

EVALUATION, MANAGEMENT, AND TRAINING ASSOCIATES, INC.

First 5 Kings County Annual Evaluation

Fiscal Year 2022-2023

Prepared for:

First 5 Kings County Children and
Families Commission

330 Campus Drive

Hanford, CA 93230



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First 5 Kings County Commission Investments in Child Health, Early Learning and Family Strengthening

Introduction

The California Children and Families First Act, also known as Proposition 10, was approved by California voters in 1998 to impose a 50-cent retail sales tax on the purchase of cigarettes and other tobacco products sold in the state. Tobacco tax revenues fund investments in early learning, health, and family development for children 0-5 years of age. The act established the First 5 California state commission and local commissions in each of the 58 counties to oversee the expenditure of funding by directing tax dollars to early childhood programs and services in the community and monitoring program accountability.

Within Kings County, the vision of First 5 is that “all Kings County families receive access to the tools, knowledge and quality care necessary to encourage each child to develop to their fullest potential.” First 5 Kings County is working to achieve this vision by directing resources to funded partners in the community who provide direct child and family services, support workforce development, and enhance early childhood systems of care.

First 5 Kings County engages in strategic planning every five years to assess local community needs and to direct Commission investments to priority areas. The Strategic Plan outlines the Commission’s strategic focus, implementation approach, financial plans, and evaluation methods for ensuring program accountability and best practices. The five-year plan is guided by a state framework that targets outcomes in the following four strategic result areas:

- **Improved Child Health: Healthy Children**
- **Improved Child Development: Children Learning and Ready for School**
- **Improved Family Functioning: Strong Families**
- **Improved Systems: Integrated, Consumer Oriented, Accessible Services**

The strategic plan guides the achievement of results through School Readiness, Family Resource Center (FRC), Early Care and Education (E3), and New Projects Initiatives.

School Readiness Initiative

The School Readiness Initiative supports a system of early childhood services to prepare children for entry into kindergarten. As part of its school readiness strategy, the Commission allocated \$417,810 in FY 2022-23 to support two programs for children at risk for developmental concerns. Funded programs include the Parent & Me and Special Needs Project offered through United Cerebral Palsy of Central California (UCP).

Family Resource Center (FRC) Initiative

The FRC Initiative funds place-based community centers that serve as a single access point to early childhood education, health, and family services, resources, and supports. The Commission allocated \$599,461 in funding in FY 2022-23 to support FRCs across the communities of Corcoran, Hanford, Kettleman City, and Lemoore. Funding allocated for the community of Avenal is currently unutilized.

Early Care and Education (E3) Initiative

The E3 Initiative promotes workforce development to increase the quality of center-based preschools, family day care centers, and home visiting programs. The E3 Initiative was allocated \$85,834 in FY 2022-23 to support components of the Kings County Office of Education’s Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Academic Standards (CARES) program. Funds are used to provide coaching, technical assistance, and training services for early childhood education (ECE) providers.

New Projects Initiative

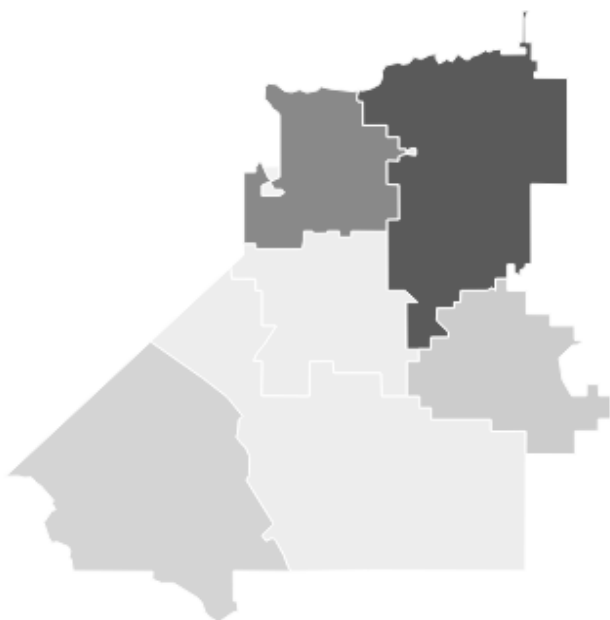
The New Projects Initiative invests in new or innovative strategies that benefit children, families, and systems of care. For FY 2022-23, the Commission invested \$38,000 in funding to support development of the Kings County Referral Exchange System on the Unite Us platform to promote service coordination across partners.

