



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

2026-2030
System Improvement Plan
SUMMARY

December 2025



What Informed the Santa Cruz County System Improvement Plan (SIP)?

Every five years, each California county reflects on their successes, challenges and desired outcomes for children, youth and families. This is conducted through the California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR)—a statewide, outcome-based accountability process designed to strengthen child welfare and juvenile probation systems, guided by federal mandates and state legislation. Santa Cruz County’s approach involved a

comprehensive self-assessment using outcome data, peer reviews, and extensive stakeholder engagement to identify service strengths, gaps, and strategies for improvement. The resulting System Improvement Plan (SIP) outlines the county’s commitments and methods for enhancing care for children and families, integrating community feedback and aligning with funding priorities.¹

Collaboration with Community is Key

The 2026-2030 Santa Cruz SIP is the result of a collaborative process involving external stakeholders, youth and families with lived experience, internal county staff, various community organizations, and peers from other counties in California. Through focus groups, peer review and stakeholder meetings—all facilitated by Hay Consulting—participants provided feedback on county services and practices related to child welfare and probation, with incentives offered to birth parents, youth, and resource parents. This point-in-time exploration is enhanced by ongoing relationships that ensure continuous feedback and collaboration to address the strengths and needs of children, youth, and families throughout Santa Cruz County.²

Local reflections were broadened by insights from peer counties across California. Santa Cruz County hosted 10 counties representing child welfare and juvenile probation agencies to conduct a qualitative review of Santa Cruz County practice and suggest improvements in chosen outcome areas. Peers interviewed host county case carrying social workers and probation officers regarding county practice. Each peer county shared promising practices based on review findings to stimulate new innovations for Santa Cruz County to consider including in their SIP. Ideas included enhanced utilization of parent partners, intensive service strategies, and ongoing family finding.

Child Welfare Peers		Juvenile Probation Peers
Alameda	Merced	Placer
Contra Costa	Stanislaus	Sonoma
Fresno	Ventura	Yolo
Kings		

¹ See “About the C-CFSR” on pp. 2-3 of SCC SIP

² See “C-CFSR Team” on pp. 4-5 of SCC SIP

What the Data Says about Opportunities for System Improvement

An examination of recent child welfare trends and system improvement opportunities in the county highlight a decline in reported abuse and neglect cases, shifts in child demographics, and notable decreases in disproportionality for Latino children in care. While the previous SIP cycle saw improved permanency outcomes with comprehensive assessments and supportive practices such as SOP and CFTs, ongoing challenges include insufficient mental health resources, limited transitional planning, and gaps in aftercare. Paradoxically, the improved performance in timely permanency may also be related to the decreased performance in re-entry into care. Taking less time to ensure families are prepared for reunification may increase the likelihood that children and youth will re-enter care later.³

Aligning SIP strategies with prevention efforts can improve outcomes by emphasizing more proactive support for families.

To overcome these challenges and lower re-entry rates, Family & Children's Services (FCS) and Juvenile Probation (JP) are aligning to implement three new strategies to strengthen families and enhance child safety.

FOCUS ON PREVENTION

Substantiated allegations are highest for children under age 3, often due to parents with active substance use disorders and infants born substance exposed.

The Child, Youth and Family Well-Being Cabinet is targeting prevention services for expectant mothers as an upstream response to this trend.



California's refined General Neglect definition opens the door for more effective, community-based responses to the most commonly reported challenges families face.

By shifting from a mandate-driven reporting approach to a community-supporting model, families facing economic or housing insecurity receive more responsive, individualized support to meet their needs

³ See "Rationale" on pp. 6-8 of SCC SIP

2026-2030 STRATEGIES

Strategy #1: Aftercare Enhancements

Enrich aftercare planning and connections to stronger partnerships with prevention providers by preparing families for exiting the system from the start. Key steps include developing client identification and referral processes, piloting aftercare programs, creating measurement metrics, formulating policies and procedures, establishing provider contracts, and implementing staff training. The overall strategy spans from 2026 to 2028, culminating in the full implementation and evaluation of improved aftercare services.

Strategy #2: Improve Parent Engagement

A strategic approach to enhancing parent engagement through targeted education and support activities within the FCS and JP programs, emphasizing the use of case review data, continual feedback from parents, and targeted workforce training. It incorporates lessons learned from prior engagement efforts, specifically the importance of ongoing parent input including early identification of barriers, and details a multi-year plan beginning in 2026 to implement and evaluate improved education and support activities for families.

Strategy #3: Increase Networks of Support

A comprehensive strategy to strengthen natural and community supports for every family involved with FCS or JP. Innovations include increasing family engagement, tracking support network involvement, ensuring families have a plan for ongoing support upon exiting the system, and integrating support networks throughout the case process. Additional efforts focus on enhancing resource parent support through feedback-driven activities, support groups, coaching, and respite. The overall strategy is scheduled for design and development beginning in 2026, with full implementation and evaluation by 2029.

Conclusion

In summary, Santa Cruz County's commitment to continuous system improvement is reflected in its collaborative approach, emphasis on prevention, data-driven strategies, and focus on family-centered practices. By leveraging peer insights and addressing ongoing challenges with innovative solutions—such as enhanced aftercare, increased parent engagement, and expanded support networks—the county is poised to further strengthen outcomes for children, youth and families.

The multi-year implementation plans outlined in the SIP not only build on previous successes but also pave the way for more sustainable and equitable child welfare practices going forward. Accountability is ensured throughout implementation using regular feedback loops, ongoing evaluation and adaptation along the way. Specific monitoring activities include quarterly engagement with the Santa Cruz County SIP Steering Committee and annual progress reports to the California Department of Social Services. Taken together, these efforts position Santa Cruz County to improve the safety, permanency, and well-being of those it serves.