PRESENTATION TO THE 2023 BIENNIUM
LEGISLATIVE INTERIM COMMITTEES

Child and Family Services Division

Human Services Practice
Department of Public Health and Human Services

THE FOLLOWING TOPICS ARE COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

- **Overview**
- **Summary of Major Functions**
- **Recent Highlights and Accomplishments**

OVERVIEW

Child and Family Services Division (CFSD) provides critical services to protect children in Montana from child abuse and neglect. This division operates a child welfare system that works 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, from 32 different offices across Montana to fulfill its mission of "keeping children safe and families strong". We work to ensure children are safe while striving to achieve high-quality permanency and well-being outcomes for the children and families we serve.

This division continues to work diligently to improve its child welfare practice model; to develop a comprehensive work force development plan to recruit, train, and retain high-quality staff; and to implement a continuous quality improvement system aimed at improving efficiency and effectiveness. Despite the traumatic and difficult work, we have committed and skilled staff who continue to do this truly life-changing work every day to protect Montana's children from abuse and neglect.

Child safety is too important to do this work alone. CFSD cases require ongoing communication and interaction among myriad stakeholders to achieve safety, permanency, and well-being for children. The CFSD, judicial system, community service providers, and others collaborate to provide a continuum of services that ensure the safety of children. This team works to build upon the strengths of families to increase each family's ability to provide a safe, healthy, and nurturing environment for their children. We rely on community service providers to provide direct services to children and families, such as education, parenting classes, childcare, mental health, substance abuse, medical, and dental services.

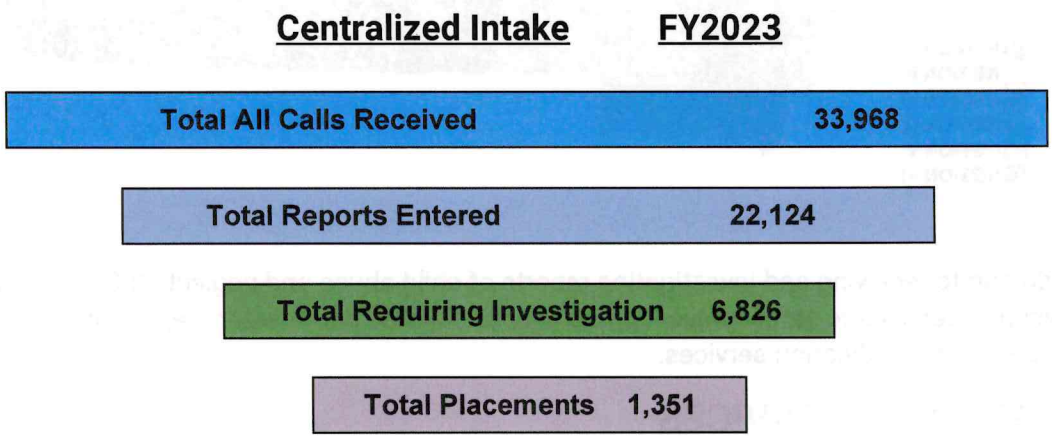
CFSD is structured into six direct service regions, centralized intake, and central office/administration. Each region provides direct services to families through investigations of alleged child abuse and neglect, on-going case management, reunification support, adoption and guardianship completion, and licensing and support of resource families. Centralized intake manages all incoming calls of alleged child abuse and neglect, taking information provided by the reporter and asking in depth questions to allow for categorization and prioritization of reports. Central office provides fiscal management and support functions such as grant management, interstate compact coordination, and adoption and guardianship subsidy negotiation and finalization.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FUNCTIONS

CHILD ABUSE REPORTING AND INVESTIGATING

CFSD operates a toll-free child abuse hotline that takes calls 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Upon receipt of a report, a centralized intake specialist reviews the information and determines whether it meets the statutory requirements for investigation. The field staff respond to emergency calls at any time, day or night, to ensure the safety of children.

