Small Population County Funding Augmentation: County Experiences

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Final Report to First 5 California

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First 5 California (F5CA) is dedicated to improving the lives of California's young children and their families through a comprehensive system of education, health services, child care, and other crucial programs. Established in 1998 through a voter approved initiative, known as the Children and Families Act (Proposition 10), F5CA distributes tobacco tax funds to local communities. Each of the state's 58 counties has created a local First 5 county commission that provides leadership and oversight for F5CA funds and services. The statutory funding formula for First 5 county commissions is based on the county's proportion of statewide births.[1] In counties with small populations and a low number of births, funding is not enough to fully operate a First 5 county commission and offer programs. Since 1999, F5CA has implemented a variety of strategies to support the state's small population counties. One strategy is the Small Population County Funding Augmentation (SPCFA), which F5CA currently provides to the 20 counties with the lowest birth rates. This funding is intended to ensure small population counties can sustain the operations and services necessary to implement the goals of the Children and Families Act.[2] See Appendix A for more information about the SPCFA history and requirements.

In fall 2019, F5CA requested that Child Trends interview a sample of SPCFA counties to learn more about their unique successes and challenges. After reviewing the draft report of findings, F5CA requested that Child Trends complete a second round of interviews with the nine remaining small population counties to provide comprehensive information about the needs of all 20 counties. In addition to learning about overall successes and challenges, F5CA was particularly interested in learning about their experiences with SPCFA requirements such as implementing evidence-based programs (EBPs) and evaluating program progress. This brief summarizes findings from the 20 interviews and offers recommendations.

The executive director from each First 5 small population county participated in a 90-minute, semi-structured interview with a team of researchers from Child Trends in December of 2019 and May/June 2020. We completed 11 interviews in December and

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[1] http://www.ccfc.ca.gov/about/about.html
[2] http://www.ccfc.ca.gov/partners/investments.html

conducted 9 more in May/June. The interviews included open-ended questions about successes and challenges related to using the SPCFA to offer services for children and families, ways F5CA can support continued success, and evaluation experiences and needs. The second round of interviews also included questions about experiences responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. See Appendix B for the full protocol. If a director indicated their county was implementing an EBP on their APR, Child Trends asked questions about experiences selecting, implementing, and monitoring fidelity of programming. Questions were broadly framed, with the intention of delving deeper into work mentioned in each county's APR and extending beyond the APR for further examples of funding use, needs for support, and experience with EBPs. This report summarizes the responses of the counties and offers feedback and recommendations.

Overall Observations

While the interviews mainly focused on challenges and successes, directors also expressed views on two broader topics that may be of interest to F5CA: the crucial role that the SPCFA plays in funding First 5 programming and relationships with Hubs. When discussing the role of the SPCFA, 13 of 20 directors stated that most of the programming in the county would not exist without the SPCFA. Of these, four indicated that First 5 would not exist in the county at all without the SPCFA. When asked if there were different ways funds could be used to support their successes, all directors responded that they were satisfied and no changes were needed, with the exception of potentially receiving additional funds.

A second topic was the quality of relationships with the Quality Counts California (QCC) Regional Coordination, Training and Technical Assistance Hubs (Hubs), which are funded through First 5 IMPACT (Improve and Maximize Programs so All Children Thrive). F5CA developed the Hubs to provide coordinated technical assistance and specialized supports for counties primarily in two broad topical areas: (1) training and technical assistance related to California's quality rating and improvement system, QCC; and (2) supporting increased capacity and knowledge regarding family engagement and family strengthening. Of the 20 small county directors interviewed, ten expressed positive relationships with the Hubs, specifically with respect to trainings, resources, and networking opportunities. These directors found the Hubs to be highly responsive to their needs. One director attributed this success to the fact that the other counties participating in their particular hub were also small. They used the hub to discuss the unique challenges that small counties face and develop solutions. Another director discussed the benefits of having relationships with larger counties through their hub. The remaining ten directors did not have much experience with or a strong relationship with the Hubs. Three directors specifically expressed concern that Hub resources were disproportionately allocated to larger counties, overlooking the needs of smaller ones. One director explained that their hub tries to organize trainings in centralized locations, but the distance is still too far for them to travel.

Experiences with COVID-19

The first round of interviews did not include questions about the COVID-19 pandemic, as there were no known cases of the disease in California at the time of the interviews in December 2019. However, the second round of interviews took place in the early phase of the pandemic, when counties were responding to the immediate needs of children, families, and early childhood professionals. We summarize COVID-related successes, challenges, and recommendations from the nine directors interviewed in May/June 2020.

Challenges

All nine directors interviewed in the second round reported challenges as their counties grappled with how to provide services to children and families in the context of COVID-19. As some programs move online to accommodate the need for physical distancing, one director was concerned that their commission will need to acquire new resources that support virtual programming to address the needs of children and families in their community. Other directors reported concerns regarding funding stability. One director mentioned that the local First 5 commission was awarded a new county contract that was then cancelled due to a shortfall in funding as a result of COVID-19. They expressed concern over filling that gap in expected income. Another director reported they were unable to fill staffing vacancies that occurred in early 2020 because of a pandemic-related hiring freeze. As a result, the local commission will have unspent funding for reasons out of their control.

Successes

Many directors noted the speed and efficiency of support, as well as flexibility in work expectations from F5CA as successes in maintaining services for children and families in their counties. Two directors specifically mentioned the resources F5CA sent to each county as a success. They described how they were able to provide care packages with learning materials for children, resources for parents, and cleaning supplies to their local clinic. Some mentioned that they have seen higher demand for their services since the onset of the pandemic. One director described a quick transition to virtual programming. Being nimble allowed this local commission to continue providing parenting classes at the same rate as they did prior to the pandemic.

