

CASE STUDY

Strengthening Foundations: Advancing Early Childhood Systems in Alameda County

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Using real-world examples of how a community can develop tailored, holistic approaches to meet the needs of young children and their families, this case study provides actionable insights and learning tools for practitioners, leaders and students nationwide.

Stanford | Center on Early Childhood

About SCEC Case Studies

This case study by the Stanford Center on Early Childhood (SCEC) uses storytelling to highlight transformative, community-led strategies in early childhood systems building. It showcases a real-world example of how communities can develop tailored, holistic approaches to meet the needs of young children and their families. By understanding and amplifying these efforts and providing actionable insights for other communities, the hope is that this case study will contribute to broader systemic change in early childhood policy and practice.

Case studies elevate stories unfolding at the local level, where community bodies – public, private, and not-for-profit – have mobilized to meet the needs of children and their families in cases where the federal and some state governments have not (yet) focused their attention. While not exhaustive of all community-led efforts in the spotlighted communities, they offer a representative view of specific investments and partnerships by a subset of organizations and leaders.

Case studies serve as learning tools for practitioners, leaders, and students nationwide, showcasing community-aligned approaches to holistic systems building. SCEC recognizes that because of history, politics, demographics, and culture, every place has a unique approach to systems building and community engagement for improved outcomes in early childhood. There are, however, universal aspects of the highlighted practices and approaches that can apply broadly to improving the well-being of children and their families, and SCEC seeks to contribute to the omnidirectional flow of learning and information in the field.



Foreword

Dear Readers,

First 5 Alameda County's story is by no means finished, but it's certainly not too soon to begin telling it. As the organization's CEO, and in numerous other public and private sector roles before that, I have been working to build responsive programs and coordinated equity-centered public systems in service to and in partnership with families and communities for over 25 years. My hope with this case study, and in my career more generally, is to encourage leaders and decision makers to think in interdisciplinary and strategic terms about system building. Through strategic system building, we seek to connect the root causes of inequity, which are often predominantly tied to race and class bias, and develop processes, policies, and programs that support and address conditions that afford access and opportunity for low-income and working people. This includes structuring the funding to benefit those who are exploited through the existing labor market, developing participatory facilitated processes to center community voice, using data to map and disaggregate impacts, and administering and advocating for holistic approaches that include a community, family, and child framework within socioeconomic, racial, and cultural contexts.

As practitioners invested in public systems work, I urge you to focus on three key areas:

- **Critical Class and Race Consciousness:** Hire individuals who have lived experiences and understand the technical, political, and analytic decision points and skills to change and build systems to reflect community and to be responsive to community needs.
- **Financial Policy Expertise:** Develop a deep understanding of fiscal and regulatory policy to interpret the highest use of resources

and shape effective program design. Understanding economics is essential for understanding societal problems and identifying resources with community needs.

- **Holistic Approach:** Adopt a "public health" view. In early childhood that means integrating early childhood education with parent leadership, family economic and personal health, community resources, and culturally concordant instruction. Supporting children means addressing the full tapestry of their lives and parent/caregiver needs and community health.

I'm reminded of my childhood experience watching "Mr. Rogers." I recall turning to my mother and saying, "Something's wrong with this guy." His ritual of taking off his business shoes and putting on slippers was a stark contrast to my working-class parents. Mr. Rogers represented a different culture, one that didn't align with my own upbringing. This awareness highlights a critical need: As we design systems, we must be attuned to the diverse cultural contexts that have historically valued some and devalued others through the norms of race and class. No single culture, not even Mr. Rogers, who was awesome in many ways, is inherently right – each perspective brings value, and we must both acknowledge and embrace this diversity to build quality children and family programming.

In Alameda County, public investment in early childhood system building is growing, presenting us with opportunities to showcase our successes to taxpayers, philanthropic supporters, and beyond. We find ourselves in this situation, however, not by accident, but rather because of our relentless focus and attention on public finances, politics, and community needs. Even amid struggling city and school district budgets, we are demonstrating that public institutions, with public resources, working toward a public good can make tangible progress. I believe this progress as we demonstrate the impact – growing from $20 million to close to a projected budget of $300 million in public investment – makes the case for why more investment is needed.

Finally, this report discusses the concept of “moving from portrait to landscape” – a shift from focusing solely on the child to recognizing the myriad experiences and environments surrounding them. At First 5 Alameda, we have adopted a “whole-community, whole-family, whole-child” approach. This requires robust partnerships and systems collaboration that not only focus on early childhood education but also bring attention to quality health care, access to good jobs, green spaces, nutritious food, diapers, and more. As University of Southern California Professor Manuel Pastor says, system building isn’t about individuals beating the odds, it is about changing the odds so more have access and opportunities because of the hard work of connecting our national values of “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness” to our public policies.

The road ahead in continuing to evolve Alameda County’s early childhood system will continue to be challenging, relying on the dedication of our entire community, including the perseverance and love of parents and caregivers, the tireless commitment of early educators caring for and educating our children, and the incredible work of community partners. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to our local leaders, some of whom are highlighted in the article, who have embodied a vision and continue to inspire us. Pioneers like Wilma Chan have set this crucial work in motion, imploring us to take a different approach to supporting children and families. Finally, thank you to First 5 staff – if not for your efforts to create a brighter future for every family and child in our communities, none of this would be possible.



Together, we can continue to forge ahead.

With appreciation,

Kristin Spanos,
Chief Executive Officer,
First 5 Alameda County

Abstract

This case study explores the efforts to align, integrate, and advance early childhood systems in Alameda County, California, bolstered by significant public investment. It highlights the impact of a subset of community-aligned initiatives and innovative practices, with a focus on First 5 Alameda. This study also underscores the diverse demographic setting of Alameda County, the complexity of a large county with many municipalities, and the challenges posed by First 5's declining revenue base, along with the county's high living costs.

First 5 Alameda arose with California's Proposition 10, a 1998 voter-approved ballot initiative that added a tax on cigarettes to fund early childhood services in each of the state's 58 counties. First 5 Alameda County supports young children from birth to age five so they arrive at kindergarten healthy, safe, and ready to learn. Guided by community data, First 5's mission is to support the intersections between early childhood development, community and family conditions, and lifelong health. The agency stands out for its proactive shift from focusing solely on individual programs as the solution for unmet needs of early childhood to becoming a system-building entity focused on coordinating, integrating, and leveraging funding to support the community and socioeconomic conditions that position young children and their families for success.

First 5 Alameda views the early childhood system through a public health lens in order to leverage Proposition 10, a flexible resource, and to achieve sustainable revenue through both existing and novel funding streams. Thanks in part to these efforts, Alameda is one of many counties across the United States leading early childhood systems creation and change at the local level.

The case study explores the expertise required to build and sustain such a system, including fiscal policy, governance, analytics, regulation, participatory facilitation, strategic communication, and a critical analysis of inequities within the early childhood landscape. It is organized into four parts:

- **Community Background**
- **Unlocking the Potential for Systems Building in Alameda County: From Portrait to Landscape**
- **Building Momentum for Community-Led Ballot Initiatives**
- **Transforming Opportunity into Action: The Road Ahead**

Recently, child care ballot measures in Alameda County have unlocked over $200 million in new funding annually for early childhood care and education, with First 5 Alameda County as the administering agency of these new revenues. This breakthrough is a result of years of multi-sector investment and community-led advocacy in pursuit of a systems-building agenda within a highly fragmented system.





1. Community Background

Children under 6 make up about 7% of Alameda County's population, comparable to state and national averages.

Alameda County is located in the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay Area. It is among the most populous counties in the United States, encompassing 14 cities, 740 square miles,[1] and an estimated population of over 1.6 million people, with 108,000 children under the age of 6.[2] Children under 6 make up about 7% of Alameda County's population, comparable to the state and national averages, although projections indicate a decline in this age group in the county over the coming decades due to shifting demographics and birth rates.[3,4] Of the 14 cities, Oakland is the most populous and the government seat of the county.