The following chart shows in state fiscal year 2023 (FY2023), Montana citizens called centralized intake (CI) approximately 34,400 times. Of those calls, over 22,000 of them required documentation within our system and 7,567 required investigations. Our safety model, the Montana Safety Assessment and Management System (SAMS), guides workers and supervisors through the investigation and decision-making process to determine if maltreatment occurred. Staff work diligently to assess families to ensure we only serve children who are unsafe.



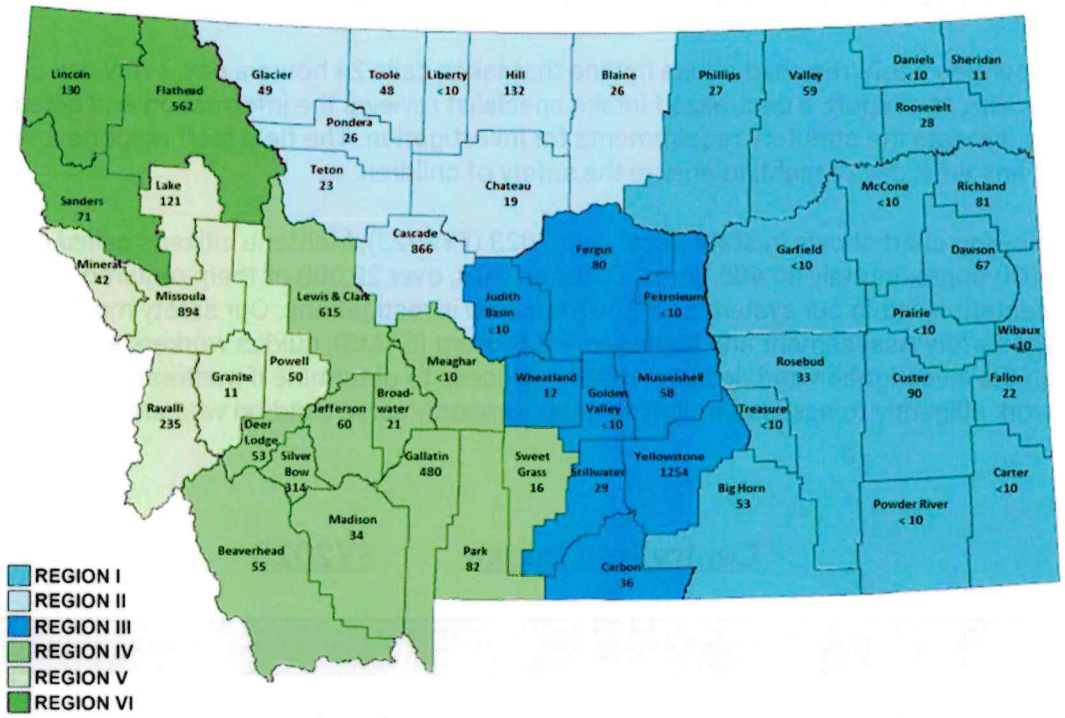
10,270 children involved in investigations

MONTANA SAFETY MODEL

The SAMS model is a comprehensive safety decision-making model. It is a strength-based, family-centered model that considers the totality of information collected throughout the assessment. A holistic assessment is completed to evaluate immediate danger (safety threats that are actively occurring), impending danger (continuous state of danger), child vulnerability, and parent protective capacities. The model supports both in- and out-of-home safety planning with families to ensure the least restrictive intervention is provided to maintain child safety while strengthening the family. The number of investigations per county in SFY 2023 is outlined in the map below.

CFSD Region Map

SFY2023 Investigations



In addition to receiving and investigating reports of child abuse and neglect, CFSD also provides prevention services to safely prevent placement of children into foster care, out-of-home safety services, and reunification services.

PREVENTION SERVICES

We make every effort to keep children safe within their home. CFSD provides prevention services facilitated by child protection specialists and community providers to preserve, strengthen, and stabilize families. Prevention services are coordinated through in-home protection plans and in-home safety plans. These plans outline the necessary services to safely maintain children in their home while parents work to address the behaviors that have impacted the safety of their children.