Support needed

One director described the COVID-19 response as a "marathon, not a sprint," suggesting that support will be needed for a long time. This was echoed by comments from two directors who said they hope F5CA support will continue. They also hope that the support helping counties develop programs and services to support families long-term (e.g., socio-emotional development, mental health, and domestic violence support). Another director mentioned a specific request for F5CA to continue to provide resources, such as crayons and coloring books, for children and families in their county. One director expressed the need for flexibility with reporting deadlines and other expectations, as much of their time has been spent responding to community needs. Another director asked for flexibility regarding the ability to carry over funds that their commission was not able to expend due to the pandemic.

Challenges

Understanding the strengths and achievements of small counties requires an appreciation of the contextual difficulties they experience. While each county faced unique challenges, the themes of geographic barriers, community culture, and allocation of resources were reflected throughout responses.

Geographic limitations on services

All counties mentioned geographic isolation as a primary difficulty. Common obstacles included extended drives to find basic service providers, weather- and safety-related road closures, and physical barriers like mountain ranges. Geographic challenges limited options for providing services within counties, and when services did not exist within a county, geography made it challenging for residents to seek them elsewhere. These issues were exacerbated when families did not have the resources necessary for overcoming geographic barriers, such as a working car or internet access. Limited public transportation options and the cost of driving extended distances meant that families benefitted most from programs like home visiting, which did not require families to travel. However, in communities already working with limited funds, bringing services to families was an additional financial challenge.

Transportation- and isolation-related challenges also affected opportunities for finding quality services and staff who were willing to travel to provide services not available within the county. One director specifically mentioned that independent program evaluation was a requirement of certain programming, yet there were no evaluators within the county; an outside evaluator would need to travel more than two hours to provide the service. Another director noted that many staff who were recruited from outside the community to provide health care services had difficulties finding early care and learning services for their families and opted to move to an adjacent, more well-resourced county. High staff turnover affected the quality of services that remained, which illustrates the difficulties of engaging those outside the county in an effort to improve services within the county.

In ten counties, directors described how basic services and supportive organizations did not exist. These included pediatricians and obstetricians, child care and Head Start programs, as well as county agencies, such as health departments. One director reported that there are no labor and delivery services in the county. Opportunities for partnerships with nonprofit organizations or universities were also limited—if they existed at all. As a result, directors reported that network-based programs like Help Me Grow were challenging to implement. As summarized by one director, "It can be a bad thing when F5CA tells us to just call [an agency or office] and ask them to partner… the agency may not exist here. [We need] understanding that small counties have fewer resources in terms of what's here, not just money."

Challenges with engaging community members

Eleven directors mentioned difficulty with providing services due to community members' reluctance to engage with the government. They stated that people may be choosing to live in isolated areas to remain "off grid," meaning that participating in a system of services or allowing personal data to be collected may not be aligned with community members' value of privacy. Directors have addressed this issue in

> *"People don't live in a small county because they want their data out there. A lot of people don't trust the government. Our home visitors know how to interact with families. It's all done on a human-level and we're respectful of who we deal with."*

multiple, and often intensive ways that included community fairs, online enrollment, and home visiting.

Directors also observed that historically marginalized groups were reluctant to trust government services given their prior experiences. Three directors shared that their counties have large undocumented immigrant populations who tend to be wary about sharing information—if they participate at all—due to fears about deportation. Two directors worked closely with their tribal community members to learn more and adapt resources and programs to their unique needs. These collaborative opportunities resulted in improved service delivery to tribal populations.

In addition to a reluctance on the part of community members, directors also mentioned that many people in their communities, including county agency leaders and

because we can bring people together, but there's also competitiveness- everyone has a stake in the ground. It takes a long time to build trust. People aren't used to collaborating."

community-based service providers, were hesitant to change their practices. Directors reported that they had to work hard at times to convince these individuals that change was necessary. In one community, reporting processes were minimal and relaxed, making evaluation of program effectiveness difficult and poorly timed. The director reported difficulty with buy-in for processes that increased accountability.

Data systems were also mentioned as a difficulty, specifically with respect to reporting. For example, one director thought that some providers using developmental screeners were not convinced that a county-wide data collection or monitoring process was necessary and were reluctant to participate in broader tracking efforts. In other counties, data were tracked in cumbersome spreadsheets, or program administrators felt too overwhelmed with daily work to complete reports on time. Given that many of these issues stem from a difference in values combined with a lack of resources, directors were often unsure which strategies might improve engagement and buy-in with respect to new systems. They thought that the F5CA requirement for EBPs and reporting as a condition for funding helped overcome this reluctance.

Limitations on available resources

Interrelated challenges with staffing, funding, and physical space were also common among the small county directors interviewed. Frequently, First 5 county commission staff were asked to play a wide variety of roles which may or may not have been in alignment with their experience. This occasionally led to burnout and difficulties with staff retention. In some counties, all First 5 county-level tasks fell to one person, who sometimes only filled a part-time position. One director described this problem succinctly, saying, "I'm the executive director, but also the fiscal person, the program evaluator; I do all the reports, state reports, administrative work, community advocacy work. Everything that some counties have multiple people to do – I do all of that. I struggle with some parts of it." Thirteen directors mentioned administrative staffing levels as a challenge. The challenges reported within this section were noted by

counties with a range of staffing levels, and there did not appear to be differences in the types of challenges faced based on staffing levels.

When directors and other commission staff played multiple roles, their time for seeking and applying to new funding sources and exploring new programming options was limited. Six directors mentioned limited capacity to work with collaborative entities or represent their communities at state-level events because they were unable to find coverage for basic daily responsibilities. In nine counties, directors talked explicitly about administrative time limitations with respect to program evaluation and subsequent reporting. Directors perceived completion of additional reporting requirements as presenting a much bigger burden on their small staff than in larger counties with more resources. One director described feeling that reporting expectations are not adjusted to reflect the level of staffing: "Reporting on small county funds is very burdensome. A small county with one and a half full-time employees doesn't have enough money to do annual performance reporting. We do basically double the reporting of large counties because we do two annual reports for Proposition 10 funding and the SPCFA. This year we had to do an extra one for the statewide report. I can't believe there isn't a better way to collect data from small counties. We don't have money for programs and a lot of other things."