Alameda is also one of the most diverse counties in the country.[5] There is no majority ethnic or racial group, and more than half of the children under age 6 live with at least one parent born outside the U.S., making the need to take in a diverse set of community sentiments and experiences critical in any and all programmatic approaches and investments in the county.[6] The county has also seen gradual shifts in demographic makeup. From the 2000 Census to the 2010 Census, the Black population decreased county-wide by 11%, the Asian population increased by 31%, and the Hispanic population increased by 23%.[7] Simultaneously, gentrification is changing the economic balance of the county. A 2023 Urban Institute report found the county's Black renters and homeowners alike were

1 Alameda County Gov.(n.d.). About. acgov. www.acgov.org/about
2 State of California, Department of Finance, P-2B: Population Projections by Individual Year of Age, California, 2010–2060 (Baseline 2019 Population Projections; Vintage 2020 Release), https://dof.ca.gov/forecasting/demographics
3 Ibid.
4 U.S. Census Bureau, 2021, ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates, American Community Survey 5-year estimates (DP05), https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP1Y2023.DP05
5 Alameda County Gov.(n.d.). About. acgov. www.acgov.org/about
6 Children Living with Foreign-Born Parents - Kidsdata.org. Published 2018. Accessed April 24, 2025. www.kidsdata.org/topic/573/foreign-born-parents/table
7 Alameda County Gov.(n.d.). About. acgov. www.acgov.org/about

more likely than non-Black renters and homeowners to be paying 30% or more of their "income … toward rent, a mortgage, or other housing-related needs."[8]

Like many Californians, especially in urban settings, Alameda County residents face a high cost of living (Exhibit 1) and pronounced wealth divides. One in 10 children under 6 lives below the federal poverty level,[9] 28% of children under 6 are enrolled in Medi-Cal (California's Medicaid program; half of Oakland children qualify for Medi-Cal), and 11% of children under six are enrolled in CalFresh[10] for food assistance. Additionally, Alameda County's Gini Coefficient of 0.46 indicates a significant degree of income inequality.[11] Life expectancy varies by as much as 24 years between census tracks in Alameda County. A person could expect to live to 91 in the Lower Hills, but only 67 in West Oakland.[12]

Nationally, Black women and birthing people are three times more likely than white women to die during pregnancy or childbirth and experience more maternal health complications. Black babies are three to four times more likely to be born too early, too small, or die before their first birthday.[13] These risk factors create striking impacts for Alameda County, which is about 10% Black.[14] According to the California Women's Well-Being Index, the county ranks 51st out of 58 counties for prenatal care in the state.[15]

8 Rennert L, Holland N, Remor I, et al. Changing Landscapes for Black Californians. 2023. www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023–09/Changing%20Landscapes%20for%20Black%20Californians.pdf

9 United States Census Bureau. Poverty Status in the past 12 months of related children under 18, American Community Survey 5-year estimates. https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=B17006&g=0500000US06001

10 U.S. Census Bureau, 2019, Poverty Status in the past 12 months of related children under 18, American Community Survey 5-year estimates (B17006), https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2021.B17006

11 Schiller BR, Gebhardt K. The Economy Today. Mcgraw-Hill Education; 2016. Note: A coefficient of 0 represents perfect income equality (all households at the same income level), while a coefficient of 1 represents perfect income inequality (one household with all of the income, the rest of households with no income).

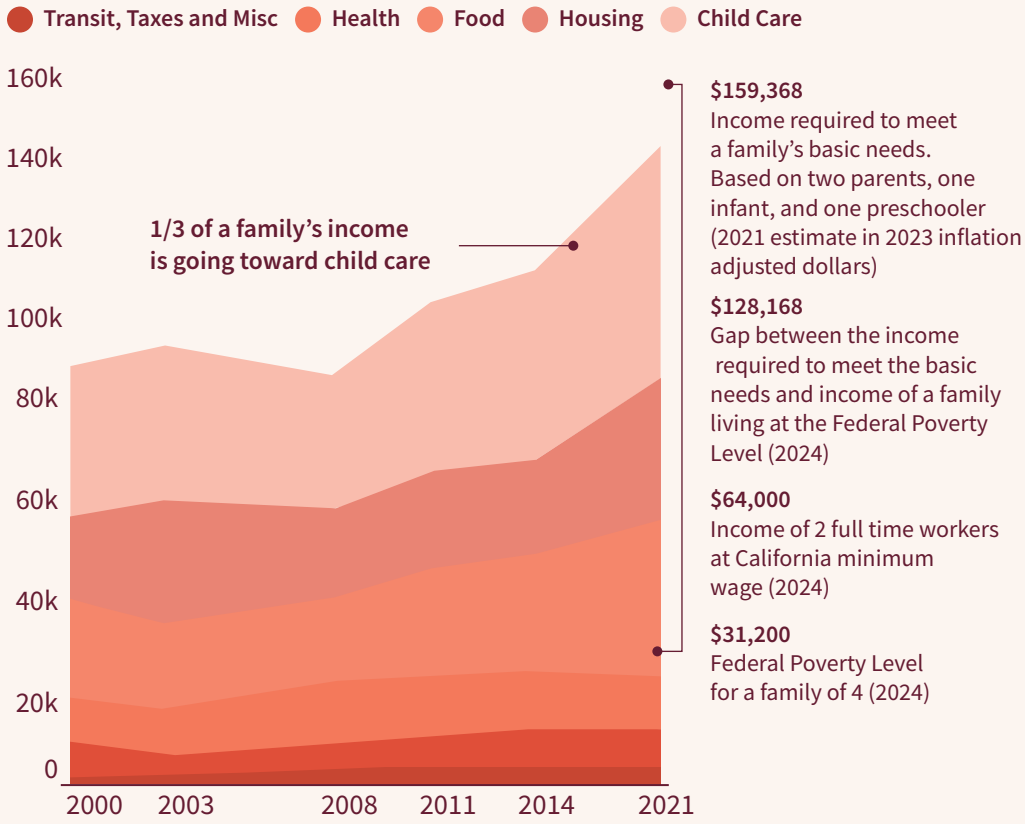
12 Neighborhood-Level Determinants of Life Expectancy in Oakland, CA.; 2012. https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/media/society-health/pdf/PMReport_Alameda.pdf

13 CDC. Working Together to Reduce Black Maternal Mortality. Women's Health. Published April 8, 2024. www.cdc.gov/womens-health/features/maternal-mortality.html

14 QuickFacts: Alameda County, California. Census Bureau QuickFacts. Published 2024. www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/alamedacountycalifornia/PST045224

15 California Women's Well-Being Index. Calbudgetcenter.org. Published 2025. https://calbudgetcenter.org/embeds/wwbi2024

EXHIBIT 1:
Financial Requirements to Meeting Basic Needs in Alameda County



Source: First 5 Alameda County, Strategic Plan 2022–2027, June 2023

Similar to many other parts of the country, low-income families in Alameda County struggle to access affordable child care. This challenge is compounded by the low supply of child care and insufficient incentives for potential child care providers to enter the market. Over 90% of eligible families with infants and toddlers are not accessing subsidized care, and over 45% of eligible families with preschool-age children are not accessing subsidized care because of insufficient public funding and limited subsidized child care capacity.[16]

16 Alameda County Early Care and Education Planning Council, Alameda County Early Care and Education Needs Assessment, 2021. www.ackids.org/files/2021%20Alameda%20County%20ECE%20Needs%20Assessment%20FINAL.pdf

Proposition 10 and First 5 California

First 5 California, and subsequently First 5 Alameda, arose in 1998–99 as part of the voter-approved Proposition 10, which added a $0.50 tax on each pack of cigarettes sold in the state to fund early childhood services through First 5 for all 58 counties in the state.[17] First 5 California's mission is as follows:

> **"Convene, partner in, support, and help lead the movement to create and implement a comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated system for California's children prenatal through 5 and their families. Promote, support, and optimize early childhood development."**[18]

The only requirements for Prop 10 funds are that it supports 0- to 5-year-olds, is not means tested, can be carried forward from year to year, and can be a match for other state and federal funding.

Proposition 10 was developed and passed with the understanding that making impactful investments in early childhood requires flexibility and responsiveness to local conditions. Therefore, the legislation allows for more flexibility than most other types of public funding. The only requirements are that funding supports 0- to 5-year-olds, is not means tested (i.e., eligibility is not based on caregiver income), can be carried forward from year to year, and can be a match for other state and federal funding. Some local First 5 agencies benefit from additional administrative nimbleness such as flexible hiring and independent procurement processes. First 5 Alameda operates as an independent governmental entity with a nine-member Commission appointed by the Board of Supervisors with three mandated seats: one for a Board of Supervisors member and one apiece for the heads of county departments – currently Social Services and Public Health. The Commission oversees and governs First 5 Alameda's strategic direction and partnerships.