Evaluation Method

Local First 5 commissions must collect and analyze evaluation data and report findings to the state annually for performance monitoring and accountability purposes. To support measurement of results, the First 5 Kings County Strategic Plan identifies goals, objectives, and result indicators within each of its four funded initiatives. First 5 Kings County partners with an evaluation firm, EMT Associates, Inc., to evaluate its program investments. The evaluation ensures compliance with state requirements, informs future planning and decision-making, and supports quality improvement efforts.

Kings County Children and Families

Kings County is a small Central Valley county in California bordered by Monterey, Fresno, Kern, and Tulare counties. There are currently 151,018 Kings County residents (CA Department of Finance, 2023). Eighty percent of the population is concentrated in one of four incorporated cities of Avenal (9%), Corcoran (14%), Hanford (39%), or Lemoore (18%). The balance of the population (20%) lives in the unincorporated areas, which includes the small communities of Armona, Home Garden, Kettleman City, and Stratford, and the Lemoore Naval Air Station (4%). The county also encompasses the Santa Rosa Rancheria of the Tachi Yokut Tribe near Lemoore. Approximately 12% of the Kings County population is designated as rural (U.S. Census, 2020).



Based on current population projections (CA Department of Finance, 2023), there are approximately 13,968 Kings County children 0 to 5 years old, including 2,206 infants (16%), 4,585 toddlers (33%), and 7,177 children of preschool or kindergarten age (51%). The U.S. Census indicates that 3,863 family households in Kings County have a child under the age of 6 with an average family size of 3.81 people per household. Forty-eight percent of children live in married family households, 47% live in female-headed, single-parent households, and 5% live in male-headed, single-parent households. An estimated 1,639 children under age 6 live in households headed by a grandparent.



The Kings County population is rich in cultural, ethnic, and language diversity. Forty-nine percent of children are White, 5% are Black, 2% are Asian, 22% are some other race, and 20% are more than one race. Sixty-eight percent of county children are of Hispanic or Latino origin. About 40% of Kings County residents speak a primary language other than English at home, with Spanish as the predominant language.

Kings County family households often face serious economic hardship. About 23 percent of all county children live below poverty. About 22% of the adult population never graduated from high school. Twenty percent of children live in food insecure households and 3% of public school-age children experience homelessness. Hispanic or Latino residents of any race (22%) face income disparities being twice as likely as White, non-Hispanic residents (12%) to live at or below poverty.

The most current data available from the CA Maternal and Infant Health Assessment (MIHA) profiles the characteristics of Kings County mothers with newborn infants. Forty-six percent of new mothers live at or below poverty, 3% lack stable housing, and 17% are food insecure. About 7% are teens 15-19 years of age and 18% never completed high school. Twenty percent of new mothers speak a primary language other than English at home. Similar to patterns in the general population, Hispanic mothers (19%) are far more likely than non-Hispanics (7%) to be uninsured or to experience gaps in coverage, creating additional barriers to accessing needed health care.