Limited resources also affected staffing for direct services to children and families. Directors said they often did not have enough resources to pay competitive salaries to attract qualified direct service staff. They noted that they sometimes had to blend together multiple funding sources to support a position and that uncertainty in funding made it difficult to sustain positions. This cycle of limited funds, lack of eligible candidates, and staff who were stretched among positions led to high rates of turnover, which impacted the county's capacity to provide services and maintain an infrastructure. Those who were hired were often in the earlier stages of their careers, which required additional resources for training. In some cases, staffing was available for services such as early care and education, but there was only enough staff to provide services for about half of those who needed it. One director described a situation where limited resources in other agencies affected the county commission's ability to achieve systems goals. In this example, decreased investments across several county agencies resulted in a lack of staff to attend meeting or support efforts to coordinate services for families and children.

Although finances played a major role in challenges with staffing and resources, several counties mentioned problems directly related to resource allocations. Three directors specifically cited difficulties with other funding sources being allocated by birth rate, as declines in birth rate have more of an effect in a small county than in a large one. While directors appreciated that the SPFCA provided a predictable source of funding, diminished allocations based on decreased birth rates, combined with limitations in other community resources, left these directors feeling they were in a more precarious situation than larger counties. Additionally, two directors shared that they are not able to apply for a number of grants outside of SPFCA because they are typically designed for large counties and not tailored to small county needs.

Successes

Directors were able to share a variety of successes in providing services to their communities, despite the challenges they encountered. Though stretched thin, directors described successes in building collaborative relationships, addressing geographic barriers, and maximizing resources.

Building collaborative relationships for system improvements

Most often, directors cited the close-knit nature and interdependence of people in small counties as a driving force behind their successes. They described collaborations with education, health, child welfare, social service, legal, and county government offices as a key part of their work to improve early childhood systems. Community members, faith-based organizations, health service providers, and advocacy organizations were also mentioned as sources of supportive collaboration.

"We play fairly in the sandbox together. [Collaborators] are supportive, complimentary. They want to work together, they celebrate together… you don't get that in other places. They're all working towards the greater good. That's unique to us because we are so small. They rely on their neighbor – it takes a village."

As a result of these broad networks, counties were able to achieve goals such as addressing gaps in service provision, improving outreach and enrollment in services, and coordinating services among programs. For example, one county was experiencing difficulty with school readiness at kindergarten entry. The ED created a workgroup to engage early childhood educators, childcare providers, and kindergarten educators with the goal of increasing communication and bridging strategies for developing the skills that lead to school readiness. Other directors mentioned improvements with coordinating intake forms and increased ability to engage members of marginalized communities, such as members of local tribes, families with undocumented parents, and families whose primary language is not English.

Some directors also noted that their association with F5CA helped them develop positive relationships. Community members' favorable view of F5CA helped confer a sense of trust in the local work. One director observed that families called the First 5 county office when they needed support (instead of being referred to the First 5 county office by another agency), which suggested that they knew about the county commission (and its relationship with F5CA) and viewed it as a trusted source for help. As one director summarized, "The quality and excellence in what [F5CA does] rubs off on me and improves my reputation locally." This reputation extended beyond work with families; five directors mentioned that affiliation with F5CA opened doors to collaborations with other offices because they were seen as a source of program and financial support.

Creative solutions for geographic barriers

All directors reported that geographic isolation presented a major barrier to providing services and finding staff. However, many directors described creative solutions to reach families in remote areas. These included mail-based EBPs, such as the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which sends books directly to families' homes. One director paired this EBP with a text-based evaluation survey to obtain feedback from remote families. In some counties, web-based solutions like resource sites and social media outreach allowed connections with families who did not have transportation to access physical resource centers. In one county, the Ages & Stages Questionnaire was available online for developmental screening. Other directors mentioned housing family resources together in an accessible or pre-existing location, such as a library. Centralized locations like schools were also combined with mobile service provision; for example, one county provided space for conducting dental exams at elementary schools using a visiting dental service, which eliminated the need for parents to travel or take time off work.

Maximizing and sharing resources

Counties relied on a broad network of collaborators including schools, health departments, and neighboring communities to enhance available resources. This often took the form of shared space, where programming was conducted within a school or library, or supplementary funding. For example, in one county the Raising a Reader program was housed and partially funded by the local library, with support from the First 5 county commission.

Other counties that were divided geographically by unreliable transportation options or great distances shared resources with adjacent counties to ensure the equitable availability of services. Six directors interviewed were from counties adjacent to a county with a population over 500,000, and four of those reported collaboration and relationships outside the county more frequently than other counties, suggesting that opportunities for bridging with more well-resourced areas improved the resources available within small counties. However, this solution was not feasible for more geographically isolated counties.

Reported Strategies for Maximizing Resources	
	Using available space in schools, libraries, and community centers
	Sharing services across counties
	Building strategic relationships to introduce new funding and resources
	Distributing funds among programs that attract additional resources
	Participating in advocacy and advisory organizations to drive planning and budgeting

In most counties, services and programming were supported by a mix of funding sources. SPCFA funds were a critical baseline for attracting additional funding, bridging funds during gaps in fiscal timelines, and ensuring reliable support in planning future programming. One director described multiple programs, each with braided funding streams, "Here you wouldn't be able to run a program with only one funding source. We get a small amount of money from state and federal sources, so we have to combine

funds to make services work." Through a collaboration with a school superintendent, multiple early childhood and pre-K programs in one county were housed within schools and received funding from education related sources. As illustrated by this county, leveraging available resources maximized the effect of SPCFA funding.

Directors in counties that were successful in developing strong collaborations credited the availability of administrative time for networking and advocacy. First 5 county commissions frequently had fewer than two full time staff, which made it difficult to find time to collaborate. However, in counties with enough First 5 staff to cover basic responsibilities, a position dedicated to building collaborations, seeking additional funding, and advocating for early childhood programming was viewed as a critical asset. One director credited the stable, multi-year nature of F5CA funding as the reason why they were able to develop relationships and advocate for early childhood programming throughout the county, "I lead the collective and I've led other programs too because I'm seen as someone who has the bandwidth to do that and the stability to do that."

