



Promoting Strong Families through TANF

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program plays a key role in promoting strength and stability for families experiencing poverty. By helping families to meet their basic needs, obtain employment, and nurture healthy family relationships, TANF programs can foster long-term family wellbeing and economic independence. States have significant flexibility to use TANF funds to address unique family needs and accomplish any of the four purposes of TANF, including:

1. Assisting families so children can be cared for in their own homes or the homes of relatives;
2. Reducing the dependency of parents in need by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
3. Preventing pregnancies among unmarried persons; and
4. Encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.¹

Supported by the Office of Family Assistance's Peer-Based Training and Technical Assistance (PeerTA) contract, this is one part of a series of briefs that highlight innovative and strategic ways that states are leveraging TANF funds to strengthen families and communities by building capacity for self-sufficiency and economic independence. Other parts of this brief include spotlights on kinship navigator programs, healthy relationship initiatives, stress management supports for mothers, and connections between TANF & WIC. For additional information on the TANF program and its legislative framework, please refer to the Office of Family Assistance's TANF Laws and Regulations page.

TANF & Child Welfare: Leveraging Family Support Centers

Poverty and material hardship are often correlated with child welfare involvement. In 2024, 83% of families investigated by Child Protective Services (CPS) had an annual income below 200% of the federal poverty line.² However, over 60% of substantiated CPS allegations in 2023 were for neglect only.³ Neglect is commonly defined as a caregiver's inability to meet their child's basic needs, such that the child's health, safety, or well-being is at risk of harm. Although over half of states have statutes specifying that neglect investigations cannot occur due to poverty alone, these laws are often poorly defined and inconsistently operationalized.^{4, 5} As a result, indicators of poverty – such as public benefit receipt, food pantry use, utility shutoffs, and difficulty paying rent – are among the strongest predictors for neglect investigations.⁶

It is important to note that the majority of caregivers experiencing poverty do not neglect their children; however, conditions associated with poverty often give rise to the material hardships that put a family at greater risk for a neglect-related CPS investigation.⁷ TANF families who experience at least one material hardship are three times more likely to face a CPS investigation due to neglect than families without such hardships.⁸ TANF programs can reduce families' risk for CPS investigations by providing holistic and integrated concrete supports to families.⁹ Investments in family support centers (FSC), also known as family resource centers, represent one effective mechanism for TANF programs to provide supportive services and reduce child welfare involvement for TANF families.

FSCs serve as a single-entry point for families to access a range of free or low-cost services tailored to the specific needs, cultures, and interests of the community served. FSCs provide essential support through information sharing, needs assessments, referrals, and direct service delivery. The specific services offered by FSCs are customized to reflect each community's needs, but typically include referrals to public benefit programs, case management, emergency and daily living resources, parenting

education supports, and community events.¹⁰ While there is no national set of standards or universal certification process, FSCs are distinct from other community-based organizations in that they are uniquely place-based and driven by the specific needs of local families. FSCs often operate under small budgets and utilize multiple funding sources, such as private grants and local and state funds.¹¹

Although FSC services may support all four purposes of TANF, this memo focuses specifically on their role in strengthening families and preventing CPS involvement in support of TANF's first statutory purpose: to provide assistance to families so that children can be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives. By funding, partnering, or referring families to FSCs, TANF programs can reduce the number of families that become involved with child-welfare and ensure that children remain in their homes under the care of parents or relatives.

Family Support Centers and Child Welfare Prevention

FSCs play a critical role in preventing child welfare involvement by providing supportive services to help stabilize families and reduce risk factors for neglect. Neighborhoods with FSCs have a 26% lower rate of CPS investigations than neighborhoods without them.¹² Child welfare services provided by FSCs range from general, community-level supports to intensive interventions for families with an active CPS case. Table 1 details the three levels of child welfare prevention and the services FSCs provide at each stage.^{13,14}

Table 1. Child Welfare Prevention Continuum and FSC Supports

Prevention Level	Purpose	FSC Supports
1) Primary Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community-level supports to raise awareness about child well-being and prevent conditions that may lead to child welfare involvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aim to strengthen communities and improve family wellbeing through a variety of services, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Poverty reduction services Concrete supports including food, clothing, & shelter School readiness & child development support Expanding healthcare access Healthy marriage & parent education classes Neighborhood safety interventions
2) Secondary Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targeted services for families needing support to address specific family needs and prevent child welfare involvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary prevention supports, as well as more comprehensive services for families who are at direct risk of child welfare involvement, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referrals to mental health services or substance use treatment. Employment support & financial education Case management & counseling
3) Tertiary prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intensive interventions for families with an active CPS case to prevent further harm and avoid family separation.¹⁵ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intensive primary and secondary prevention services, in addition to intensive support services, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct coordination with child welfare workers Supervised home visitations Crisis intervention & legal supports