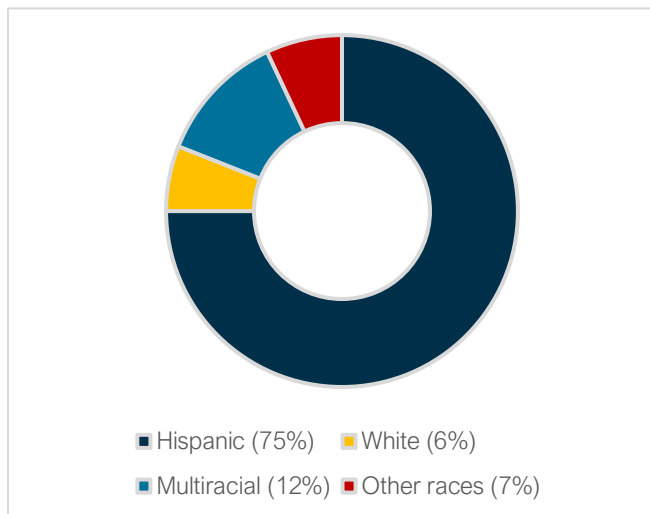
Kings County data also show that many mothers of newborns experience trauma or other personal hardships during pregnancy, such as divorce or separation (9%), job loss (14%), intimate partner violence (8%), or depressive symptoms post-partum (14%). Parenting stress can be a contributing factor to child maltreatment. According to data from the CA Child Welfare Indicators Project, in 2022, 134 children 0 to 5 years of age countywide had a substantiated report of child abuse and 106 children 0-5 were in the foster care system. Adult residents of Kings County living in family households with children also report high rates of exposure to trauma in childhood (20%), known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which are associated with negative physical and behavioral health outcomes.

According to census estimates, only about 12% of Kings County preschool-age children 3 to 4 years of age are enrolled in preschool programs. Childcare demand has historically exceeded the available supply creating a substantial gap in access to quality care. The county has 201 licensed childcare facilities including 39 center-based providers and 162 family childcare homes (2021). Licensed facilities support 3,326 childcare spaces countywide; yet 79% of working families lack access to affordable, licensed childcare spaces. This profile of the Kings County population reveals the challenges facing young children and families and highlights the need for early childhood services to help all children and families thrive.

First 5 Kings County Service Reach

In 2022-23 First 5 Kings County invested in an array of direct services for children, caregivers, and providers to promote access to early care and education, workforce development, school readiness, and family support services benefitting young children and their families. Direct service programs funded under the School Readiness and Family Resource Center initiatives delivered health, early education, and family support services to an estimated 800 children, about 60% of whom were infants and toddlers and 40% of whom were preschool or kindergarten age. This number accounts for about 6% of the 13,968 children 5 years of age and under countywide.

Exhibit 1. Racial or Ethnic Composition of Children Served

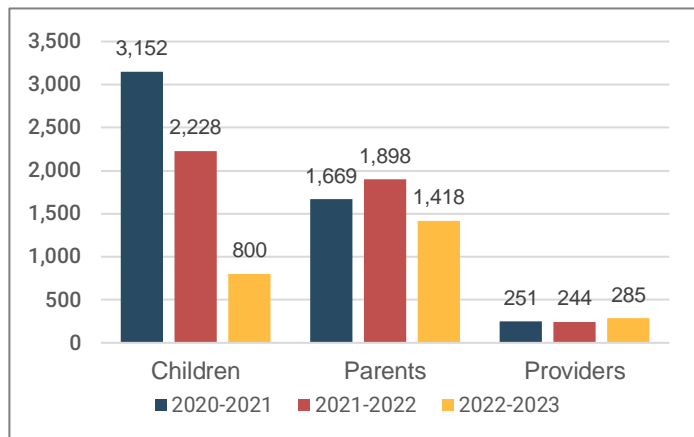


The racial and ethnic composition within the child service population included a mix of Hispanic or Latino (75%), multiracial (12%), and White (6%) children, and children of other or unknown races or ethnic groups (7%). Hispanic or Latino children were slightly overrepresented relative to the larger child population countywide. Almost half of all children served (45%) spoke Spanish as the primary language spoken at home.

First 5 Kings County funded partners also reached 1,418 parents, caregivers, or other family members in FY 2022-23. Parents and caregivers accessed a range of community programs and services, including parent education, parent-child interactive programs, and other coordinated services available through family resource centers. In addition, 753 parents of newborns received New Parent Kits through their hospital. First 5 Kings County additionally reached 285 members of the ECE workforce who benefitted from coaching and professional development opportunities aimed at enhancing the quality of ECE settings and promoting provider effectiveness in working with children with special needs.