Directors provided multiple examples of the benefits of SPCFA-supported time that could be devoted to administrative tasks. Some used the time to apply for additional grants, while others maintained a presence on advisory councils or networked throughout the county. Two counties mentioned specific circumstances where initial support from the SPCFA and additional grants provided the startup support necessary to develop programs that built their own capacity and became self-sustaining. In another example, a director from one county developed a relationship with a county commissioner through a F5CA training, where they were able to illustrate how a county commissioner's role could extend beyond meeting attendance to participation in strategic planning. Through work with the county commissioner, the county was able to pass a budget with additional funding for improving fidelity in programming. For counties with enough funding, administrative time for directors was a fruitful investment, whether in the form of additional time for a director or additional staff to assist with daily responsibilities.

Experience with Evidence Based Programs

Many directors were grateful for F5CA EBP requirements that supported the implementation of programming within their counties and increased buy-in among county officials. However, finding a program that met the needs of the county and implementing it to fidelity were consistent challenges. Sixteen directors interviewed indicated that their counties were either providing EBPs themselves or were funding partners who were providing EBPs. The following section describes these experiences and details the programming supported by the SPCFA. See Appendix C for a list of EBPs mentioned by directors.

Challenges

Three directors described challenges with selecting an EBP. One county investigated implementation of the Nurse-Family Partnership program but found that there were not

enough families that fit program eligibility criteria. They also noted challenges with Healthy Families America, which has a narrow enrollment window that makes it difficult to enroll families. Another director described a challenge with not having time to recruit partners needed to implement an EBP, such as pediatric offices.

For counties that were implementing EBPs, the most frequent challenge was hiring, training, and retaining qualified staff. Four counties described efforts to recruit AmeriCorps employees to a varying degree of success. After rapid turnover, one director decided this was not a sustainable strategy. Some directors also noted the need to provide additional training for less qualified staff. Four directors explained that they struggled to meet EBP requirements for the duration and frequency of program services, due to a lack of funding for full staffing capacity or inconsistent attendance. Another director described issues with fidelity because the program did not fit every families' needs. This director commented, "Our home visiting has trouble sticking to the script … because every family needed something really different." Several directors noted that they would have appreciated more flexibility to adapt models to their needs.

Successes

Counties that were able to implement EBPs were successful in doing so largely because of programming that addressed geographic barriers. Parents were able to enroll in literacy programs like the Dolly Parton Imagination Library online and receive books delivered directly to their homes. Other programs, like Ready Rosie, made use of mobile technology, videos, and partnerships with schools to deliver parenting support and information. Raising a Reader provided books that were sent home in a weekly backpack in collaboration with local libraries. Other counties used home visiting models such as Parents as Teachers to provide support directly to families at home rather than asking families to travel to attend programs. Each of these programs had specific components that reduced the travel burdens on families and used existing resources to facilitate service delivery.

F5CA mandates for EBPs were especially helpful in four counties where EBPs were not yet in place, whether due to funding concerns or adherence to previously established programming preferences. In one county, these requirements led the county to stop supporting non-research-based programming. Other directors cited these requirements as assets in convincing local officials and collaborators that EBPs are the best option despite potentially higher costs.

"Having the extra funding and a focus on evidence based programs led the commission to invest in [EBP] and the stability of the contract allowed them to continue investing."

Finding an EBP to fit the unique needs of county residents was a common struggle. Some counties described success with addressing this challenge by finding flexible programs that could be altered to fit their county needs. For example, one director struggled to effectively offer programs to an underserved native population. To address this challenge, the director used SPCFA funds to hire an AmeriCorps member to engage with the community. This AmeriCorps member co-designed the Raising a

Reader program in partnership with parents in the tribal community by handpicking books, establishing enrollment and recruitment procedures, and developing curriculum. They reported that involving parents in the program development phase built trust and increased participation.

Four directors specifically attributed successes in providing EBPs to having the SPCFA. Two directors claimed that they would not have an EBP if it wasn't for this additional funding. Another director explained that they would not have funding to train their staff without the allocation.

Monitoring fidelity

Directors played a variety of roles in terms of monitoring EBP fidelity. Nine directors were able to describe monitoring efforts because they were personally involved in programming, as described by a director who said, "Our evaluator works with [program staff] to evaluate. I've been trained as a Nurturing Parenting facilitator and I attend the meetings. I stay invested in that conversation as well." Five directors received reports from the accrediting body of nationally accredited programs such as the Dolly Parton Imagination Library but had no role in program implementation. In cases where programming and evaluation were contracted out completely, directors were not involved in monitoring and could not always confirm that programs were being implemented to fidelity. In some cases, directors described implementation of programs to the extent possible given current funding and staff availability. When there was enough funding to meet or closely approach developer specifications, the most common obstacle to monitoring fidelity was that resources were too limited to conduct full evaluations and truly ensure that specifications were met. Overall, directors rarely reported certainty that programs were being conducted to specifications.

Small Population Counties' Experiences with Evaluation

Child Trends asked executive directors a variety of questions about their experiences, current capacities, and needs related to evaluation. The primary purpose of these questions was to inform Child Trends' internal development of technical assistance resources. Overall, interview responses indicate that counties have a wide range of experiences evaluating their programs and a variety of evaluation-related topics on which they need more support. Key findings are summarized below.

- **Over half (55%) of directors interviewed reported that they currently work with an external evaluation partner.** In some cases, directors reported that they relied on their external evaluation partner for all evaluation-related work, but other directors reported that they partner with an external evaluator for specific evaluation needs (e.g., developing surveys, creating content for evaluation reports, etc.). In some cases, working with external evaluators seemed to influence their level of interest in evaluation technical assistance. For example, one director reported that they would rather pay for an external evaluator than invest in their own capacity to do evaluation.