17 What Would Proposition 10, the California Children and Families First Initiative, Mean for California? 1998. https://calbudgetcenter.org/app/uploads/980903Prop10.pdf

18 About Us. www.ccfc.ca.gov. https://www.ccfc.ca.gov/about/about.html

First 5 California represented an unprecedented commitment to state funding for early childhood systems building. Notably, First 5 organizations were designed to serve as a nexus for local early childhood systems, identifying opportunities to integrate services and documenting progress resulting from the public investment. Home visiting, developmental screening, and child care were the primary programming and data collection overlapped but was not necessarily universal across all First 5's. First 5 leadership has often faced the task of balancing local needs with working toward alignment of uniform data to inform statewide conversations.

In the broader context of California's First 5 programs, Proposition 10's allowance for local flexibility could be considered a mixed blessing. While flexibility helps with making targeted, local investments, the sheer variety of 58 models, one for each county, makes it hard to demonstrate the impact of First 5s to make the case for additional funding amid a declining revenue stream.

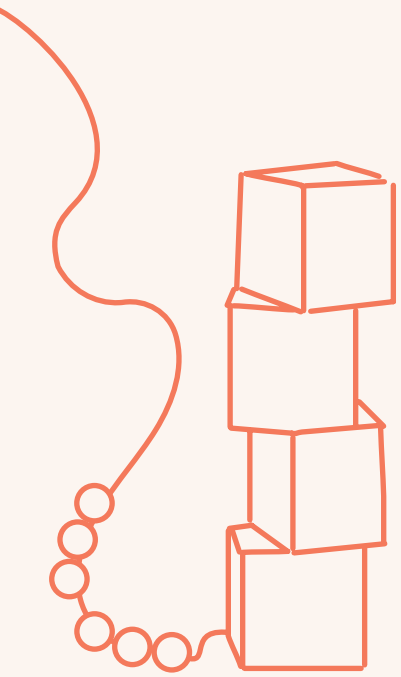
The reduction in tobacco use is a public health success, but it also represents a significant reduction in revenue driven by tobacco sales. As a result, First 5 agency budgets have declined across the state. Consequently, each local First 5 is navigating a transition in order to sustain and possibly grow impact in their community. This has caused a shift toward community decision making and creating the parent and community leadership needed to build durable and responsive systems.

Although Proposition 10 funding in Alameda County has declined by over 50% since 1999, First 5 Alameda has adopted a systems-building approach to address the underlying structural issues and root causes that communities, families, and children face (Exhibit 2). The agency uses funding, partnerships, and advocacy to ensure that families have what they need on the "Road to Kindergarten Readiness" and that systems are prepared to meet the needs of children, families, and communities (Exhibit 3).

First 5 Alameda uses a “place, people, policy” approach and a “whole community, whole family, whole child” framework. This approach is holistic, addressing a multitude of factors affecting the lives of young children, their families and communities, and the providers who care for them (e.g., financial stability, thriving neighborhoods, health, and parent partnership).

As the agency has evolved, so have its practices of centering parents/caregivers and community in program design, technology, and investments. Through participatory processes and human-centered design, the agency seeks to make funding decisions in a way that reflects and is responsive to those most knowledgeable and affected by the existing conditions. Lastly, First 5 Alameda leans strongly into policy advocacy to expand the impact of early childhood investments in a sustainable, integrated manner. The agency believes in using data for action; this includes data on needs, assets, and impact for continuous learning. It also relies on data and evaluations, in partnership with communities, to inform its investments, programmatic approach, and policy decisions.

A commitment to data and learning has been a part of First 5 Alameda’s culture from inception, as the voter initiative statewide was committed to demonstrate the use of the tax funding and early investment’s positive impact for communities and families. Examples of this commitment range from reviewing existing data and developing evaluations and data collection for home visiting programs to collecting data on community programs funded by small grants to document their impact and long-term sustainability.



2. Unlocking the Potential for Systems Building in Alameda: From Portrait to Landscape

"Our aim is to see the early childhood system treated as a public good," First 5 Alameda CEO Kristin Spanos said.

Transitioning to a Systems-Building Approach

While all California First 5s originated with a mandate for systems building, First 5 Alameda was early in undertaking a thorough reassessment of its internal operating model as well as its stance for external partnerships. Its pivot to systems preceded the decline in tobacco tax revenue, creating opportunities for sustainable impact, and it has achieved noteworthy progress in the past decade. This pivot to systems change required new approaches to coordination and integration of parent and community voices, including real-world experience in staffing, among other changes.

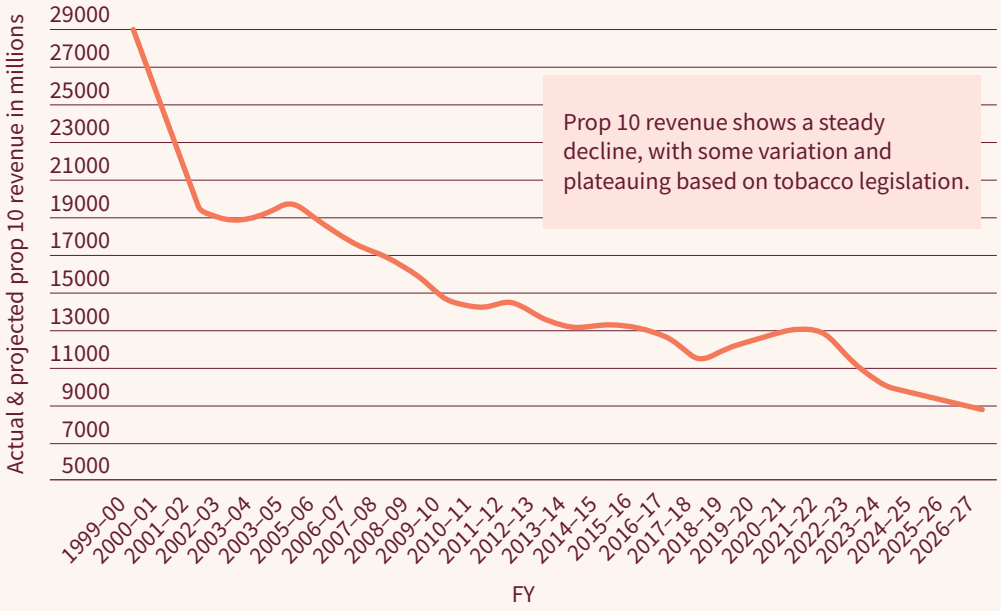
"Our aim is to see the early childhood system treated as a public good," First 5 Alameda CEO Kristin Spanos said. "The central question is how to use public funding to wrap our arms around the system, making it coordinated and organized rather than fragmented and inequitably distributed."



In 2018, despite ranking seventh in Proposition 10 funding statewide, First 5 Alameda had the second-largest staff among First 5 agencies, behind only First 5 Los Angeles. The Commission and Spanos – who became CEO in 2018 after three years as COO – knew this would not be a sustainable staffing level, given the expectation for a continued

decline in Proposition 10 funding (Exhibit 2). Separate from the declining revenue, they had a vision of creating an early childhood system that met the unique needs of all young children and their families and communities.

Exhibit 2:
First 5 Alameda County Proposition 10 Revenue



Source: First 5 Alameda County, Strategic Plan 2022–2027, June 2023

The transition has required several significant shifts, including:

- Revisiting the fundamental purpose and identity of First 5 Alameda
- Conducting a landscape analysis
- Enhancing navigation of the public and private aspects of early childhood systems
- Engaging parent and community voices in decision making
- Evaluating existing competencies and gaps
- Conducting data collection and evaluation
- Evolving approaches to funding and contracting and to internal and external change management

“We have been at the front of the wave nationally around changing early childhood,” said Lisa Forti, First 5 Alameda’s director of planning, “from… portrait to landscape.” For public health and early care and education experts, this refers to a shift in the field: moving on from focusing on the child alone, to also focusing on the experiences and environments that surround them.

Janis Burger, former CEO of First 5 Alameda, acknowledged, “Taking anything to scale was always a challenge in the early childhood system because it is hard to demonstrate impact without scale. You needed buy-in from everybody. In a way, it [Proposition 10] wasn’t enough money. Everybody thought we had all this money, but you couldn’t have taken anything to scale without investment from others.”

