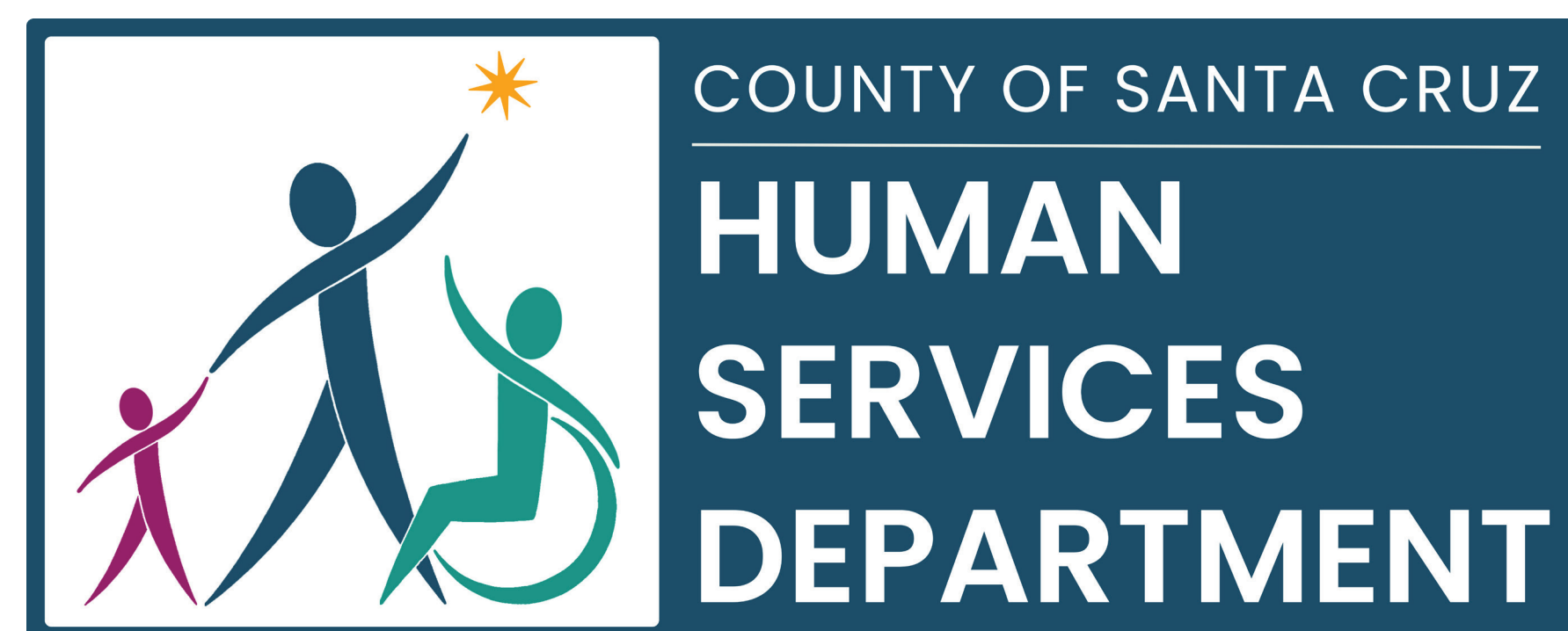


SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

Child Youth & Family
Well-Being Partners

Since 2000, California's child welfare system has shifted from responding after harm occurs to supporting families earlier so children can remain safely at home whenever possible. This approach uses data, accountability, and a stronger focus on family-based care over group placements. More recently, the emphasis has expanded to prevention, equity, and community-based supports that address basic needs, mental health, and connection before crises occur.

Santa Cruz County reflects this shift. By investing in early, family-centered support and preventing unnecessary removals, the County has seen foster care entries steadily decline — from 198 children in 2000–2001 to just 43 in 2024–2025 — while continuing to prioritize child safety and well-being.



Child Welfare Reform Timeline

2000–present

Key:

- County Actions
- State Actions
- Federal Actions

2001–2003

Santa Cruz County begins using Structured Decision Making, a research-based tool to help guide child welfare decisions and support families.

2002

California Child & Family Services Review (C-CFSR) passes as part of California's effort to align with federal requirements and improve outcomes in child welfare. It includes self-assessments, peer reviews and system improvement plans to track progress in areas like safety, permanency and well-being.

2003

Santa Cruz County adopts the Family-to-Family Initiative to make foster care more family-centered and community-based. The goal is to keep children safe, connected to their families, and close to home. Key changes include local foster family support, team-based placement decisions, and tracking progress to improve services.

2003–2004

Federal Child & Family Services Review (CFSR) require counties to begin to track results more closely in the county self assessment (CSA) so they can better understand how children and families are doing.

2006

Santa Cruz County establishes a steering committee of community members, County staff and partners to help guide the FCS System Improvement Plan (SIP) and maintain momentum.

2010

California passes legislation (AB 12), creating California's Extended Foster Care program that allows young people in foster care or probation the option to receive support until age 21. These provisions officially took place on January 1, 2012.

2003-2017

The California School of Origin Acts (AB 490) in 2003 establishes the right of foster youth to remain in their school of origin to promote educational stability. It requires immediate enrollment and coordination between child welfare and education agencies.

In 2010, AB 1933 goes into effect, strengthening the law by allowing foster youth to continue attending their school of origin even after moving to a new placement, if it's in their best interest.