- **All directors interviewed reported that they collect data from the programs they fund and have at least some ability to document their programs' activities and number of people served.** Slightly less than three quarters (70%) of directors reported having the capacity to measure and document the reach of their programs, including the proportion of the target population they serve. The types of data and the frequency with which it is collected varied across the counties interviewed.

Some directors reported wanting to streamline their data collection process by developing new templates or data collection tools.

- **Most (80%) directors interviewed reported that they have experience developing and implementing satisfaction surveys to gather input from participants about programs and services.** However, over half (55%) of directors indicated that they were interested in technical assistance to improve their skills around developing and conducting surveys. For example, tips and strategies to increase survey response rates was a common point of interest.

- **Eight (40%) directors reported that they have a logic model, and eleven (55%) directors indicated they would like to receive technical assistance on developing, revising, or using logic models.** Interviews suggested that counties have a wide range of capacity related to logic models: some have never built one, some need support revising one, and some have one but would like support on how to use it as a tool for monitoring and evaluation.

- **Additional topics of interest for technical assistance included developing evaluation questions (50%) and measuring systems change or systems integration work (45%).** Directors reported that a lot of their work relates to improving systems that serve young children and families in their counties, but they do not have a process by which to measure and track the progress of that systems-level work. Other areas of interest included strategies for evaluating systems change efforts, receiving feedback on annual evaluation reports, support measuring long-term outcomes, and facilitated discussions to strengthen partnerships between directors and external evaluators.

- **Four (20%) directors reported that they have used the evaluation toolkit on the F5CA website.** Of the twelve who reported *not* using the evaluation toolkit, eight reported that they know what it is and how to access it and four reported that they do not know what the evaluation toolkit is. Directors offered suggestions for how to improve the evaluation toolkit, including:

  - One director reported that the materials in the toolkit are more educational than practical. They said they would like the evaluation toolkit to include some sample evaluation reports and sample surveys that directors could reference to develop their own reports and surveys.

  - Another director reported that they do check the evaluation toolkit for resources, but often find that they don't have the expertise to understand the tool or resource and how to use it.

Summary and Recommendations

Many small population counties faced similar challenges, but they were not monolithic. Each county had different ways to address issues and meet the needs of residents. Close relationships were key to success in some small counties; forming collaborations and building trust with communities was enhanced by the feeling of shared responsibility for supporting community development. Conversely, geography and isolation were persistent challenges mentioned by directors, which affected their ability to meet the needs of the community with services and resources. These services, especially EBPs, were implemented and monitored to varying degrees based on the resources available to the county.

Directors offered a variety of suggestions for how to support their successes. In addition to basic funding and longer funding cycles for expanding programming and administration over a greater period of time, counties offered the following recommendations.
- **Increase efforts and resources to include small counties in events and decisions.** Directors felt that they were stretched very thin and did not have the

option to be represented at state level events due to the demands of work within the county. They expressed that the values and goals of larger counties often overshadowed their own, and that ideas and expectations were not always appropriate or feasible for small counties. They recommended more support for them to travel to state-level events and flexible funding to support meeting participation so that small counties would be able to ensure that their needs are recognized.

- **Increase administrative time and consider ways to minimize burden in reporting requirements for small counties.** Directors who were the sole First 5 county staff often felt that they were unable to make connections and spend time planning for sustainability and program expansion. F5CA reporting requirements were the most frequently cited difficulty, and directors requested improvements so that it did not disproportionly burden those with minimal staffing. Further, some directors expressed concern that they were not trained in the best ways to efficiently track and report their progress, as they are not data analysts. Directors offered several concrete solutions for this issue that included additional funding for administrative time, funding for a position dedicated to collaboration or reporting, or adjusted reporting requirements that require less administrative effort for directors playing multiple roles. Technical support in this area, an evaluator that could be shared across small counties, or additional funds to address evaluation needs would be very useful.

- **Continue to allow counties to use funding flexibly.** Directors were knowledgeable of the needs within their own community, which could vary considerably. What is considered a success in a large county may not reflect the goals of smaller communities. For example, some counties wanted to focus more on prevention practices, while others were concerned with meeting immediate needs for early care and learning. Having the ability to spend funds flexibly was viewed as a significant asset.

- **Adjust expectations of small counties to reflect the capacity of staff and funding.** Some directors were concerned about expectations for success when compared to larger counties. They felt their opportunities were limited by their available staff and resources, and that they would not have as many opportunities to meet their goals as larger counties with multiple staff working on different projects. Directors would appreciate recognition for their work to achieve benchmarks that are accomplishments for their communities, instead of working under the assumption that every community can meet the same goals.

- **Coordinate a support system to be shared among small counties.** A shared online system for communication among small counties was mentioned as a potential resource for troubleshooting similar experiences. Directors wanted to be able to explore solutions together, track progress, and collaborate, but were often limited by geographic barriers. They thought it would be helpful to either use video conferencing or provide travel stipends to allow directors of small population counties to regularly communicate with one another. Because some counties do not have access to reliable internet, a completely online system of support would not meet the needs of all small population counties.

- **Develop shared templates and technical support services.** Several directors mentioned that outreach products and services would be especially helpful in the form of shared calendars, websites, communication templates, and graphics.

Directors wanted branded tools for conducting outreach and reporting back to community collaborators in the form of newsletters and memos. With a limited capacity to develop these products on their own, they suggested that F5CA develop a kit or set of templates, tools, and services that small counties can use to organize and present their work.

- **Tailor funding and learning opportunities to small counties.** Directors often reported that resources were tailored towards larger counties, where there are requirements to partner with an array of organizations that might not exist in small counties. They suggested developing grant opportunities that are more accessible to small counties. They recommended that F5CA offer technical assistance on topics geared to small counties, such as how to collaborate and coordinate services with limited community partners and assistance with identifying additional funding streams to sustain programs. One director also expressed that they frequently hear about trainings via word of mouth. They recommended F5CA develop a list or calendar of available trainings to increase awareness.