Exhibit 3:

Early Childhood System as Defined by First 5 Alameda County

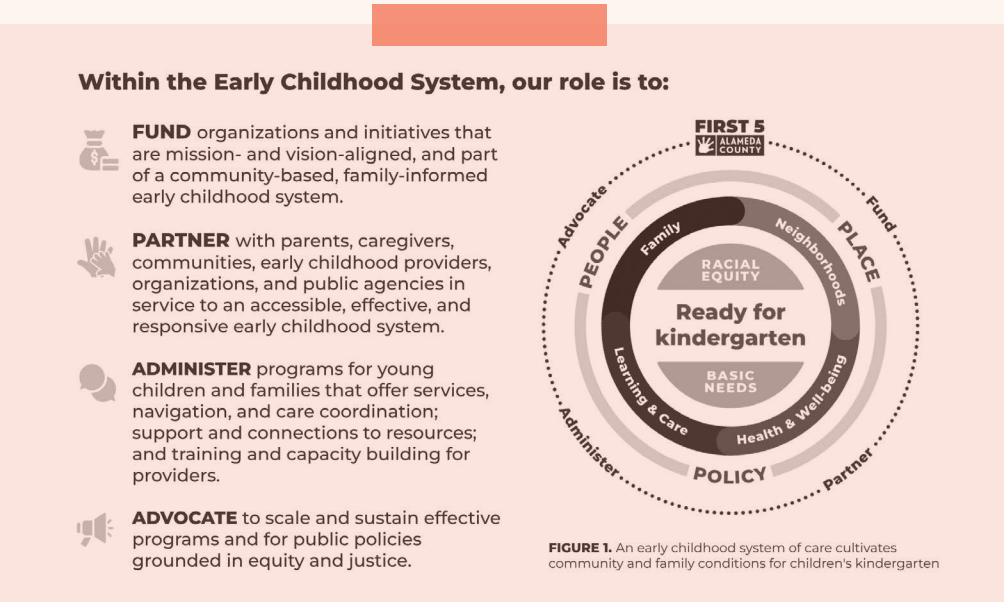


FIGURE 1. An early childhood system of care cultivates community and family conditions for children's kindergarten

Source: First 5 Alameda County, Strategic Plan 2022–2027, June 2023

The agency conducted a thorough landscape analysis to understand the local early childhood landscape, reviewed program impact evaluations, assessed community needs, and identified policy and funding opportunities. Ultimately, the Commission pursued

a systems-building approach. First 5's system building model and vision align with the federal Department of Health and Human Services' definition of the early childhood system,[19] including investments in early care and education, health and well-being, neighborhood and place-based focus, and parent partnership, all in support of school readiness and individual thriving.

With this definition in place, partnership with community fell into place as the agency enacted a strategy of program administration, funding, and policy advocacy aimed at redressing inequities and supporting community conditions that help families and their children.

Systems Building as Defined by Alameda County

In Alameda County, as in most communities in the United States, families must interact with numerous private and public systems to meet their children's needs – for example, when enrolling with a private child care provider or seeking public Medicaid enrollment. Given the intimate nature of relationships between caregivers and their children, these systems have an inherently personal dimension. Therefore, to improve the lives of caregivers and their children, systems building in the county must acknowledge and welcome the coordination of public and private actors. Further, systems building requires understanding the intersection of federal, state, and local systems.

In addition to aligning with the intersecting nature of the public and private sectors, integrating parent, provider, and community voices into programming drives First 5 Alameda's systems-building work. Similarly, First 5 Alameda needed to adopt a decision-making

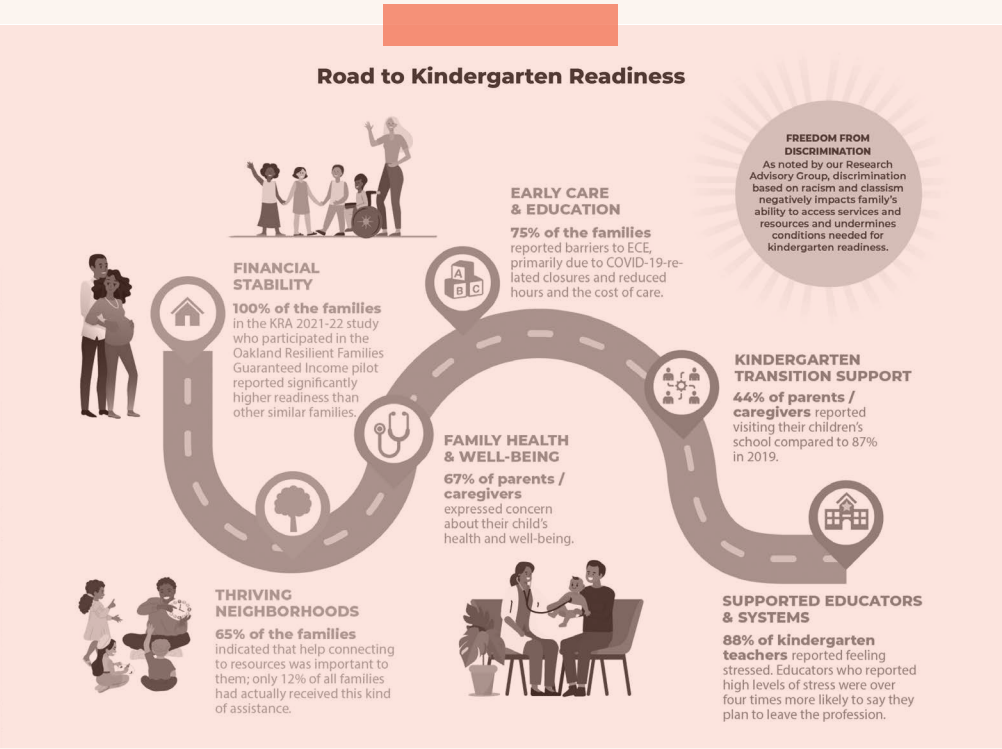
19 National Institute for Children's Health Quality (NICHQ), "Parents know best: Strategies to engage families in early childhood systems change," https://nichq.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/ParentsKnowBest-v2.pdf

approach that was consistent and fair as well as sufficiently responsive to that parent and community voice.

“When you get end users involved,” said Dan Tuttle, director of health programs with the Stupski Foundation, “you get better feedback because parents and caregivers can speak to how something has affected their relationship with their child or the child themselves.”

Plotting the path to systems building also required adding to the existing competencies of the organization, as well as evolving the organization’s allocation of organizational resources and administrative practice. At every step along the way, it has been necessary to utilize the expertise of both in-house and outsourced services and to bolster the analytic expertise necessary for system building and the administration of large amounts of public funding while remaining adaptable.

Exhibit 4:
First 5 Alameda County Roadmap to Kindergarten Readiness 2021–2022



Source: First 5 Alameda County, Strategic Plan 2022–2027, June 2023

Sondra Aguilera, chief academic officer for Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), has been closely involved in expanding capacity and building relationships which are more responsive to the community. While it might not seem immediately obvious, flexibility in contracting is essential to community responsiveness. She said about flexibility in contracting:

> **“The multi-year contract is a win because it allows fewer starts and stops (in community-based programs) between years. There has also been a better understanding and alignment of systems across the city in addition to increasing [child care] seats.”**

Furthering agency capacity and staff skills in community responsiveness and flexibility, the agency has removed educational requirements for hiring and now recognizes lived and professional experiences as commensurate with certifications and degrees. It has also expanded staff capacity both in hiring for experience and by providing professional development opportunities in participatory facilitation, project management, data analytics, and strategic communication skills to expand organizational ability to solicit community recommendations, partner with community and public systems, position for additional revenue, and administer and execute a responsive vision.

In the words of Kimi Watkins-Tartt, director of the Alameda County Public Health Department and First 5 Alameda Commissioner, “There are a whole host of people around a child. Children are not raising themselves. Communities are raising them.” Alameda First 5 was remaking itself to be able to be responsive to those communities while acting as the backbone for systems creation and change.

The shift began with asking fundamental questions about First 5 Alameda's identity:

- Could the agency evolve to more readily address structural issues and socioeconomic factors affecting community conditions?
- Should it become more like a grantmaking foundation, or could the agency secure new funding to evolve and grow the programming cultivated over nearly 20 years?
- What if the predicted results failed to materialize in time to bring political leaders and others along with systems change?

