**Preventive Services:**

**Increasing the Likelihood that Children Stay in Their Homes**

Throughout the history of child welfare in the United States and elsewhere, the pendulum has swung many times between an ideology of saving children from their parents and efforts to keep children in their homes through the use of services meant to provide poor families with access to resources, like decent housing, financial assistance, quality mental health services, and concrete and emotional support in times of crisis, that more affluent families typically have access to. Early proponents of preventive services saw themselves as champions of poor and marginalized families, and the parent advocacy movement grew, in part, out of the fight for preventive services and against a system that separated families and warehoused children.

Today, progressive critics argue that in practice, preventive services have primarily provided only interventions such as mental health services and parenting classes, focusing on the assumed mental health needs or child-rearing deficits of parents, and not enough on the financial needs that can spiral families into crisis or on more fundamentally overhauling a broken system. In contrast, proponents argue that if preventive services were funded in the same ways and to the same degree as foster care, it would have the potential to radically reduce the number of children separated from their families.

**You can read more about the history of preventive services in New York City in** [**this essay**](https://toolkit.parentadvocacy.net/cwop-parent-advocacy/) **from IPAN’s Toolkit for Transformation, and** [**an article**](https://www.nytimes.com/1979/09/30/archives/westchester-weekly-new-hope-in-child-welfare.html) **from The New York Times from 1979 about New York Child Welfare Reform Act of 1979.**

**As part of a larger essay on the problems with the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 by Professor Martin Guggenheim, you can read a critique of preventive services and a call to provide direct economic support to families on page 711 of the** [**July 2021 issue of the Columbia Journal of Race and Law,**](https://journals.library.columbia.edu/index.php/cjrl/issue/view/789/188)

**Although free legal services for all poor parents does not fall under any official child welfare preventive services funding stream, in** [**this article**](https://www.risemagazine.org/2015/09/order-of-protection/) **in Rise magazine, you can read about how efforts to provide parents with “preventive legal advocacy” also keeps children out of foster care.**

**Family First Prevention Services Act: Efforts to Change Funding to Prioritize Keeping Families Together, Or Just More of the Same?**

In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act (also referred to as the Family First Act) was passed in the United States with bipartisan support. It is a major piece of legislation that focuses on preventive services targeted at families deemed at risk of having a child placed in out-of-home care. Parents with lived child welfare experience, organized in large part by the Birth Parents National Network, were active in advocating for the passage of the act, with Sandra Killett, parent advocate from New York City, testifying before the United States Senate Committee on Finance. The act is significant because, for the first time in United States history, it stipulates that the national government provide money to states to keep children out of out-of-home care not as a block grant, with a set number of dollars regardless of how many families receive preventive services, but based on the number of families receiving services, also known as uncapped funding. Prior to the passage of the act, only dollars for children placed in out-of-home care were uncapped, leading to a financial incentive to place children in foster care rather than invest in services that might keep them at home. The act also restricts federal funds for group homes and other forms of congregate care.

While the Act has been hailed as an historic change, it also has critics. Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform, argues that support for prevention is “minimal and largely misdirected,” because funding is limited to only three categories -- mental health, parenting skills and drug treatment -- even though studies have found that 30% of America’s foster children could have remained with their families if they received housing aid, a category not mentioned in the Family First Act.

Another major downfall of the Family First Act, according to Wexler, is that it requires new prevention services to meet impossibly high standards to be deemed evidence-based in order to be funded, making it unlikely that community-based initiatives, including grassroots parent advocacy efforts, would ever be able to be funded.[[1]](#footnote-1) Lastly, other critics have argued that families shouldn’t have to declare themselves at risk in order to qualify for preventive services through the Family First Act, as is currently the case, and help shouldn’t come through the same system set up to police families.

**Read the** [**full text**](https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ffpsa-pages-from-law-language.pdf) **of the Family First Act or a** [**detailed summary**](https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/family-first-detailed-summary.pdf)**.**

**Read a Q&A of commonly asked questions about provisions in the Family First Act** [**here**](https://www.childrensdefense.org/policy/policy-priorities/child-welfare/family-first/?gclid=CjwKCAjw9aiIBhA1EiwAJ_GTSmLcP3p6Fe-gvpdr532u_V2gtqUjLR6FktRQRjyK7HxxIXu14y6BBBoCS9EQAvD_BwE)**.**

**Read** [**Sandra Killett’s testimony**](https://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/04aug2015-KillettTestimony.pdf) **before the United States Senate Committee on Finance.**

**View a** [**database**](https://familyfirstact.org/) **of resources and information about the Family First Act.**

**Read more about the expectations, limitations, and reality of the Family First Act** [**here**](https://law.duke.edu/sites/default/files/centers/publiclaw/hughes_ffpsa-_expectations_limitations_and_reality.pdf)**, and a critique of the Family First Act** [**here**](https://childwelfaremonitor.org/2019/10/01/family-first-act-a-false-narrative-a-lack-of-review-a-bad-law/)**.**

1. Richard Wexler, “Richard Wexler: Family First Act Institutionalized Institutions, Sets Up Prevention to Fail” ([The Imprint](https://imprintnews.org/opinion/family-first-institutionalizes-institutions-sets-prevention-fail/19342), June 30, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)