First 5 Santa Cruz County



Annual Evaluation Report

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EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

Strategic Goal:

Preserve, enhance, and/or expand services and supports in early childhood systems.

Desired Results:



- Increased parent and community voice in early childhood advocacy and systems change initiatives
- Increased coordination and integration among organizations and sectors serving young children and families
- Policies and funding that prioritize prevention, early intervention, and equity for young children and their families

First 5 supports all young children and their families in Santa Cruz County, while prioritizing efforts that are responsive to the needs of the county's diverse community, and which have been shaped by community voice, and focus on eliminating disparities based on race, ethnicity, language, income, and other characteristics. In that context, First 5 seeks to strengthen the early childhood system of care by:

- **Leveraging** Prop 10 resources to create, strengthen, or fill gaps in service delivery systems;
- **Supporting** community initiatives, training, data sharing, community events, and capacity-building projects;
- **Implementing** and **evaluating** evidence-based and research-informed programs and practices;
- **Facilitating** collaboration among public, nonprofit, and private partners in order to connect siloed systems and services;
- **Serving** as the backbone for collective impact collaboratives, such as Quality Counts Santa Cruz County and Thrive by 5;
- **Advocating** for policies and budgets that prioritize early childhood; and
- **Convening** partners to implement local solutions that address and integrate systems and policy changes initiated at the local, state, and federal levels.

For over 20 years, these service integration and systems building functions have become a cornerstone of First 5's strategy to promote and create an equitable and sustainable early childhood system of care in Santa Cruz County. Central to that strategy is the role that First 5 plays leading the coordination and evaluation of the county-wide Thrive by 5 initiative in partnership with the Human Services Department and the Health Services Agency, with guidance from an Advisory Committee established by the First 5 Santa Cruz County Commission. In addition to Thrive by 5, First 5 has expanded the implementation of its communications plan, supported multiple community engagement activities, and continues to play an active role in systems-building efforts led by First 5 partners.

Thrive by 5

In January 2017, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors established the Thrive by Three Early Childhood Fund to improve outcomes for the County's youngest children and their families. In May 2022, the Board expanded its scope to Thrive by 5, creating greater alignment with other early childhood initiatives and funding streams. First 5 and its Thrive by 5 partners have since adopted the following strategic goals and community-level impacts:

Children and families are healthy

- Early access to prenatal care
- Healthy births
- Preventive health care
- Access to nature, open space

Children and families are ready for kindergarten

- Access to quality child care and early learning programs

Children live in safe, nurturing families

- Assets that promote resilience
- Parent and caregiver well-being
- Safe families and home

Families have resources to support children's optimal development

- Economic security and stable housing

In fiscal year 2025-26, First 5 and its Thrive by 5 partners:

Home Visiting Coordination

- **Enrolled** 209 families of children from prenatal to age 5 in the County's home visiting programs: Nurse-Family Partnership, Trauma Informed Approach (TIA) Field Nursing, and Families Together. Enrollment was lower than in prior years due to staff vacancies and the temporary closure of Early Head Start Home-Based for most of the year.

- **Refined** the CalWORKs coordinated referral process through the Coordinated Referral Workgroup. All 33 CalWORKs participants contacted agreed to a referral, and 29 participants received a total of 72 milestone incentives (valued at $3,600) for participating in home visiting.
- **Hosted** four Thrive by 5 Learning Collaborative sessions for partners on topics including doula services, safe sleep, human trafficking, and early education resources for families, among others.

Early Care and Education

- **Redirected** $100,000 in Thrive by 5 Early Learning Scholarship funds to emergency bridge funding for Head Start and Early Head Start in October 2025. Combined with other County and Office of Education contributions, the $362,000 in bridge funding helped sustain services for about 250 young children during the federal government shutdown.

HealthySteps

- **Supported** HealthySteps, an interdisciplinary, evidence-based pediatric primary care program that served 3,543 children in FY 2025-26 at Salud Para La Gente and Santa Cruz Community Health clinics. In June 2026, Santa Cruz Community Health announced that it could no longer financially sustain formal HealthySteps certification, but it intends to continue universal screenings and connecting families to community resources.

Strengthening the System of Care

- **Convened** four meetings of the Thrive by 5 Advisory Committee on topics including Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, Medi-Cal and Head Start updates, and supporting immigrant families with young children, among others. The Advisory Committee also serves as the Community Advisory Board for Santa Cruz County Public Health's Nurse-Family Partnership and TIA Field Nursing programs.
- **Completed** a Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis with Prenatal to Five Fiscal Strategies. The analysis found that agencies in Santa Cruz County received approximately $66 million for prenatal-to-5 early care and education and family strengthening services in FY 2022-23, far short of the true cost of delivering high-quality services. Its four recommendations will help guide future investment, workforce, and system-capacity efforts across the Thrive by 5 system of care.

To learn more, visit: https://www.first5scc.org/thrive-by-5

Communications and Community Engagement

First 5 Santa Cruz County developed a draft Communications Plan integrating the *Annual Evaluation Report* with priorities from the 2025–2030 Strategic Plan, which aims to build a connected, bilingual, equity-centered communications ecosystem that shares impact stories and data, engages families,

partners, funders, and policymakers, and strengthens trust, participation, and advocacy. First 5's communications plan continues to focus on increasing awareness of early childhood development, offering resources for families and early care and education providers, and promoting the agency's programs and partnerships both locally and state-wide. First 5 has continued to address equity and access by consistently engaging Spanish language translation and interpretation services for its website, newsletter, outreach materials, and community engagement.

