benefits of family-friendly workplaces are numerous and long lasting. They include positive

impacts on health, development and wellbeing, and financial stability. In partnership with local Chambers and *We Are the Care*, First 5 SLO County is committed to changing the business culture of San Luis Obispo County to make it the most family-friendly county in California. Creation of a family-friendly toolkit is just example of work toward this goal.

Funded Activities in Resilient Families

New Investments

Resilient Families Innovation/s \$295,980

The Commission has directed staff to solicit proposals in support of developing programs and services in the area of resilient families. The Commission opted not to specify the types of activities to be funded, instead allowing the community leeway in identifying their needs and proposing creative solutions. Some of the areas of need that were identified in the community input efforts during the strategic planning process were: *positive home environment, assistance with basic needs (e.g., housing, stress, eligibility for services), support for new parents (mothers, fathers, adoptive and foster families), parent education and support/counseling, and more postpartum home visits/check-ins.*

Continuing Investment

Parents Helping Parents \$41,566

Parents Helping Parents operates Family Resource Centers in SLO County: one in San Luis Obispo, one in Atascadero, and one in Grover Beach. The FRCs include libraries stocked with resources to help parents learn about their child's needs and how to address them. Parent trainings are offered on autism, Down's Syndrome, and other special needs. And, parents are connected with each other to promote peer support.