Services include, but are not limited to:

- Substance use disorder treatment
- Drug and alcohol monitoring
- Mental health counseling
- Parenting education and skill building
- Stress and anger management

- Transportation
- Childcare/respite
- Home visiting services

Family Support Teams

Family support teams ensure necessary services are provided to the family in a timely manner so children can remain in their own homes while safety threats are managed. When services are immediately put in place in a transparent way, the family will be more capable and willing to engage in services and partner with us to keep their children safe. During family support team meetings, goals are developed in real time and referrals are completed together so providers can understand the needs of the family and provide wraparound services to allow children to remain in their homes safely. Family support teams create structure to ensure the in-home safety plans are routinely monitored by child protection specialists and service providers. Currently, CFSD has implemented family support teams in five regions across the state, which have resulted in better engaged families from the onset of a case and throughout the process.

Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA)

FFPSA offers an additional tool within the existing toolbox of prevention services provided by DPHHS. The FFPSA was signed into law as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act in February 2018. This act reforms the federal child welfare financing stream, Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, to provide services to families who are at risk of entering the child welfare system. FFPSA aims to prevent children from entering foster care by allowing federal reimbursement for mental health services, substance use treatment, and in-home parenting skill training. It also seeks to improve the well-being of children already in foster care by incentivizing states to reduce placement of children in congregate care. There are new restrictions on accessing Title IV-E funding for specific congregate care placements. Family First aims to be fiscally neutral for Title IV-E funding by reducing reimbursement for congregate care placements while allowing reimbursement for prevention services.

CFSD has been working diligently with stakeholders to implement all elements of FFPSA.

Montana's Title IV-E Prevention Plan was approved by the Children's Bureau of Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in January 2022. The plan includes federally approved evidenced-based prevention models for in-home, skills-based parent training, mental health support and substance use disorder services.

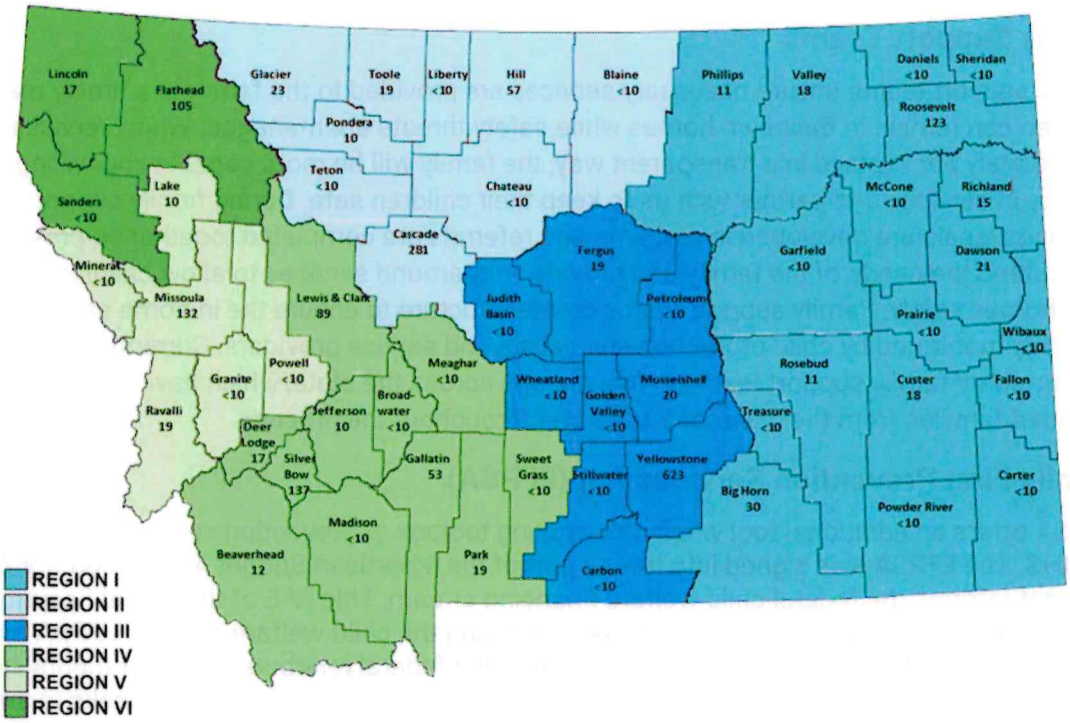
REUNIFICATION SERVICES

Upon a child's placement in out-of-home care, the child protection specialist works with the child's parents to develop and implement a court-ordered treatment plan. This plan is designed to provide the services necessary to address and resolve those issues that led to the out-of-home placement, thereby allowing the child to safely return to the home. Reunification services offered are based on the needs of the family and current circumstances and are similar to the types of services listed above under Prevention Services.