First 5 Kings County funded partners reached 800 children and 1,418 parents and caregivers in FY 2022-2023.

Exhibit 2. Trends in Program Reach: 2020-21 – 2022-23



The 2022-23 fiscal year marked the third year in the five-year time frame covered under the 2020–2025 Strategic Plan. Funded partners experienced a 5% decrease in program budgets from the previous year to adjust for continuing declines in tobacco tax revenues. Despite reductions in their program allocations, funded partners worked to maintain service levels and minimize disruptions to service. The largest decline in the number of children reached was attributable to the discontinuation of kindergarten readiness activities. Since the 2021-22 fiscal year, the number of parents and caregivers reached through First 5 programs decreased by 15%. By comparison, the number of providers accessing workforce development opportunities has increased by 14% since FY 2021-22.

Data Limitations

The First 5 Kings County evaluation approach is guided by the 2021-2025 Strategic Plan, which allocates public resources to fund community-based early childhood programs and services. The strategic plan contains a results matrix that identifies performance indicators for each initiative to measure the achievement of strategic results. Performance indicators are framed as targeted increases in service outputs from year to year as the basis for determining program success. The strategic plan acknowledges the declining trend in revenue and Commission funding that has occurred over time. This is due both to a newly enacted federal tobacco tax and reductions in tobacco use statewide that affect the revenue base. The decline in funding, combined with escalating program costs, may continue to require funded partners to reduce scale, limiting their capacity to achieve targeted increases.

The other important limitation of the evaluation approach is that counts of children, parents, and providers reached through First 5 Kings County funded programs are duplicative, meaning that funded partners track individual participants within programs, but cannot account for duplicate enrollment across multiple funded partners and activities. This factor potentially inflates the actual number of children and families served and fails to embrace systems integration that is a goal of the five-year strategic plan.

The California Children and Families Commission also requires counties to track unduplicated participants across multiple funded partners to create a more accurate accounting of program reach. First 5 program staff continue to explore alternative options for low-cost data applications that would allow for more robust and longitudinal tracking of service utilization and child and family outcomes over time. This represents a critical next step for performance measurement and reporting, which could enhance the overall value of evaluation activities.

Structure of the Report

The next sections of the report detail child and family participation in First 5 funded programs and services delivered during the 2022-23 fiscal year. The report presents a data snapshot for each of the core funded programs and initiatives. The report concludes with a summary of findings related to the overall status of program implementation and recommendations for future efforts in monitoring and performance assessment.

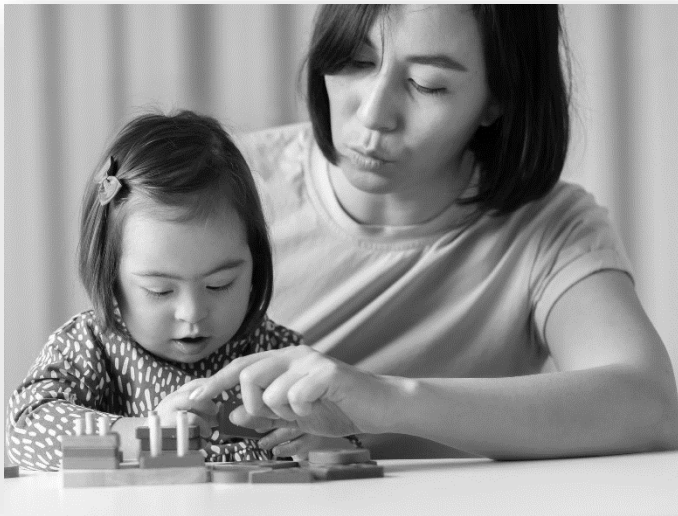
UCP Parent & Me and Special Needs Project

Funded Programs

First 5 Kings County partners with United Cerebral Palsy (UCP) of Central California to implement two early childhood education programs for children who may have special developmental needs. This includes children with a known disability, health, or mental condition requiring specialized services or support, or children with suspected delays who may need support or monitoring. The UCP programs aim to promote equitable access to quality early learning programs for all children by addressing gaps in systems of care for children with mild to moderate delays who are ineligible for other special developmental services.