Family Support Centers and Child Welfare in West Virginia

West Virginia has the highest child removal rate in the nation - 69.5 out of every 1,000 children living in poverty are removed from their homes each year- and places children in foster care at a rate four times higher than the national average. West Virginia also terminates parental rights more quickly and more frequently than any other state.¹⁶ West Virginia's child welfare crisis stems from numerous compounding, historical, and systemic factors¹⁷, including the devastating opioid epidemic and widespread substance use¹⁸, restrictive public assistance programs¹⁹, and persistent intergenerational poverty²⁰. The majority of West Virginia's foster care placements and family separations are due to parental substance use and neglect²¹ - issues closely linked to material hardships caused by poverty, which could be alleviated through material supports such as those offered by FSCs.

In response to the state's child welfare crisis and recognizing the effectiveness of FSCs in preventing child welfare involvement, the West Virginia Department of Human Services (DHS) announced a renewed commitment to child welfare prevention in November 2024 by expanding partnerships and investments in FSCs statewide, funded partially through TANF dollars.²²

FSCs in West Virginia play a vital role in providing early and ongoing support to families to help children remain safely cared for at home. Currently, 57 FSCs operate across 54 of the state's 55 counties²³, serving as trusted community hubs and accessible resources for families in their everyday lives. FSCs across the state provide support to families through educational and family strengthening activities, peer support, assistance with basic needs, and opportunities to build meaningful community connections. FSCs provide several services to specifically support children to be cared for in their own homes, including non-recurrent short-term benefits²⁴, parenting education classes, child development classes, respite care, and referrals to In Home Education Programs and health programs.²⁵

A key part of West Virginia's recent investment is the launch of the CarePortal pilot program. This online tool is designed to prevent child welfare involvement by directly connecting families to local resources to meet essential needs.²⁶ Through CarePortal, FSC staff, TANF case workers, and other human service professionals can submit requests for urgent material needs. Local faith-based organizations are immediately notified and can respond rapidly to provide the essential resources to the family. Over 50% of CarePortal requests receive a response within 48 hours, illustrating the tool's success in effectively meeting families' urgent needs.²⁷ By connecting families with timely and targeted material assistance, the CarePortal helps mitigate the conditions that could otherwise lead to a CPS report for neglect.

While outcome data is not yet available to measure the direct impact of FSCs on child welfare cases in West Virginia, the state's strategic and innovative investment in FSCs holds promise for reducing child welfare involvement among TANF families and strengthening family stability statewide. TANF agencies in other states can follow West Virginia's lead in utilizing TANF funds to bolster FSCs, thereby reducing risk factors for CPS investigations among TANF families and ensuring that children remain cared for safely at home.

¹ Office of Family Assistance. (2024). *About TANF*. <https://acf.gov/ofa/programs/tanf/about>

² Casanueva, C., Armstrong, J. M., Kluckman, M., Larrabee, H. M., Dolan, M., & Ringeisen, H. (2024). *NSCAW III Baseline Report (2017-2022): Introduction to NSCAW III*. OPRE Report #2024-024. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/system/files/documents/opre/OPRE_NSCAWIII_Baseline_Report_april2024.pdf

³ Children’s Bureau. (2025). Child Maltreatment 2023. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>

⁴ Thomas, M. M. C., & Waldfogel, J. (2022). What kind of “poverty” predicts CPS contact: Income, material hardship, and differences among racialized groups. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 136, 106400. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106400>

⁵ DePanfilis, D. (2006) Child neglect: A guide for prevention, assessment and intervention. US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. <https://ocfcpacourts.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/3.-Child-Neglect-Guide..pdf>

⁶ Slack, K. S., Berger, L. M., DuMont, K., Yang, M.-Y., Kim, B., Ehrhard-Dietzel, S., & Holl, J. L. (2011). Risk and protective factors for child neglect during early childhood: A cross-study comparison. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(8), 1354–1363. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.04.024>

⁷ DePanfilis, D. (2006) Child neglect: A guide for prevention, assessment and intervention. US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. <https://ocfcpacourts.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/3.-Child-Neglect-Guide..pdf>