The map below reflects the number of children in foster and kinship care per county as of July 1, 2023.

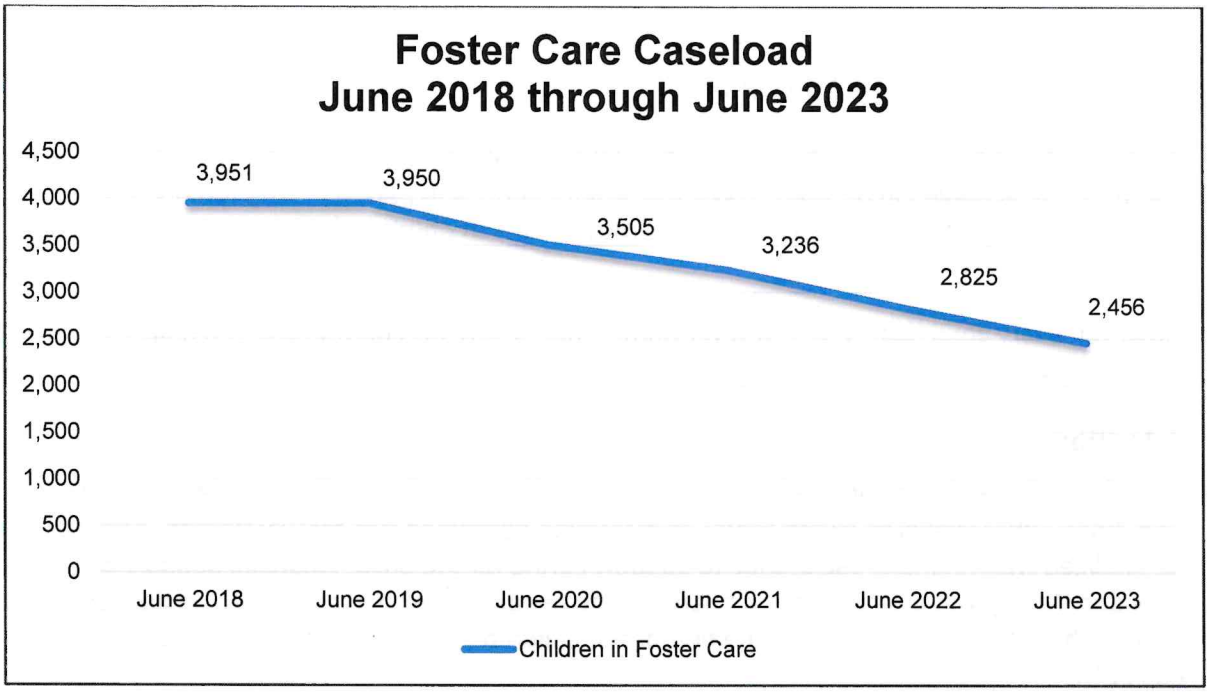
CFSD Region Map

Children in Care End of SFY2023

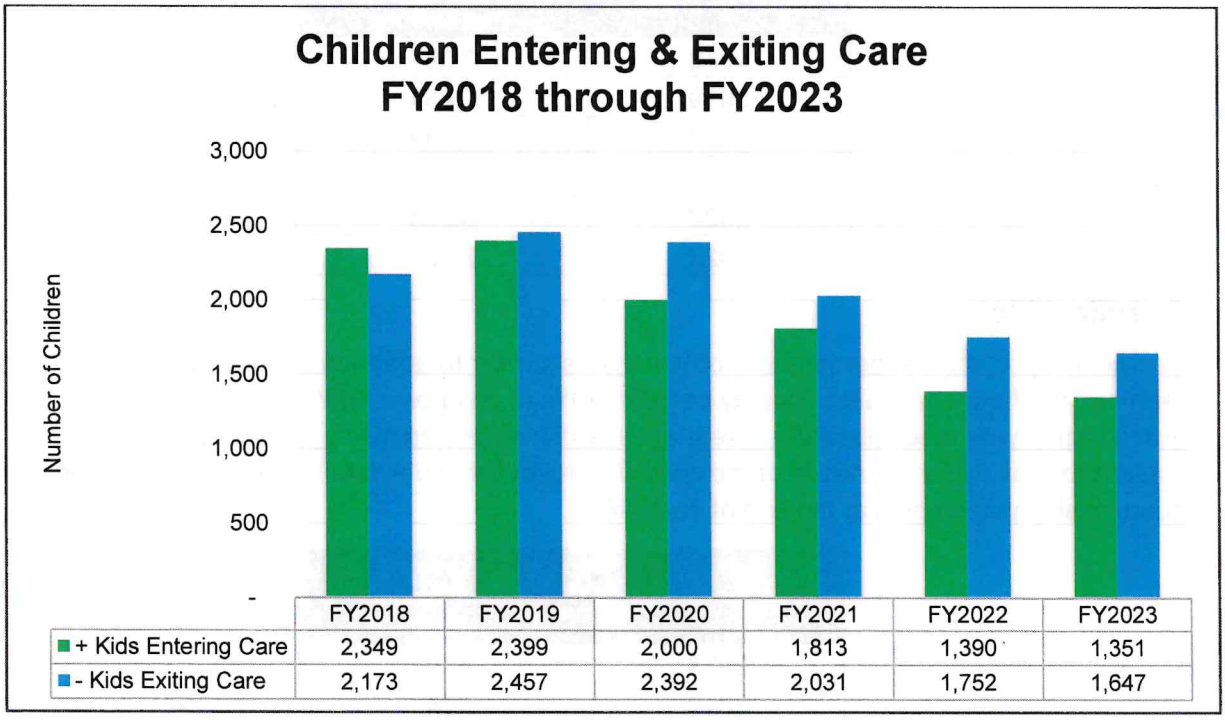


The current number of children in foster care has decreased 13% to approximately 2,456 over the past year. Of these children in foster care, 47% are placed with relatives. CFSD makes diligent efforts to locate relatives and place children with them, as we know children experience less trauma and disruption when placed with relatives or families they have a prior significant relationship with. CFSD is proud of the work that has been done to increase the number of children who are able to exit the system safely from foster care to find permanent placements through reunification, guardianship, and adoption.

On the next page is a graph of the foster care caseload over the past six years.



The chart below illustrates the improving trend of children exiting foster care, while the rate of children entering has decreased.



	FY2018	FY2019	FY2020	FY2021	FY2022	FY2023
+ Kids Entering Care	2,349	2,399	2,000	1,813	1,390	1,351
- Kids Exiting Care	2,173	2,457	2,392	2,031	1,752	1,647

PERMANENCY FOR YOUTH

Finding safe and permanent placements for children is the focus for this division. Permanency for youth can be achieved in different ways, but reunification with parents is the top priority for permanency for children in foster care. In Montana, 58% of children that come into foster care reunify with a parent.

However, every child deserves a "forever home" that is safe and permanent. If a child cannot safely return to his or her home, we identify and implement an alternative permanency plan for the child.