Services for Children with Special Needs

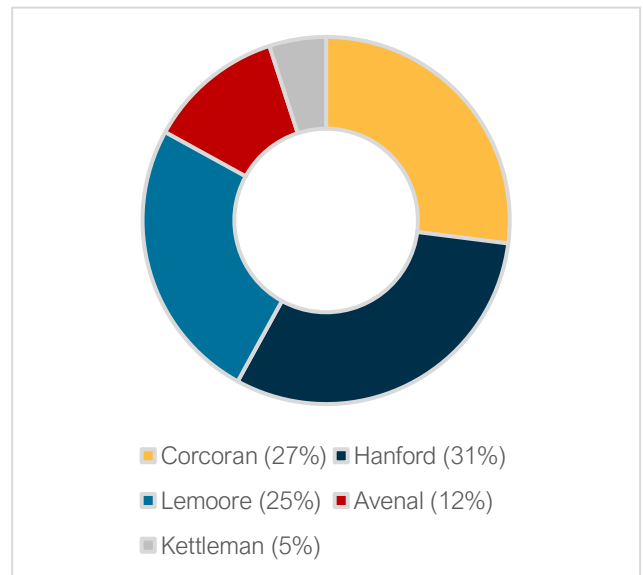
In FY 2022-23 UCP was awarded \$85,500 in funding for the Special Needs Project. The project offers classroom-based support to ECE providers and provides screening, intervention, and follow-up for children with developmental delays. The project provided interventions to 64 children in 2022-23 compared to 118 children served in the previous year. This constitutes a 46% decrease in service reach. All children supported through the Special Needs Project were 0–3 years of age. UCP staff also provided coaching to 113 ECE providers in classroom settings and provided support to 19 special needs children in Parent & Me classrooms as part of its inclusion program with Early Start.



Parent & Me Early Education Programming

UCP also received \$332,310 in funding to implement the Parent & Me interactive, curriculum-based early education program for parents and their children. Parent & Me programs served 167 children across 5 sites in the communities of Avenal (12%), Corcoran (27%), Hanford (31%), Kettleman City (5%), and Lemoore (25%). Parent & Me sites offered 1,174 interactive, parent education and support sessions reaching 145 parents or caregivers in 2022-23. UCP also conducted developmental screenings with 142 children using the Hawaii Early Learning Profile (HELP).

Exhibit 3. Children Served by Program Location (n=167)



Parent & Me was one of several programs that were considerably impacted by reductions in funding this fiscal year. UCP opted to downsize by adjusting operating schedules to a 10-month year. This resulted in a 20% decrease in the number of children served as compared to the previous fiscal year.

Kings United Way Referral Exchange Program

Funded Programs

The First 5 Kings County Commission awarded \$38,000 in funding to Kings United Way (KUW) to support the continuing development of the Kings County Referral Exchange. The Referral Exchange connects county and regional government agencies, healthcare providers, and community organizations through the Unite Us technology platform as part of a countywide network of care. The platform provides a secure, closed-loop electronic referral system that allows providers to refer clients to local services and track outcomes of referrals and services that are delivered across partnering agencies.

Community Outreach, Engagement, and Support

KUW provided direct outreach to the community to recruit prospective partners to the Unite Us platform, onboard new member organizations, and deliver training and technical support to facilitate participation.

In FY 2022-23, the Referral Exchange grew to support 36 active user organizations including representatives from the healthcare, education, and social service sectors. Specific accomplishments reported for FY 2022-23 included the following:

- Provided capacity-building support to 15 community organizations to facilitate their participation on the platform.
- Conducted training or provided educational materials to medical providers and other stakeholders on the availability of resources in Kings County.
- Onboarded 16 providers who focus on services for special needs children 0-5 years of age.
- Supported 17 organizations that provide access to early care, education, and buffering resources.
- Supported 15 providers that offer access to school readiness resources and increase family literacy.