In addition, difficult questions about data included:

- What story is being told, and who gets to decide?
- What if change was apparent to the community but not measurable according to the funders' criteria?

In addition to wrestling with internal change management, the shifts in program and availability of additional revenue also required an understanding of the existing early childhood programming and available resources. Financial modeling, public finance, and the local political landscape became increasingly more important. The agency has also invested in enhanced staff development and training as well as opportunities to enhance such technical skills as business writing and proficiency with emerging technology like AI. It has also partnered with several consultants to support alignment, effective change management, and hiring. Below are two examples of the emerging opportunities for community impact which were created, in part, thanks to these organizational changes within First 5 Alameda – one focused on maximizing public funding and the other focused on community responsiveness through neighborhood or place-based investments.

An Example of Sustaining and Scaling Effective Programming: Repositioning Help Me Grow

First 5 Alameda has leveraged the expertise of its influential Commission and the perspectives of well-established partners, shifting power toward community engagement and parent leadership.

First 5 Alameda's relationships with public systems leaders and community-based organizations are central to systems building in the county. As First 5 Alameda has leveraged the expertise of its influential Commission and the perspectives of well-established partners, it has made strides toward systems building, shifting power toward community engagement and parent leadership.

Help Me Grow, a pediatric care coordination program that includes a parent helpline, provider resources, and developmental screening, is one example of a program that Alameda County was able to scale creatively. Help Me Grow was launched in 1997 in Connecticut and now operates in 28 affiliate states. The program helps communities identify existing resources and make the most of existing opportunities to provide ongoing support for children.[20]

To sustain Help Me Grow in Alameda County, the First 5 Alameda leadership seized upon this opportunity to engage system leaders with the budget and motivation to support the programs. Through research into the Social Security Act, First 5 Alameda determined that Help Me Grow activities and services were covered by entitlement dollars through Medi-Cal's Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment program. First 5 Alameda presented an overview of Help Me Grow to Alameda Alliance for Health, Alameda County Health Care Services, Alameda Social Services, and hospital systems. The leaders of these health systems were previously unaware of this vital part of Alameda County's social safety net, which made First 5 Alameda pivotal in getting Medi-Cal funding to support the program. These changes were happening at a time when – thanks to significant

20 Help Me Grow National Center. Help Me Grow systems model. https://helpmegrownational.org/hmg-system-model

organizing, advocacy, and public leadership statewide – Medi-Cal reform was underway, supporting changes in its uses.

After 15 years of administration, First 5 Alameda strategically positioned Help Me Grow as a critical function in the county's pediatric health care system. This positioning helped make the case for why the county's Medi-Cal managed care plans should invest in the program - to support its ability to scale so it can serve every Medi-Cal family that needs its services. Garnering support from Alameda's primary managed care plan for Medi-Cal participants, Alameda Alliance for Health, was a particular challenge, as insurance providers prioritize costly high utilizers such as older adults or adults with severe behavioral health disorders and chronic conditions. This created a gap in incentives for plan managers to increase investments in preventative services for their younger members. Doing so would generate savings that could be used to fund overages in caring for more expensive, older populations.

The push for transitioning Help Me Grow to alternative funders coincided with the January 2022 launch of California's Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal (CalAIM) program. CalAIM enhances the Medi-Cal system to better serve beneficiaries. By addressing social determinants of health, expanding access to services, and utilizing data-driven population health management, CalAIM is designed to improve health outcomes and promote health equity.[21]

To support the case for transitioning Help Me Grow, First 5 Alameda presented several analyses to potential funders demonstrating that children enrolled in the program and insured through Alameda Alliance for Health's Medi-Cal plan benefited from early intervention. For example, children received developmental diagnoses an average of two years earlier than those who had not been served by Help Me Grow. The advantage of early screening and identification

21 California Department of Health Care Services. CalAIM: Transforming Medi-Cal. California Department of Health Care Service. www.dhcs.ca.gov/calaim

is particularly beneficial for young children with autism, who are more likely to meet later developmental milestones if they begin receiving services earlier.

First 5 Alameda leadership leveraged the agency's relationships with the county's Board of Supervisors and Alameda Alliance for Health to move from analytics to political and moral arguments. First 5 Alameda articulated the connection of investing in early development screening through Help Me Grow to the system leaders' shared visions of equity for the county. It highlighted the fact that there had been no recent investments in Alameda County children by the health plan provider. Children accounted for nearly 40% of Alameda's Medi-Cal population but only about 13% of the costs. Through this intensive pitching process, First 5 Alameda secured an initial commitment of $1.4 million in annual funding from Alameda Alliance for Health to help administer Help Me Grow.

The Stupski Foundation provided funding for the creation of a new director of pediatric care coordination who would oversee the expanded Help Me Grow program in partnership with Alameda Alliance for Health. Tuttle, the director of health programs at Stupski, said he was drawn into collaboration with First 5 Alameda because of the opportunity to align motivations and benefits for a large system operator like Alameda Alliance for Health, noting, "It turns out that people usually say yes if the ask is for their children, so that's a great thing for children and ends up being a good thing for the parents and insurance companies, too."



Investing in Neighborhoods to Enhance Early Childhood Development: Empowering Communities

These place-based investments go beyond supporting programmatic efforts, creating learnings that can inform future policymaking.

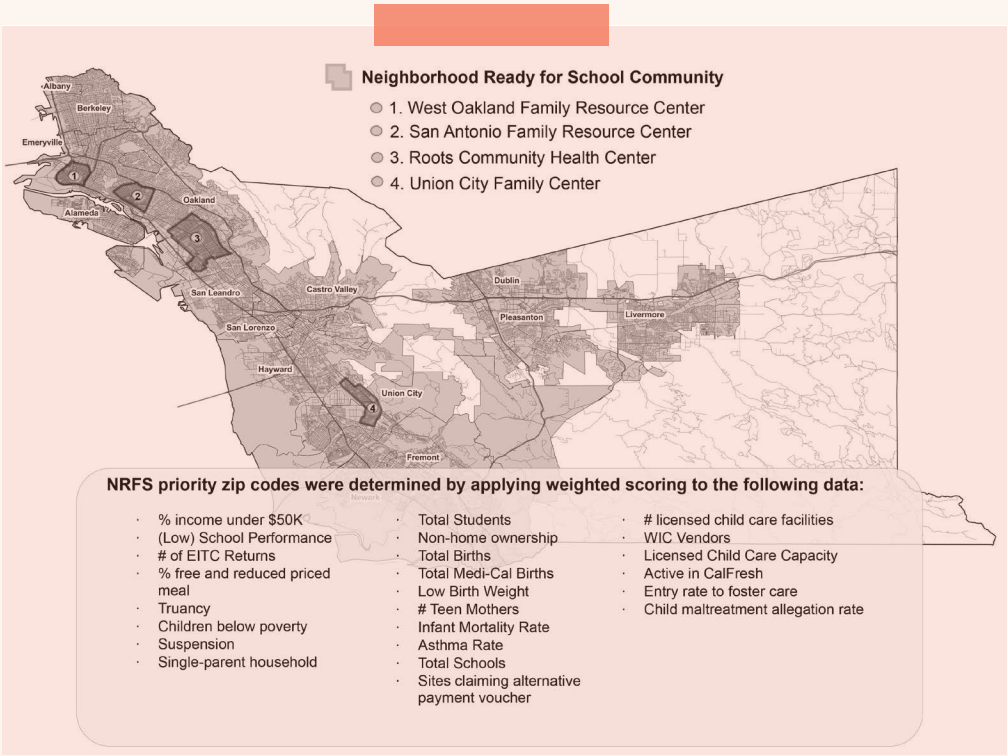
First 5 Alameda launched the Neighborhoods Ready for School (NRFS) initiative to put $3.5 million into communities in 2018. This initiative aligns with the agency's mounting focus on community conditions – like neighborhood walkability, safety, play spaces, and community resources – as a determinant of family well-being and healthy child development. Since then, First 5 Alameda has released an additional $15 million to communities. Four communities were selected, three located in Oakland and the fourth in Union City, based on a comprehensive assessment (Exhibit 5). NRFS allows communities to decide how to invest the awarded funding. Where public funding has historically come with many constraints and directives, the NRFS funding extends the flexible nature of Proposition 10 to communities, as there are no quality requirements set for eligible child care providers and no parenting curriculum imposed on families. These place-based investments go beyond supporting programmatic efforts, creating learnings that can inform future policymaking.