Adoption

Adoption represents one permanency option for children who are unable to safely return home. In SFY 2023, 18% of children exited foster care through adoptions into forever homes. Adoptions may be finalized with financial assistance to support caring for the child. Financial support can be provided throughout their childhood based on the needs of the child and the financial needs of the family. The following table details the number of children in adoption placements at the end of each SFY:

State Fiscal Year	Children in Adoption Placements
2018	2,581
2019	2,854
2020	3,049
2021	3,164
2022	3,264
2023	3,337

Guardianship

Guardianship is another permanency option that is similar to adoption but does not require termination of parental rights. Twenty percent (20%) of children in SFY 2023 entered a guardianship with their substitute caregiver. Guardianships can also be finalized with financial support to provide for the needs of the child. The following table details the number of children in guardianship placements at the end of each SFY:

State Fiscal Year	Children in Guardianship Placements
2018	640
2019	724
2020	873
2021	1,108
2022	1,348
2023	1,583

Transition Services

Youth who age out of foster care or are at risk of aging out of foster care are eligible for services to achieve a successful transition to independent adulthood. We contract with community service providers to provide these services as part of the Montana Foster Care Independence Program, also referred to as Chaffee.

These services include:

- Life skills instruction
- A structured support system when/if needed
- Education and Training Vouchers (ETVs)
- Individualized transitional living plans
- Assistance with obtaining employment
- Life Skills Assessment
- Mentorship
- Assistance with independent living costs
- Youth Advisory Board opportunities

This program allows for continued support to these youth as they transition from foster care to independent adulthood. In SFY 2023, 5% of youth aged out of foster care. Due to the support Chaffee offers, Montana has seen an increase in the number of foster youths attending college or other types of secondary education and training.

RECENT HIGHLIGHTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

WELLNESS PROGRAM

Beginning in July 2021, CFSD engaged the consulting firm Alvarez & Marsal (A&M) to develop a greater understanding of the needs and concerns of child welfare workers to increase worker retention and enhance employee wellness. A staff survey used data-driven methods to understand the level of employee satisfaction and the factors that contribute to these satisfaction levels. A 70% response rate was achieved at the close of this survey with 328 responses received out of a total of 470 employees. Following the survey, five focus groups provided suggestions for improvements in terms of services CFSD may be able to offer the staff, as well as other procedural and cultural improvements that could enhance the work environment. This data was used to design wellness programs and other interventions to lead to higher levels of employee satisfaction and higher employee retention. CFSD hired a Wellness Coordinator in May 2022 to develop and evaluate programs to enhance staff resiliency and increase staff retention.

COLLABORATIVE SAFETY SCIENCE

CFSD participated in the department-wide initiative to implement practices reflective of safety science principles through services offered by Collaborative Safety, LLC. This model recognizes that improved outcomes for children and families involved in the child protection system cannot be accomplished without collaboration from external stakeholders. The model is often associated with the development of systemic critical incidents review. While this is one of the ways in which the model is used there are a variety of other benefits. The data is continuing to be explored and analyzed, but child welfare agencies that have successfully integrated this model into their business practices have seen a reduction in turnover in their child protection staff. The successful integration of safety science principles is seen as a key strategy to assist CFSD in addressing issues of staff turnover and retention.

Through the strategic efforts of implementing the Wellness Program, safety science principles and pay increases for front line staff, CFSD has reduced the vacancy rate to 5% and has reduced employees exiting by 43% when comparing January through July 2022 to same timeframe in 2023.

MEADOWLARK INITIATIVE

The Meadowlark Initiative, in partnership with the Montana Healthcare Foundation, brings together clinical and community teams to provide the right care at the right time for patients and their families; improve maternal outcomes, reduce newborn drug exposure, neonatal abstinence syndrome, and perinatal complications; and keep families together and children out of foster care. This initiative created a venue to implement Plans of Safe Care in Montana by contacting centralized intake prior to delivery of the infant for a voluntary meeting between mothers, CFSD, and hospital care coordinators.

Through this effort and others, CFSD has reduced the removal of children under the age of one by 22% over the past two years.

MOVING THE DIAL CONFERENCES

CFSD and the Court Improvement Project (CIP) have held five virtual conferences called "Moving the Dial." These conferences bring together teams of judges, Office of Public Defenders, county attorneys, CASA and CFSD staff from local communities to learn and collaborate to improve the child welfare system continuum. The conferences are built around team break-out opportunities to discuss and implement positive changes in each local judicial area. Topics have included CFSD's safety model, data, training on substance use disorders and how these affect parents and children, importance of permanency for children in foster care, and ICWA best practices and requirements. CIP and CFSD plan to continue the "Moving the Dial" conference through SFY 2023.