Continuing Challenges and Implementation Barriers

Throughout the development of the Referral Exchange, KUW encountered barriers that limited widescale adoption. These barriers included difficulty engaging organizational leaders who had the requisite decision-making authority to commit to the platform, challenges generating buy-in across large organizations, concerns over data sharing and privacy protections, and challenges reaching the necessary threshold for participation among community organizations that was needed to demonstrate the platform's value.

During the 2022-2023 fiscal year, Unite Us informed KUW that it was restricting KUW's access and ability to demo the platform to prospective partners and would not be releasing county stakeholder data. This severely limited KUW's capacity to recruit new organizations and for organizations to realize the benefits of participation. While KUW remains committed to the concept of a shared, electronic referral system, they have decided to no longer pursue development of the Unite Us platform. KUW has since revised its scope of work and amended the terms of its agreement with First 5. The new scope of work will be launched beginning in 2024 of the 2023-24 fiscal year.



Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Academic Standards

Funded Programs

The Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Academic Standards (CARES) program is a component of the larger Kings County Cares About Quality (KCCAQ) initiative, implemented by the Kings County Office of Education (KCOE). KCCAQ is a countywide early education initiative that aims to promote children's access to quality ECE experiences. Early childhood education access can be measured on several dimensions, including reasonableness of effort to secure ECE spaces, equity, affordability, and the ability of programs to support the child's development and meet the needs of parents.

The CARES program focuses on providing workforce development opportunities, support, and incentives to ECE programs and providers as a mechanism to improve program quality. Services included reviews of personal growth plans, assistance with permit applications and higher education access, and provision of training, coaching, and mentoring.

Participant or Organization Level Services

For the 2022-23 fiscal year, the CARES project used First 5 funding to deliver direct services to 172 CARES participants. Participants included providers from licensed childcare centers and preschools, home visitation programs, Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) providers, and Family Resource Center staff. Specific accomplishments included the following:

- Provision of direct technical assistance to 146 CARES participants, including reviewing personal growth plans, assisting with permit applications and access to higher education, and providing coaching and mentoring.
- Provided resource assistance to 266 providers including classroom assessment implementation materials, check-out materials, and computer access
- Purchased a new data system to store, manage, and analyze information supporting early childhood quality measurement.



Coordinated Services

The CARES program established and distributed a countywide training calendar for ECE professionals that was posted on the CARES and First 5 websites and distributed to community partners and CARES participants by email. The ECE training calendar was distributed to 3,416 recipients throughout the program year, far surpassing the number of providers targeted for dissemination. Staff also collaborated with the local Resource & Referral program to offer specialized training to 12 ECE providers supporting workforce development goals. CARES consultants also hosted Inclusion Community of Practice groups throughout the year and continued to sponsor a Home Visitation Professional Learning Community (PLC) to support home visiting staff.

Quality Improvement Activities

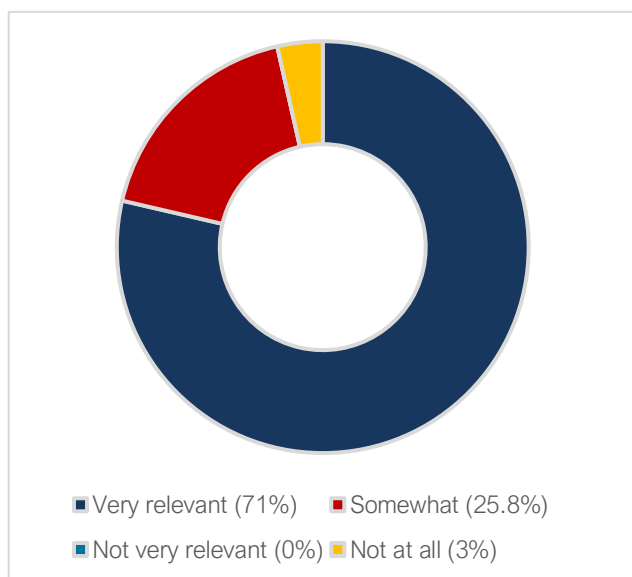
For the 2022-23 program year, KCOE offered professional growth training and materials support to 20 providers in response to needs identified through the assessment process. Staff also provided coaching to 62 Family Child Care (FCC) providers and provided stipends and materials to 51 participants.