The continued focus of this communications plan is guided by four goals:

1. **Increase Awareness** – Ensure families, policymakers, and Community Based Organizations know First 5's impact, priorities, and resources.
2. **Drive Engagement** – Inspire families and partners to access all services and benefits that they are eligible for, share content, and participate in events.
3. **Support Advocacy** – Give policymakers and leaders compelling and accurate data and real stories to inform policy and funding.
4. **Build Trust & Relationships** – Establish First 5 as a trusted brand and go-to source for early childhood development information in Santa Cruz County.

Implementation of this communications plan focuses on community partnership, amplifying family and provider voices alongside local early childhood partners. Communications platforms for outreach include the First 5's website, e-newsletter and social media.

In FY 2025-26, First 5's website hosted 7,240 unique visitors totaling 10,680 site sessions. There was a 34.7% increase in site visitors and a 21.9% increase in site sessions from the previous fiscal year. Of these visitors to First 5's website, 97% were new visitors and 3% were returning visitors. The website's most visited sections were the Triple P program pages (which provided program information, class overviews, and registration links), the First 5 website home page, and the Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Santa Cruz County program pages. During the fiscal year, First 5 maintained an e-newsletter distribution reach of over 1,100 individuals.

In the social media space, First 5 remained active on Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. First 5's Facebook engagement grew by 17.8% from the previous fiscal year. First 5's Instagram account grew by over 120 followers.

In an effort to support the community, First 5 contributed fiscal sponsorships for several community events and endeavors during FY 2025-26. In the winter, First 5 sponsored the "All Kids Play" campaign (a fundraising initiative by Santa Cruz County Park Friends to provide scholarships for low-income youth to access Santa Cruz County Parks and Recreation programs), the Children's Museum of Discovery's Teddy Bear Clinic, The Diversity Center's Queer Youth Leadership Awards, and United Way Santa Cruz County's United in Purpose Celebration.

DataShare Santa Cruz County

In September of 2017 the Health Improvement Partnership of Santa Cruz County (HIP) initiated a collaborative effort to develop a county-wide data sharing system designed to share data on a variety of factors that affect the well-being of residents in the county. In 2021, management of the system was turned over to four administrative partners: the County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency, United Way Santa Cruz County, the Community Health Trust of Pajaro Valley, and CORE Investments.

DataShare's mission is to provide an accessible, comprehensive, and reliable resource for local, regional, and national data that is available to everyone. DataShare Santa Cruz County envisions an equitable, thriving, and resilient community where everyone shares responsibility for creating the social, economic, and environmental conditions necessary for health and well-being at every stage of life. The website is an interactive data platform with local, state, and national data that allows users to explore and understand information about our local community. The site holds robust data and indicators in the areas of health, economy, education, environment, government and politics, public safety, transportation, and social environment. In FY 2025-26, DataShare served as a source for community-level indicators in the Thrive by 5 report, including data on health insurance coverage among young children. To learn more, visit: https://www.datasharescc.org/

Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network

Building on a series of successful legislative visits and policy wins for early childhood in 2017, First 5 Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz Counties joined forces in FY 2017-18 to help form the tri-county Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network (CCECAN). Representing over 94,000 children ages 0-8, CCECAN is a collaboration of organizations and individuals in the tri-county area committed to strengthening and advocating for policies and systems change at the state and local level that will support thriving children and families. To learn more, visit: https://www.ccecan.org/

Cradle to Career

Cradle to Career Santa Cruz County (C2C) grew out of the Live Oak Cradle to Career place-based initiative, a nascent idea in 2013 championed by former Supervisor John Leopold. Today, C2C is a results-based collaboration between parents and local education, health, and social service leaders in two school districts in the county. C2C's mission is to work collectively to empower families, deliver resources, and advocate for equitable and inclusive support systems to eliminate disparities

and ensure all Santa Cruz County children thrive in their education, health, and character. To learn more, visit: https://c2cscc.org/

Oral Health Access

Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County was created in 2016 as a steering committee made up of community leaders and organizations, dental and medical clinics, and educators to address oral health needs in Santa Cruz County. Led by Dientes Community Dental, the County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency Public Health Division, and numerous community partners, the committee's mission is to improve the oral health of Santa Cruz County residents by uniting stakeholders and advocating for sound, measurable strategies that increase access to care and education.

In addition to continuing to serve as a champion of the "First Tooth, First Birthday" campaign strategy, in the spring of 2024 First 5 Santa Cruz County Executive Director David Brody agreed to serve as Co-Chair of the Santa Cruz County Oral Health Access Initiative, helping oversee the implementation of its new 2024-2028 Strategic Plan.

Data in the FY 2025-26 Thrive by 5 report show that the share of children ages 0-5 with Medi-Cal insurance who visited the dentist annually rose from 47% in 2017 to 53% in 2023. The largest gains were among children under age 1 (from 3% to 8%) and ages 1-2 (from 43% to 56%), likely reflecting the impact of the First Tooth, First Birthday campaign. To learn more, visit: https://oralhealthscc.org/