The next "Moving the Dial" is scheduled for winter of SFY24. The focus will be on improving timeliness to permanency while engaging the voice of the child.

CHILD WELFARE 101

The Child Welfare 101 training, previously called the CORE training, educates local community providers and legal partners on CFSD's practice, including the safety model. The training focuses on how child protection services staff make safety decisions and how local communities can play an active role in child protection. The intent is to provide greater understanding of the CFSD safety model, assist providers in developing effective services to meet the needs of children and families and better engage families in services. In fall of 2021, Child Welfare 101 trainings were provided locally in all six CFSD regions of the state, in conjunction with four presentations from Collaborative Safety. The local events hosted community partners from the judiciary, legislative, community-based services, education community, medical providers, law enforcement and probation and other community partners identified as necessary collaborators in the child protection system. CFSD will be hosting the next round Child Welfare 101 throughout 2024.

TITLE IV-E PREVENTION PLAN

Montana received notice in January 2022 from federal partners that the state's Title IV-E Prevention Plan was approved with an effective date of October 1, 2021. The five-year plan emphasizes prevention services aimed at keeping children and youth safely at home with their families, and when foster care is needed, helps ensure they are placed in the least restrictive, most family-like setting appropriate to their special needs. The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) allows states to shift the use of federal funds to pay for prevention services to keep children safely with families and out of foster care. In the past, this funding could only be used after a child was removed from their home, but now it can be used to help children stay safely in the home and prevent removals. FFPSA creates the opportunity for states to access federal reimbursement at 50% for evidence-based services to prevent removals. The FFPSA authorizes new optional Title IV-E funding for time-limited prevention services for mental health services, substance use treatment, and in-home parenting skill training. These evidence-based prevention services and programs may be provided for children who are candidates for foster care and their parents or kin caregivers. In Montana, 91% of children in foster care are in a family-like setting, with 47% placed with family members. FFPSA also seeks to improve the well-being of children already in foster care by incentivizing states to reduce placement of children in congregate care. In Montana, only 9% of children are served in a congregate care setting during their time in foster care. Of that number, nearly 33% are served in therapeutic group homes.

PRACTICE EFFICIENCIES

STREAMLINED ADOPTION AND GUARDIANSHIP

CFSD streamlined the path to adoption and guardianship by eliminating unnecessary forms, cross-training central office, creating and implementing a check and balance process to ensure subsidy negotiations occurred timely, and establishing permanency staffing in the field specific to children were eligible for adoption. In addition, CFSD increased the use of guardianships as a permanency option for children when placed with relatives so children could find permanency more quickly.

POLICY AND PROCEDURE MANUAL

CFSD partnered with a national consultant through the Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative to review, enhance, and updated the policy and procedure manual. The outcome of this collaboration is a streamlined structure into five overarching policy areas: Safety, Permanency, Well-Being, Fiscal and Training. Within each policy area there are several procedures that align with best practice. Through this quality improvement process, the number of procedures were reduced from over 200 to approximately 95. This has created greater clarity of the work conducted by CFSD and straightforward procedures for staff. There was an intentional focus on messaging the "why" of each procedure to help staff understand how to meet the needs of children and parents. When staff know and implement procedures correctly, there is increased clarity for families and stakeholders aimed at achieving better outcomes.

SAFETY COMMITTEE

CFSD re-established a safety committee to conduct the review of the SAMS model that guides investigations to ensure documents reflect current policy and best practice. The committee assessed and made changes to documents so the application and reason for specific forms was streamlined and clear to staff. To ensure evaluation and changes would be supported and implemented statewide the committee engaged staff at all levels in this process. The committee comprised of a child protection specialist and supervisor from each region, a centralized intake specialist and supervisor, the training development specialist supervisor, a continuous quality improvement specialist and two regional administrators. The initial focus of the committee was the SAMS model due to the recommendations of the legislative practice audit. Moving forward the committee will evaluate the entire practice model with the goal of improving application of the practice model and creating practice efficiencies where appropriate.