First 5 Alameda had historically engaged in smaller-scale, place-based grants of about $250,000. Still, the shift to significantly increase budget allocations toward multimillion-dollar community-driven work drew even internal scrutiny regarding the agency's ambition. It represented a decisive pivot from typical investments in individual child care and pediatric settings. In addition, leaders and residents of the county had not always been receptive to place-based investments because of the belief that access to the new resources would be limited to a subset of the population.

> **“Historically, people in Oakland were hesitant or even hostile toward place-based investments. There was a learning curve for people to understand that just because you start it in one place does not mean you don’t want to scale it up to all places.”**
>
> Renee Herzfeld, CEO of Community Child Care Council (4Cs) of Alameda County

First 5 Alameda worked with the four NRFS communities on collecting data, articulating priorities, delivering training related to early childhood, and developing capital and programmatic investments in physical infrastructure (e.g., family resource centers). The agency has also supported communities in conducting strategic planning processes to identify their next set of priorities.

Exhibit 5:
Priority Zip Codes in NRFS Request for Proposal and Selected NRFS Sites



Source: First 5 Alameda County, Neighborhoods Ready for School Interim Evaluation Brief, June 2021

One of the NRFS partners, Roots Community Health, operating in Deep East Oakland, embraced the place-based partnership because NRFS enabled Roots to focus exclusively on the “40x40” area (Seminary Avenue to San Leandro border, MacArthur Boulevard to the Bay). Many of the other funding opportunities that were offered to Roots required county- or city-wide reach. Yet the data consistently showed the most dire need for families in Alameda County was in concentrated areas of poverty like Deep East Oakland.

Roots used NRFS funding to establish different points of access for existing resources in Oakland for families living in the 40x40: community health centers, school property, and a community center. The previous closing of the school campus had devastated the community, and it was important for Roots to maintain these physical locations as assets and open the doors even wider. Leveraging the school campuses, Roots partnered with a local community college to teach early childhood certification courses to help with the child care workforce gap.

By advancing place-based strategies in Alameda County, First 5 Alameda has also helped attract more philanthropic funding to the county. Roots has successfully leveraged its investments in the community to lay the groundwork for a more significant investment by Blue Meridian Partners. The unprecedented commitment of $50 million from Blue Meridian Partners requires an equal fundraising match from the local community, and the NRFS investment helped grantees like Roots prepare to engage with larger-scale funders in initiatives by providing an initial evidence base for the impact of the work and governing structures for effective implementation.

3. Building Momentum for Community-Led Ballot Initiatives

Measure AA and Measure C collectively provide an additional $200 million in annual tax revenue for Alameda County's early care and education system.

Statewide investment in First 5 programs through Proposition 10 demonstrated the value of investing in a more integrated early childhood system and laid the groundwork for more substantive investments: Measure AA of Oakland (2018) and Measure C of Alameda County (2020). Together, the ballot measures collectively provide an additional $200 million in annual tax revenue for Alameda County's early care and education system to increase access to care, quality of care, and workforce compensation. These successes came about through decades of mobilization and advocacy by First 5 and its partners and champions, including Alameda County Supervisor Wilma Chan, a founding Commissioner of First 5 Alameda; the Child Care Law Center; Child Care Providers United; and community-led campaigns by Parent Voices Oakland.

Measure AA, the Oakland Children's Initiative

Then-Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf and Congresswoman Barbara Lee's support for Measure AA helped garner resources and support for the citizen's initiative. This 30-year annual parcel tax on single-family homes and multi-unit residences passed in 2018 and supports early education programs in the City of Oakland, prioritizing OUSD and the City of Oakland Head Start. It funds college readiness programs, tuition assistance, and efforts to fix racial inequities in access to higher education, yielding approximately $30 million in annual tax revenue: 62% of the tax revenue is reserved for the Early Education

Fund, 31% for the Oakland Promise Fund (college readiness), and 7% for oversight and accountability (Exhibit 6).[22] Prominent endorsements included Assemblyman (now Attorney General) Rob Bonta, the NAACP, and the SEIU labor union.

After several years of litigation, California courts upheld Measure AA in 2021. Initial progress on Measure AA since the release of funding in 2023 has been promising. A crucial part of the Oakland Children's Initiative has been investment in recruitment to ensure that more families in Oakland are aware of the available programs. OUSD created an additional family navigator position to actively recruit families, inform them about early education options, and help them access available child care slots.

Measure C and Parent Leadership

A 20-year half-percent (0.5%) sales tax in Alameda County raises an estimated $150 million annually to support child care, preschool, early education, and pediatric health care. After two years of community strategizing, Measure C was put forth for a countywide vote in 2020. A community-led initiative conceived independently from the county Board of Supervisors, the measure reserved 20% of the tax revenues for pediatric investments in partnership with UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital of Oakland. Parent Voices Oakland conducted a parent survey to better understand caregiver needs.[23] It passed in 2020, and the community selected First 5 Alameda as administrator of the child care funds.

Notably, the policy establishes a minimum wage floor for child care workers and expands access to child care slots. Measure C also established a Community Advisory Council to develop policy and

22 First 5 Alameda County, Strategic Plan 2022–2027, Appendix C, p. 52, March 2023. www.first5alameda.org/our-work/strategies-initiatives

23 Ibid.

programmatic recommendations that will inform First 5 Alameda's development of a five-year program plan and budget as well as implementation of the Measure C program. Ultimately, First 5 is responsible for creating the Child Care, Preschool, and Early Education Program Plan and Budget, which the First 5 Commission and Alameda County Board of Supervisors both need to approve.

After Measure C passed, it faced a nearly four-year litigation process over claims that it required a two-thirds majority approval rather than a simple majority to pass. This legal battle stalled the release of funds collected since July 2021. However, upon resolution of the litigation, the $500 million held in escrow is finally set to be released to First 5 Alameda.



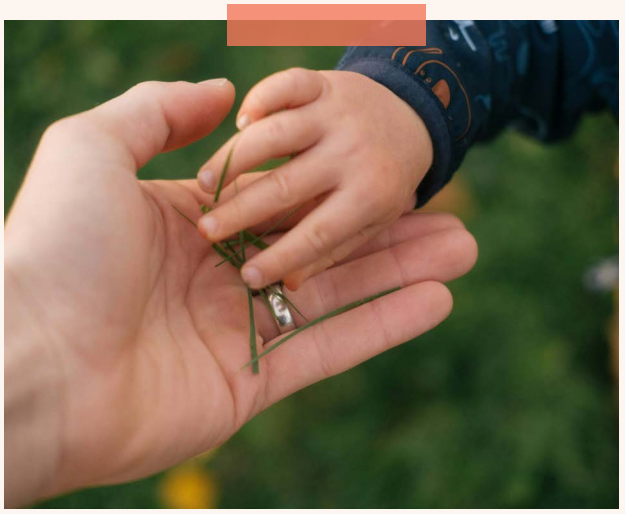


Exhibit 6:
Alameda County Early Childhood Ballot Measures

Geography	City of Oakland	Alameda County
Overview	30-year annual parcel tax of $198 a year on single-family homes and $135 a year per unit of each multi-unit residence Revenues support early child care and preschool programs, and fund college readiness programs, tuition assistance and efforts to fix racial inequities in access to higher education Raises approximately $25-30 million annually with funds divided into three subaccounts: 62% to Early Education Fund $31% to the Oakland Promise Fund 7% for oversight and accountability	A 20-year half percent (0.5%) sales tax that would raise an estimated $150 million per year to provide support and enhancements for child care, preschool, early education, and pediatric health care in Alameda County The funds will be divided 80/20 into two subaccounts: — a Pediatric Health Care Account (20%), overseen by a citizen oversight committee — a Child Care, Preschool and Early Education Account (80%) administered by First 5
Key components	Expand existing public services, first funding priority is to public agencies, particularly programs at Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and Head Start Priority on serving the children of families with the lowest incomes and/or those who are in high need Support families who need Friend, Family and Neighbor (FFN) care Availablility of free or affordable and high-quality early childhood education or preschool 4-year-olds from low-income backgrounds 3-year-olds from low-income families Increase affordability or quality of preschool (not ECE) All 4-year-olds All 3-year-olds Increase the availability and/or quality of child development support services for children from birth through age 3	Increases access to quality care for participating providers through new environments rate enhancements Ensures teacher wages at a minimum of $15 to be increased annually with revenue increases Allows services to 0-12 year-olds, but defines a focus on 0-5 year-olds Targets low-income children/families with the greatest needs, e.g., families experiencing homelessness and children in foster care
First 5's Role as Administrator of Funds	**Contractor with the City of Oakland** — Early Education Implementation Partner — Contracts are on a five-year cycle	**First 5s role as outlined in section 2.08-305.B of the Ordinance** — Developing Program Plan and Annual Expenditure Plan — Allocating funds based on expenditure plan — Developing, implementing, administering, and overseeing all programs and services paid for by Child Care, Preschool, and Early Education account — Providing staff support for the CAC — Developing the program plan evaluation Operating with transparency and public accountability, good fiscal stewardship of public resources; annual audit to ensure compliance — Awarding funds pursuant to out contracting policies and the Ordinance requirements