In 2015, AB 854 expands the protections to include youth in Extended Foster Care (AB 12), ensuring they could stay in their school of origin through age 21.

In 2017, AB 81 clarifies transportation responsibilities and reinforce the role of education rights holders in school placement decisions.

2008-2013

Santa Cruz County submits its first System Improvement Plan, focused on helping parents who are struggling with substance use, supporting families' financial stability, improving children's health and making decisions that are fair and consistent for all families.

2012

California develops the Child Welfare Core Practice Model to help social workers partner with children, families and caregivers in a consistent, supportive way. It focuses on building trust, listening to families and making decisions together so kids can be safe, supported and connected.

2014

California rolls out and trains child welfare staff in Safety Organized Practice, a new approach that helps staff work more closely with families, build on their strengths and create clear plans to keep children safe and empower parents.

2013

California Counties implement mandated health screening and services as a result of the Katie A class action lawsuits. This improves outcomes for foster youth in California by expanding access to community-based mental health services, introducing Intensive Care Coordination and Home-Based Services, and promoting collaboration between child welfare and mental health systems.

2015

California passes AB 403, the Foster Care Reform Act, updating foster care practices to better support children and families. The changes align with federal standards to keep kids safe, strengthen families and improve outcomes for youth in foster care.

California began conducting federally mandated qualitative case reviews (an in-depth look at child welfare cases). As part of the Federal Child and Family Services Review, these reviews help the state and counties identify strengths and areas for improvement, leading to better decisions, improved services, and stronger support for children and families to stay safe and thrive. Santa Cruz County began conducting reviews in April 2015.

2015-2020

Santa Cruz County submits its five-year System Improvement Plan, highlighting efforts to strengthen father engagement, implement the Safety Organized Practice, develop a Parent Partner Program and ensure all parents have access to substance use services.

2017

California's AB 403, the Continuum of Care Reform, launches, transforming child welfare and probation services to provide trauma-informed, family-based care for children and youth.

Short Term Residential Treatment Programs replace group homes with smaller, trauma-informed, family-like care that keeps siblings together and supports safe reunification.

California's Resource Family Approval replaces Licensing. This simplifies foster and adoptive family approvals, provides training and support, connects families to resources and helps children stay in stable, loving homes.

Santa Cruz County implements the Child and Family Team Model. This brings families, children and supportive adults together to plan care, coordinate services and focus on strengths, helping children achieve stability and permanent connections.

California SB 89, the Child Care Bridge Program, begins. This program gives foster, adoptive and relative caregivers emergency child care support, helping children stay in stable homes while families manage unexpected needs.

2020-2025

Santa Cruz County submitted its five-year System Improvement Plan focusing on engaging fathers and birth parents, expanding prevention services, increasing foster placement options and implementing trauma-informed family-centered practices.

2018

Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) is signed into federal law. The act helps families stay together by funding mental health, substance use and parenting support services, promoting safe, stable and nurturing homes for children at risk of foster care.

California's Department of Social Services selects the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths tool to assess the needs and strengths of children in foster care, helping ensure they receive the right services and support.

2018-2019

California's Integrated Core Practice Model builds on the Core Practice Model by providing a unified, family-centered approach. It guides child welfare staff to work consistently, use evidence-based tools and partner with families to improve safety, stability and well-being for children.

2021

California opts in to the federal Title IV-E prevention program under FFPSA and submits its five-year State Prevention Plan committing to expand supports so more children, youth and families can access prevention services before foster care is needed.

2021-2022

Santa Cruz County submitted its five-year System Improvement Plan focusing on engaging fathers and birth parents, expanding prevention services, increasing foster placement options and implementing trauma-informed family-centered practices.

2022

California passes AB 2083 establishes a statewide System of Care, ensuring that children, youth and families in the child welfare and mental health systems receive coordinated, family-centered services that meet their unique needs.

California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM) reform provides that all foster children can receive Specialty Mental Health Services without a formal diagnosis, ensuring early access to the support and services they need.

California passes AB 740, ensuring children in foster care can stay in stable schools, access tutoring and support services and have caregivers actively involved in their education, helping them succeed academically and beyond.

Enhanced Care Management (ECM) is implemented for children and youth in foster care, transitioning out of foster care, or at risk of entering child welfare due to complex behavioral or medical needs. ECM helps foster youth by coordinating health and social services, improving access to care, and supporting stability and well-being through personalized, whole-person support.

Santa Cruz County creates the Child, Youth and Well-Being Cabinet, a cross-sector collaboration of community organizations, County partners and family-serving entities, to develop and implement the Comprehensive Prevention Plan (CPP).

2025

Santa Cruz County establishes a steering committee of community members, County staff and partners to help guide the FCS System Improvement Plan (SIP) and maintain momentum.

2023

The State approves Santa Cruz County's CPP.

Santa Cruz County launches the Family Finding & Engagement Program working with FCS and Juvenile Probation to identify, locate and engage relatives and support networks.

California passes AB 740 (education rights) to add protections for foster youth to stay in school by requiring schools to notify child welfare workers before suspending or expelling a foster youth and encourages supportive alternatives to discipline.

California passes legislation (AB 2085) redefining the definition of child neglect to exclude reporting for economic conditions solely. AB 2085 helps ensure child welfare focuses on keeping children safe from real harm—not on punishing families for being poor. It reduces unnecessary reports, lowers stress and trauma for families, and makes the system more fair, supportive, and effective for children and caregivers.