Additionally, Child Trends offers a few recommendations based on our review of interview responses.

- **Support EBPs with collaborative opportunities, technical assistance, and creative solutions to geographic barriers.** While counties appreciated being able to select programming that suited their needs, overcoming geographic barriers was often the key to success. Opportunities for programs that use mobile services and online technologies may be appropriate for geographic locations where many families have access to reliable internet and cell service. In areas where reliable service is not available, First 5 county commissions could explore creative solutions to deliver programs based on community need. For example, it might be possible for home visitors to meet with families at schools or for staff to distribute Raising a Reader book bags at community locations, such as churches. Additionally, professional consultants could work with First 5 county directors to find the most effective programming options and coach them through implementation. Providing access to experts who can support effective EBP implementation, such as data analysts or outreach specialists, could reduce burden and build capacity.

- **Provide access to a reliable set of contractors that could provide "shared services" for some core tasks.** Counties expressed difficulty meeting the requirements of evaluation and auditing services due to the challenges related to isolation. Directors could benefit from having access to a team of contractors or evaluators who can work with the counties. It might be possible to identify individuals within the counties who could work with other small population counties. If this is not possible, it might be useful to identify contractors who could work remotely with small population counties. For counties with unreliable internet services, these contractors would likely need to travel to the communities to do the work.

- **Provide support for monitoring EBP fidelity.** Involvement in fidelity monitoring varied by county. Some counties contracted monitoring out completely, others were unsure whether it was happening, and others were directly involved in reporting processes. To support directors' ability to implement programs successfully, it would be helpful to offer technical support and training that is individualized for each county's strengths and limitations in implementing EBPs. Additionally, this support would need to assess whether difficulties in maintaining fidelity are due to limited resources or a mismatch between program design and the unique needs of the community. Model developers may have advice about how best to monitor fidelity with limited resources.

- **Offer technical assistance to support the evaluation capacity of small population county directors.** Small population counties could benefit from evaluation technical assistance (TA). This TA could include one-on-one support to address county-specific evaluation needs. It could also include developing templates or tools for counties, which could be especially helpful for directors who do not have additional staff or evaluation partners. For those counties with evaluation partners, TA could also help county directors understand how to work effectively with partners to ensure that the evaluation meets their needs.

- **Offer opportunities for small counties to share experiences and engage in collaborative problem-solving with each other.** Many directors directly or indirectly alluded to learning about resources or finding solutions to issues they

were facing through informal discussions with their small county peers. F5CA could offer structured opportunities for directors to obtain information and resources from their small population county peers that meet their unique needs.

Appendix A: Small Population Funding Augmentation

The California Children and Families Act establishes funding through tobacco tax revenue to First 5 California (F5CA) county commissions based on the number of births in each county. Since implementation of the Act in FY 1999-2000, F5CA recognized that the amount of resources allocated to counties with low birth rates would be insufficient to fully operate a First 5 county commission and offer programs. This recognition led to the development of the Small Population County Funding Augmentation (SPCFA) to ensure implementation of the California Children and Families Act could be implemented in every county. The purpose of this appendix is to provide background information on the SPCFA, which can provide context to the findings to the report, *Small Population County Funding Augmentation: County Experiences.* To gather this information, Child Trends reviewed documents and interviewed Ms. Silvia Flores from F5CA.

Evolution of the SPCFA

The SPCFA has evolved over the course of implementing the California Children and Families Act. Initially, the funding focused on supporting small population counties to operate an effective county commission and ensure there was sufficient capacity and infrastructure to accomplish the goals of the Act. F5CA worked with counties and state partners to develop a funding formula. They also developed requirements for reporting and other accountability measures to provide F5CA details about its investment in the SPCFA. Over time, the funding requirements changed to include a greater emphasis on evidence-based or evidence-informed programs. Throughout the evolution of the SPCFA, F5CA has explored ways to support small population counties and has had a longstanding practice of including small population county representatives and the First 5 Association in the process of refining expectations for SPCFA.

History of the SPCFA

The SPCFA launched in Fiscal Year 1999-2000, once the state-level F5CA Commission became operational. At that time, F5CA recognized that the statutory funding formula, which is based on the number of births, would not provide small population counties enough resources to support a county commission staff member who would lead local efforts to create and implement a coordinated system of supports for children and families, as specified in the California Children and Families Act. The funding amount also was insufficient to provide any level of programming, either through direct F5CA allocations from the tobacco tax revenue or as a means to leverage other programmatic funds within the county. For example, in FY 2009-10, California's smallest population county had an approximate annual birth rate of 4 births per year. This county would have received only $8,780 for their First 5 commission using the statutory funding formula. To provide context, the minimum small population county funding threshold in FY 2019-20 is $275,000.

Between FY 1999-00 and FY 2014-15, F5CA implemented a variety of strategies to support small population counties. Depending on the strategy used during this time, the number of counties receiving SPCFA funds ranged from eight to 30. SPCFA strategies in this time period included:

- Establishing a minimum $200,00 threshold allocated to counties that received less than that amount per year as their portion of tobacco tax revenue. Eight counties received these supplemental funds from FY 1999-2000 through FY 2010-11. An additional county was added in FY 2008-09. Counties used these resources to operate programs for families with children birth to 5 in their county.

- Providing a rural travel allocation to ensure small population county staff could travel to State Commission meetings and attend technical assistance workshops. Approximately 28 counties received this support from January 2001 through FY 2006-07.

- Allocating an annual graduated payment for administration, up to $125,000. The graduated payment ensured that small population counties would not have to use more than five percent of their tobacco tax revenue for administrative costs. Between FY 2000-01 and FY 2010-11, about 30 counties qualified for this supplemental funding.