Governing Bodies and Responsibilities	**Accountability Officer** — Oversee programs and provide recommendations to the Citizens Oversight Commission — Preparing subsequent 5-year guidelines Leading the selection process and contracting for the implementation Partners, making recommendations to the Citizens Oversight Commission — Ensuring independent financial audits — Monitoring performance of Implementation Partners — Oversee external evaluations, including selection	**Alameda County Board of Supervisors (BOS)** — Conducts annual independent audit — Can terminate First 5 and select a different entity as the Administering Agency — Approves Five-Year Program and Budget plans **First 5 Alameda County Commission** — Approves Annual Expenditure Plan — Approves Five-Year Program and Budget Plans
Community-Seated Bodies	**Citizens Oversight Commission (COC)** — Approves (or rejects) City of Oakland staff's recommendation of the Early Education Implementation PArtner — Approves the five-year guidelines for the Early Education funds — Approves or rejects plans, recommendations, audits — Approves or rejects recommmendations; does not develop policy and programmatic recommendations **Oakland City Council** Mayor appoints COC members and council confirms	**Community Advisory Council (CAC)** — Develops policy and programmatic recommendations related to the Measure C account — Fist 5 has not initiated the Program Plan, which must be developed in coordination with the Community Advisory Committee (still to be seated) and community, for approval by the First 5 Alameda County Commission and Board of Supervisors

Source: First 5 Alameda County, Strategic Plan 2022–2027, June 2023

Advocacy in Action: Clarissa Doutherd's Story

First 5 Alameda had been championing such measures for years and was joined by Clarissa Doutherd, executive director of Parent Voices Oakland, who helped mobilize voters for Measure C in Alameda County. Her interest in social justice work, which began in her teenage years, was further fueled by her experiences as a parent in Alameda County. Persistent challenges with managing employment, child care, health care, housing, and transportation revealed to her how interconnected and fragile the systems supporting families can be.

If one part of the system broke down, others were likely to follow. Further, miscommunications between services often compelled repeated visits to multiple safety net agencies during her limited free time, often at a financial loss.

Upon joining Parent Voices Oakland, Doutherd received a list of 6,000 families on a child care voucher waiting list. She was determined to investigate each family's situation, believing that deconstructing and analyzing the list could reveal systemic issues and potential solutions. Doutherd recognized that while immediate resources like child care vouchers might not be available, organizing to change systems and maximizing existing dollars could significantly impact these families. She started making calls to understand their circumstances and the causes of service delays.

While there was much talk about parent voice and engagement, it often aimed at changing parents' behavior rather than transforming systems.

Doutherd believed that meaningful change can only occur with parent leadership. She observed that while there was much talk about parent voice and engagement, it often aimed at changing parents' behavior rather than transforming systems. She created a platform for representatives from various sectors to discuss integrating services and systems for children while developing parent leadership and engaging systems leaders. By inviting the county supervisors' staff to learn about early childhood and to hear directly from constituents, she fostered a broader conversation about the importance of funding and resourcing parent leadership in systems change.

4. Transforming Opportunity into Action: The Road Ahead

From fiscal year 2022 to fiscal year 2025, First 5 Alameda transitioned from managing a $25 million budget to over $200 million annually. These resources, along with other fiscal leverage, enable the evolution of the county's early childhood system. This dramatic increase in budget underscores the trust and confidence placed in First 5 Alameda by the community and county leadership.

As the designated administrator selected by Alameda County's early childhood community-based organizations, First 5 Alameda continues to enhance and reposition its internal capacity to manage the funding. With the agency's "whole community, whole family, whole child" approach, it is scaling the early childhood system while stabilizing the core back-end infrastructure such as finance, human resources, data, technology, and policy. Simultaneously, First 5 Alameda is deeply committed to continuing strong partnerships with other public systems, leaders, organizations, and community members to ensure an equitable process and allocation of funds.



The agency is leveraging Title XIX (Medicaid/Medi-Cal) funding for pediatric early identification programs and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to build and maintain early care and education pathways for the child care workforce through an apprenticeship program.

Through its place-based initiative Neighborhoods Ready for School, First 5 invests flexible Proposition 10 funds into communities that have experienced underinvestment and systemic racism. In addition,

First 5 Alameda helps partners attract philanthropic funding through place-based seed investments.

First 5 Alameda's selection as the administrator of Measure AA and Measure C is a significant opportunity, as the community played a central role in this decision. The agency can scale early care and education programs, direct funds toward areas of early childhood expertise, and leverage its administrative flexibility. Additionally, First 5 Alameda can enhance the necessary infrastructure in data, finance, and human resources to support the evolution of the early childhood system.

Many in Alameda County realize that the magnitude of new, local child care funding available for early childhood services is equivalent to that of some state budgets, making implementation at the county level particularly challenging within the complicated local ecosystem of governmental, private, and community-based players. This realization underscores the concerns of First 5 Alameda's leadership about the public's and elected officials' understanding of the fragmented nature of early care and education and the complexities of supporting such a system.

The sense of urgency to disburse funds quickly, despite a year of planning built into the process, compounds the pressures and complexities of administration. The prolonged litigation has intensified political pressures to move the funding swiftly. Family child care providers, who worked without pause through COVID-19 without hazard pay and who now face enrollment challenges as 4-year-olds move into the public school system (an unintended consequence of California's Transitional Kindergarten implementation), are among the most eager to access the funds. These home-based providers are advocating for better compensation, especially because of their decades of service and advocacy for additional public funding. First 5 Alameda's leadership anticipates that addressing these challenges will require trade-offs regarding the allocation of funds and tough

conversations about the need for systemic change versus maintaining the status quo. Figuring out how funding should be spent involves questioning whether to continue the same investments or to allocate resources differently and gauge the community's appetite for these more systemic changes.

To navigate these complexities, participatory engagement skills have become increasingly essential within First 5's administrative infrastructure. The significant demands on the agency have prompted First 5 Alameda to create four new executive roles: chief of programs, chief of staff, deputy CEO, and chief impact officer. In response to the ongoing adaptation to new demands, the organization is continuing to grow and reevaluate functional areas over the next few years to respond to conditions on the ground and implement administrative best practices (Exhibit 7). Administratively, First 5 Alameda must determine what it will take to implement changes in partnership with the field and community; through the Community Advisory Council, First 5 Alameda will continue seeking to ensure that community input helps to shape community needs and priorities.