⁸ Yang, M.-Y. (2015). The effect of material hardship on child protective service involvement. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 41, 113–125. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.05.009>

⁹ Anderson, C., Grewal-Kök, Y., & McDaniel, B. (2024). *TANF & CHILD WELFARE INNOVATIONS*. Chapin Hall, University of Chicago. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Chapin-Hall_TANF-Child-Welfare-Innovations_July-2024.pdf

¹⁰ National Family Support Network. “What Is a Family Resource Center?” *National Family Support Network*. https://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org/files/ugd/ec0538_9c82d343310a497ba1a4ef0c9d1a5d82.pdf

¹¹ Casey Family Programs. (2024). *What do we know about Family Resource Centers?* Casey Family Programs. <https://www.casey.org/media/24.07-QFF-SCom-Family-Resource-Centers.pdf>

¹² Wulczyn, F., & Lery, B. (2018). *Do Family Support Centers Reduce Maltreatment Investigations? Evidence from Allegheny County*. The Center for State Child Welfare Data, Chapin Hall. <https://fcda.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/FSC-Allegheny-County- Dec2018.pdf>

¹³ National Family Support Network. *Family Resource Center & Child Welfare Collaboration Continuum*. https://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org/files/ugd/ec0538_3879587b4f994b16a627bc0da43852e4.pdf

¹⁴ Child Welfare Information Gateway. *Prevention Continuum*. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/prevention/prevention-continuum/?top=1484>

¹⁵ If a family has been separated and reunited due to a child maltreatment case, FSCs will also continue to support families with services post-reunification.

¹⁶ Maley, S., Sedon, A., Luo, H., & Hershey, H. (2023). *Review of Overdose Fatalities: An Analysis of West Virginia SUDORS Data, 2019-2021: Annual Report – January 2023*. Office of Maternal, Child and Family Health, West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources. https://dhhr.wv.gov/vip/SiteAssets/SUDORS_Annual_Report_January2023.pdf

¹⁷ Boettner, T., & O’Leary, S. (2016). *State of Working West Virginia 2016: Why is West Virginia So Poor?* West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/5/WVCBP_WVREPORT2016_Singles.pdf

¹⁸ Witikko, V., & Allen, K. (2023). *Moving Upstream: Improving Child Welfare in West Virginia Requires Addressing Root Causes of Hardship*. West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy. <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Child-Welfare-Report-Final.pdf>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Benson, C., Bishaw, A., & Glassman, B. (2023). *Persistent Poverty in Counties and Census Tracts: American Community Survey Reports (ACS-51)*. U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/acs/acs-51%20persistent%20poverty.pdf>

²¹ Witikko, V., & Allen, K. (2023). *Moving Upstream: Improving Child Welfare in West Virginia Requires Addressing Root Causes of Hardship*. West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy. <https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Child-Welfare-Report-Final.pdf>

²² West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources. (2024). *DoHS Enhances Child Welfare Prevention Efforts with New Pilot Program, Expanded Family Support Centers*. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/News/2024/Pages/DoHS-Enhances-Child-Welfare-Prevention-Efforts-with-New-Pilot-Program,-Expanded-Family-Support-Centers.aspx>

²³ West Virginia Bureau for Family Assistance. (2025). Family Support Centers. West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bfa/communityresources/Pages/Family-Support-Centers.aspx>

²⁴ Nonrecurrent, short-term benefits are supports designed to meet a specific crisis or episode of need, are not intended to meet recurrent or ongoing needs, and cannot extend beyond four months.

²⁵ West Virginia Bureau for Family Assistance. (2024). *State of West Virginia: FY 2024 State Plan for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families*. West Virginia Department of Health and Human Services. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bfa/policyplans/Documents/FY%202024%20TANF%20State%20Plan%20-%20Public%20Comment.pdf>

²⁶ West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources. (2024). *DoHS Enhances Child Welfare Prevention Efforts with New Pilot Program, Expanded Family Support Centers*. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/News/2024/Pages/DoHS-Enhances-Child-Welfare-Prevention-Efforts-with-New-Pilot-Program,-Expanded-Family-Support-Centers.aspx>

²⁷ *How CarePortal Works* - CarePortal. (2022). <https://www.careportal.org/how-careportal-works/>, <https://www.careportal.org/how-careportal-works/>

PeerTA. Sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), PeerTA provides individual and group technical assistance and other supports to help Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) implement best practices and ensure compliance with TANF statutory purposes. PeerTA is led by MEF Associates and The Adjacent Possible.