In 2007, F5CA realized that they needed clearer guidelines for determining which counties were eligible to receive the SPCFA. They also recognized that the declining tobacco revenue could jeopardize the sustainability of the SPCFA. They established a SPCFA workgroup to develop recommendations for addressing these challenges. They also worked with the NewPoint Group to complete a small population county funding assessment and develop an equitable and sustainable funding strategy. This effort led to the adoption of a revised funding formula in FY 2011-12. The revised approach paralleled the tobacco tax revenue trend and adopted criteria that reduced the number of eligible counties to 16. This formula proved to be very complex and sensitive to small changes in number of births. It led to large budget fluctuations that made it difficult to use the formula as a predictive tool for long-term financial planning. In 2013, small population county representatives developed a new funding formula to address some shortcomings with the NewPoint Group recommendations. This funding formula was adopted in FY 2014-15 and continues to be used today to support 20 small population counties.

Current Funding Formula and Framework Implementation Plan

The current criteria (adopted in 2014-15 as noted above) for SPCFA funding eligibility is based on the county's reported annual births. To be eligible to receive SPCFA funds, counties cannot have annual births that exceed 1,000, using the prior three- year average of annual births. Twenty counties currently meet the criteria. Funding amounts are determined by a fixed, graduated formula where the minimum annual baseline is $275,000 for counties qualifying with 1–50 births and increases by $25,000 for each 50 births. F5CA uses the SPFCA to make up the difference between the baseline

determined by this formula and the annual tobacco tax revenue. The 2014-15 adjustments to the SPCFA specified that administrative costs could not exceed 25% and that counties had to spend the majority of SPCFA on direct services to children.

In FY 2014-15, F5CA also instituted accountability requirements for the first time. The Accountability Framework, known as the Framework Implementation Plan (FIP), defined expectations for SPCFA counties. Under the funding agreement for Fiscal Years 2014-17, SPCFA counties are required to:

- Enter into a Local Area Agreement with F5CA that clearly outlines the use of SPCFA funds.

- Submit an annual strategic plan, evaluation report, and fiscal stability plan.

- Fully or partially fund a minimum of one program with SPCFA funds.

- Submit a high-quality plan for each program funded with SPCFA resources; this plan must be updated annually. Through the high-quality plan, counties include:
  - Plans to address at least one of three areas of focus - developmental and health needs, engaging and supporting families, high-quality learning/early educator support and effectiveness.
  - Goals, activities, outcomes, collaborative partners, and funding amount for programs supported with SPCFA funds.
  - Plans to improve local service systems integration.
  - Plans to use an evidence-based program, promising practice, or high-quality local model.

- Demonstrate compliance with regulatory audits.

- Participate in training and technical assistance, when applicable.

Current SPCFA funding cycle

For the funding agreement covering FY 2017-21, F5CA updated the funding formula and enhanced the Accountability Framework. The update allowed an exception for the two smallest population counties to expend no more than 30% on administrative expenses (instead of 25%). Enhanced accountability standards required SPCFA counties to:

- Use at least 25% of non-administrative SPCFA for evidence-based or evidence-informed programs, which could bring about measurable improvements for key child and family indicators.

- Develop plans to monitor implementation of evidence-based programs to fidelity.

- Develop plans to monitor and identify technical assistance needs for SPCFA-funded programs.

- Demonstrate how SPCFA programs and activities align with First 5 IMPACT (Improve and Maximize Programs so All Children Thrive) and other local efforts.

- Complete an Annual Evaluation Report that describes how programs are designed and evaluated.

- Complete an Annual Performance Report for F5CA.

Next Steps

F5CA will use the findings from this report about the unique successes and challenges of small population counties to inform their planning efforts. They have convened a workgroup to discuss possible future directions for SPCFA funding and implementation and plan to request additional input from small population counties as this work proceeds.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

First 5 California Small Population County Interview Protocol

Thank you for taking time to talk with us today about your experiences as a First 5 small population county. We are talking with you today to 1) learn more about the unique strengths, challenges, and needs of small population counties, and 2) learn about any needs or challenges you may have evaluating your programs or services. You may be aware that we interviewed a smaller sample of small population counties in December, and First5 CA has asked us to continue the interviews with all small population counties, so they can learn about the full range of experiences of all small population counties. Your responses will be used to inform technical assistance and other supports for small counties.

It is important to note that your individual responses will not be associated with your name and your county name. We will report on common themes we hear from participants as a group. We may include quotes to highlight themes but will not attribute any quotes to a county or individual.

We have a series of about 17 questions we will go through today. If you would rather not answer a question, please let me know and we will move on to the next question. If at any point you would like to end this call, again, please let me know.

Lastly, to help clarify our notes, we would like to record this conversation. The recording would only be used to make sure that we correctly capture the information you share with us today, would remain confidential, and would be deleted after we use it to finalize our notes from this call.

Do I have permission to record this phone conversation? (Please check their response below.)

- ☐   *Yes*

- ☐   *No*

Note: Do not turn on the recorder unless they answer YES to this question.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin? Great! Let's get started.

Overall experiences providing services for children and families

Successes

We're going to start with a few questions to help us learn about successes in your county.

1. Can you give me an example of how have the small county augment funds led to a success with providing services for children and families in your county? You mentioned [*insert short list from Small County APR*] *in the Small County APR.* You can tell us about one of those successes, or any other success that particularly highlights how the augmentation funds led to successful service delivery to children and families.

    a. What factors contributed to it being a success?

      b.   Are there additional successes with services for children and families that are important for us to know about?

        i.   If yes, please describe.

        ii.   What factors contributed to it being a success?

2. In terms of receiving continued support from F5CA:

    a.   Are there ways funds can be used differently to support the <u>successes you've accomplished</u>? Please describe.

    b.   How would you use funds differently to support successes you'd like to achieve?

    c.   Specifically with respect to Quality Counts CA and F5 IMPACT; are there new or different ways the Hub can support your successes? If yes, please describe.

    d.   What else would support your successes?

Challenges

Now we'd like to learn about challenges you're facing in your county.