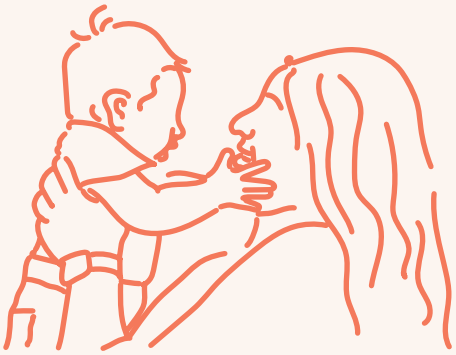
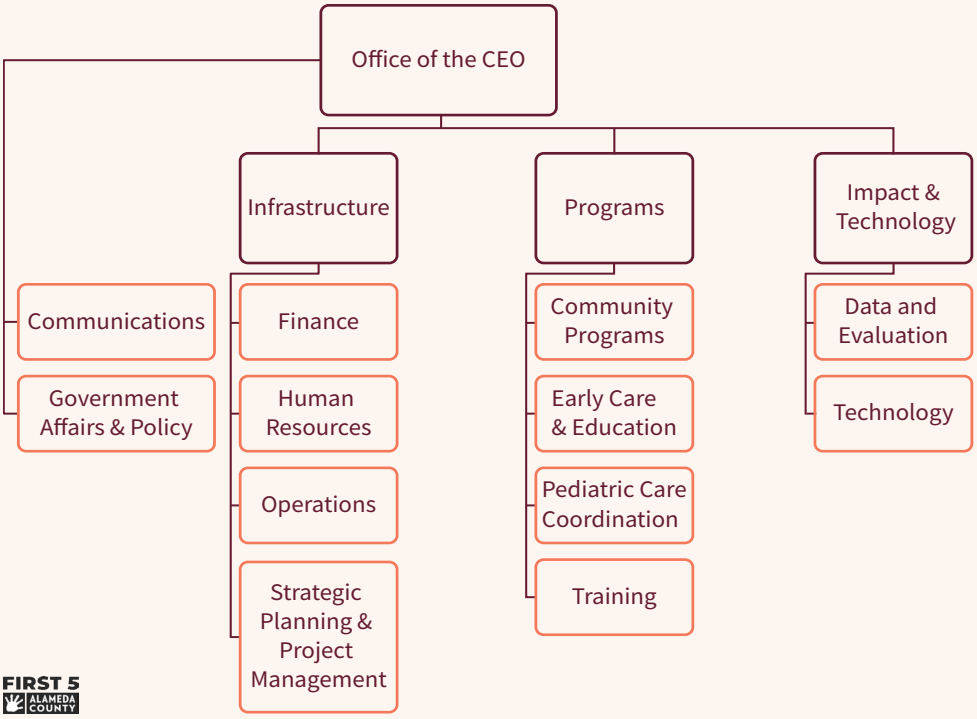


Exhibit 7:
First 5 Alameda County Planned Organization Structure



Source: First 5 Alameda County, Spring 2025

First 5 Alameda leadership is optimistic that as the capabilities of the county's more connected ecosystem mature, the focus of administering the funding will shift toward creating structures and planning parameters that center on a clearer vision for the future state of the ecosystem. This will involve moving away from administrative and tactical items to concentrating on content, analyzing data, and assessing impact. The agency expects these efforts to be part of the collective conversation needed to drive meaningful change in the early childhood ecosystem, ensuring the effective use of extraordinary funding to support comprehensive, community-aligned, and sustained improvements.

Conclusion

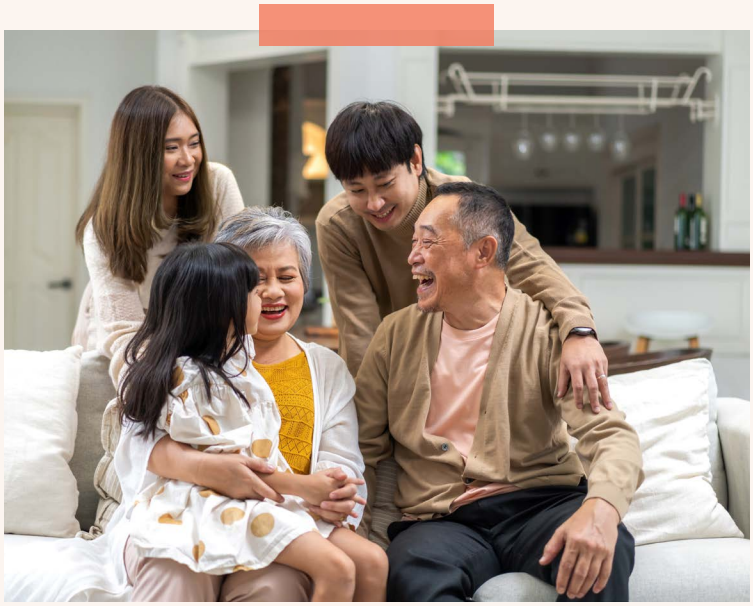
First 5 Alameda's evolving systems-building work demonstrates how comprehensive, innovative, and community-aligned strategies accelerate the connection and enhancement of local early childhood systems. Beginning with the agency's internal alignment on prioritizing systems building amid declining revenue, First 5 Alameda has evolved its capabilities to focus on investing in neighborhood conditions, leveraging data, policy, and fiscal expertise to advocate for systems change, and intentionally integrating community voices into program design, interpretation of data, and decision making.

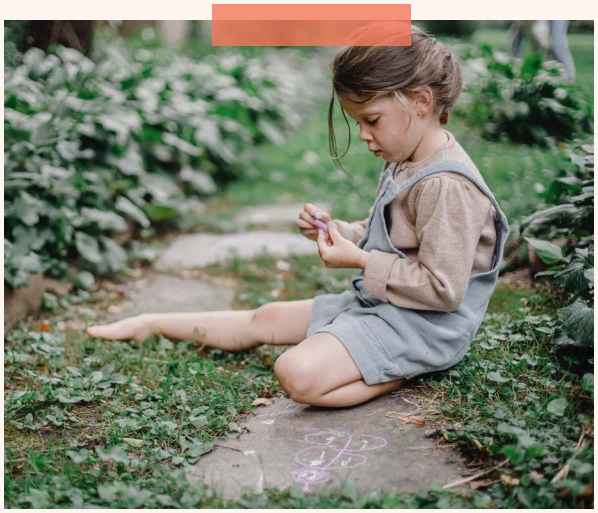
From place-based investments to early developmental screening, strategic pilots seeded larger-scale investments to bridge the gaps in the systems that impact the lives of young children and their families. Understanding the political landscape and funding sources has been critical to evolving and expanding opportunities. Close collaboration with systems leaders and constant mapping of potential partners at all system levels have been essential to aligning and informing investments and policy making.

Ensuring the effectiveness of systems-building efforts requires aligning with public systems and making them responsive to community needs and interests. To honor the self-determination and vulnerability inherent in the relationships between caregivers and children, First 5 Alameda is equipping itself with the skills and human capital needed to gather information from communities and operationalize it effectively.

Still, systems creation and systems change take time. It's not necessarily glamorous work and is often stymied by political winds and pressures. While systems creation efforts in Alameda County have been ongoing for some time, and this case study has documented

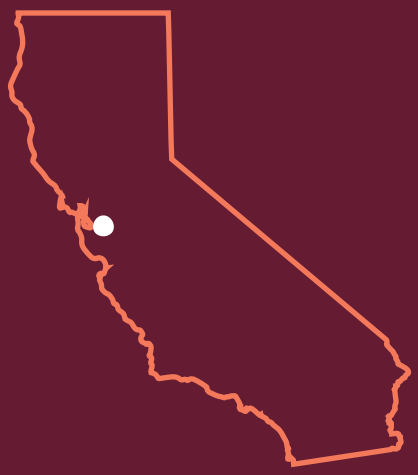
examples of changes made to create improvements, it's not yet known whether these historic efforts will ultimately result in improved child outcomes. Ongoing learning, documentation, and evaluation of direct impacts to children and families are essential, and Alameda First 5 and its partners are preparing both to deploy significant financial resources and to have the technical capacity to evaluate the results of their systems change and leadership. As the agency strengthens this capability and collaborates with key systems leaders, it gives communities more authentic opportunities to support every child's holistic development and thriving.





Acknowledgments

Alameda County .



The Stanford Center on Early Childhood would like to acknowledge collaborators from Alameda County, including Kristin Spanos, Dan Tuttle, Dr. Sondra Aguilera, Janis Burger, Kimi Watkins-Tartt, Renee Herzfeld, and Clarissa Doutherd.

The SCEC further acknowledges Ashleigh Panoo for editing and project management, Mark Swartz for writing and editing, Alessia Morales for support in the development of the SCEC case study approach, and Abigail Stewart-Kahn for leading the development of the case study approach and the SCEC's first case study.

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Suggested citation: Myers, K. & Stanford Center on Early Childhood (2025). Strengthening Foundations: Advancing Early Childhood Systems in Alameda County (Case Study). Stanford Center on Early Childhood, Stanford University. https://earlychildhood.stanford.edu/case-study-alameda