3. Can you give me an example of a challenge you've faced providing services for children and families using your Small Population County Funding Augmentation. You mentioned [*insert short list from Small County APR*] *in the Small County APR.* You can tell us about one of those challenges, or any other challenge that particularly highlights challenges in your county.

    a.   [<u>Interviewer note:</u> If the county answered this in sufficient detail in the APR, skip this question.] Why do you think these challenges occurred and how might they be addressed?

    b.   What supports from First 5 CA could help you address these challenges?

    c.   In particular, what supports from First5 CA could help you address challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic?[3]

    d.   Are there new or different ways the Hub can help you address these challenges? If yes, please describe.

    e.   What else would help you address these challenges?

4. Are there additional challenges with services for children and families?

    a.   If yes, please describe.

    b.   Why do you think these challenges occurred and how might they be addressed?

    c.   How could First5 CA help you address these challenges?

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[3] Questions related to the COVID-19 pandemic were only asked of interviewees in the second round of interviews in May/June 2020.

d. Specifically with respect to Quality Counts CA and F5 IMPACT: Are there new or different ways the Hub can help you address these challenges? If yes, please describe.

e. What else would help you address these challenges?

Implementing Evidence-Based/Evidence-Informed Programs and Services

<u>Interviewer note</u>: If we have information that suggests they are offering an evidence-based program, from responses to Q1-4 or from their Small County APR, please make sure we have answers to Q5a-d.

5. Are you offering any evidence-based programs with your Small Population County Funding Augmentation?

If yes,

a. What were your (or your contractor's) experiences implementing the evidence-based program following all of the developer's requirements, such as staff requirements, numbers of sessions offered, or other requirements?

b. <u>Where they were able to implement with fidelity, ask</u>: What contributed to being able to implement according to all the developer's requirements? How do you know the program was implemented with fidelity; do you receive reports or have other ways of knowing program fidelity was monitored?

c. <u>Where they were not able to implement with fidelity, ask:</u> What challenges did you face and why did these challenges occur?

d. What would help you address these challenges?

If no,

e. Why are you not offering an evidence-based program?

f. What supports can help you with moving from evidence-informed to evidence-based programs in your county?

Experience with evaluation

Now we're going to switch topics and ask questions about your experience with evaluation.

6. What experience do you have with the following types of evaluation?

a. Documenting program activities and people served

b. Surveys about people's satisfaction with a program

c. Outcome measurements for program activities and goals

d. Studies describing a program or activity to better understand it (e.g., implementation studies)

e. Measuring the impact of a program on a particular outcome (e.g., impact studies where you tried to determine whether a certain outcome(s) changed as a result of a program)

f. Measuring the reach of programs and the portion of the target population being served

    i. Probes: do you know how to figure out what percent of the target population you are reaching? Are you reaching enough people to meet your goals?

g. Other?

7. When you think about evaluating your work, are there questions you have about your First 5 [insert county] program that you would like to be able to answer but cannot currently answer?

Current evaluation processes

8. Do you collect any data from the local programs you fund?
   a. [If yes, skip to Q10]

   b. If no, why not? What types of information or data would you like to collect from the programs you fund? [skip to Q11]

9. [If yes to Q8] What kinds of data are you currently collecting from the programs you fund?

   a. How (in what format) do they report these data to you?

   b. How often do you collect these data?

   c. How do you use these data?

   d. What information or data would you like to get from your grantees that you don't currently get from them?

   e. What challenges have you experienced collecting data from the programs you fund?

   f. What successes have you had?

10. What supports do you need to improve the process (or start the process) of collecting data from the programs you fund?

   a. Probe/listen for: types of tools or templates that would be helpful.

11. Do you currently have a logic model for your First 5 program?

   a. If yes, how do you use the logic model(s)? Does it meet your needs?

12. Do you work with any evaluation partners or consultants? (e.g., local universities)

Evaluation tools and resources

Interviewer note: look at the APR Q14, Q15, and Q18 to determine whether the county has used the Evaluation Toolkit (and if so, what feedback they had).

13. [If they HAVE used the Evaluation Toolkit] You indicated on your APR that you have used the Evaluation Toolkit on the F5CA website.

    a. What did you find helpful about the Evaluation Toolkit?

    b. What was less helpful?

    c. What types of resources or templates would you like to see added to the toolkit?

    d. Are there any accompanying resources (e.g., webinars) that could make the toolkit more useful?

14. [If they have NOT used the Evaluation Toolkit] You indicated on your APR that you have not used the Evaluation Toolkit on the F5CA website. Why not?

Possible webinar topics

15. Our next step after these interviews will be to hold a series of webinars for small population counties on topics related to evaluation. Our goal is that these webinars be informed by the challenges you're experiencing and the specific needs of small population counties. After reviewing the APRs and talking with F5CA, we have started a list of possible topics for these webinars, and we would like your input on what would be most useful for you. Here are some of the possible topics we're considering:

    a. Building, revising, and using logic models

    b. Developing evaluation questions

    c. How to get buy-in from the programs you fund around collecting and reporting data

    d. How to identify and collaborate with possible evaluation partners in your county

    e. Best practices for conducting surveys (including tips for how to increase response rates)

Do any of these topics stand out to you as particularly helpful or valuable to you? Particularly unhelpful? What other suggestions do you have for possible webinar topics?

If yes, we'd like to hear any feedback you may have. We are always interested in learning how we can improve.

That concludes our interview for today. Your input and feedback is very valuable. Thank you for taking the time to talk with us.

Appendix C: Evidence Based Programs Available in Counties

This list represents EBPs that directors mentioned were currently implemented within their counties. It is not exhaustive, as counties were not asked for a full list of programming:

- Active Parenting
- Creative Curriculum
- Devereux Early Childhood Assessment Program (DECA)
- Dolly Parton Imagination Library
- Family HUI
- Healthy Babies Home Visiting
- Healthy Beginnings
- Healthy Families, Healthy Beginnings
- Help Me Grow
- Home Visiting
- Moving Beyond Depression
- Music Together
- Nurturing Parenting
- Opening Doors
- Parent Café
- Parenting Now
- Parents as Teachers
- Positive Parenting Program
- Raising a Reader
- Ready Rosie
- Strengthening Families Network