Provider Feedback

To learn more about the experiences of ECE providers who accessed services through the CARES program, providers were invited to participate in a voluntary survey administered in June 2023. Providers completed the survey electronically in either Spanish or English. Thirty-five CARES participants responded.

Providers were first asked to consider how actively involved they were in the CARES program during the 2022-23 fiscal year. More than 80% of respondents indicated that they were either 'very active' or 'somewhat active'. Participants were also asked to gauge how relevant they felt the selection of professional development topics had been with regard to meeting their professional development needs. Ninety-seven percent of respondents stated that topics were either 'somewhat' or 'very relevant' to the needs of their professional roles. These findings suggest a relatively high level of engagement among survey respondents.

Exhibit 4. **Provider Ratings of the Relevance of Professional Development Opportunities** (n=35)



CARES providers were next asked to rate the value of different learning opportunity formats that were available to them through the CARES program. Not all CARES participants were eligible to participate in the same program offerings. The components that were most widely accessed included in-person training events or workshops (97%) and monthly newsletters (97%).

Of those who accessed each listed professional development type:

- 100% indicated that coaching and mentoring and assistance with permit applications or access to higher education were 'very useful' or at least 'somewhat useful.'
- 96% indicated that in-person training events or workshops, reviews of personal growth plans, access to resources and materials, and monthly newsletters were 'very useful' or at least 'somewhat useful.'

Virtual training events or webinars (92%) and Professional Learning Communities (90%) were perceived to be slightly less useful relative to other program offerings.

CARES providers were also asked to share feedback on the perceived impact of workforce development opportunities. Among respondents:

- 100% indicated that they were able to manage their classroom or childcare settings more effectively and apply new teaching strategies.
- 96% believed that the children in their care had shown greater developmental gains and improvements in social and emotional development as the result of CARES workforce development activities.
- 96% believed that they had become more effective as an ECE teacher or childcare provider.
- 93% reported that they had improved the physical environment of their child care setting, had strengthened the quality of interactions with children in their care, or had become more confident in their teaching or caregiving abilities.

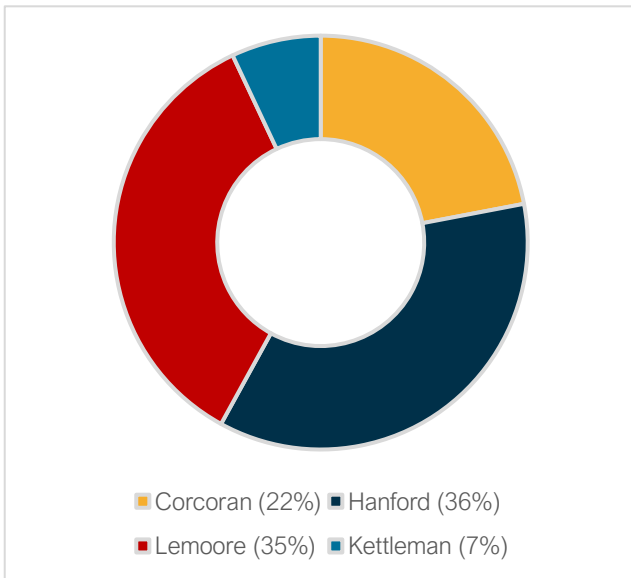
Recognizing that a key goal of the CARES program model is to promote retention in the larger ECE field, participants were also asked about future career plans and perceived impacts on career development. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of respondents stated that they would 'probably' or 'definitely' be working in the ECE field in the next five years and 94% felt that the CARES program had advanced their early education career at least 'somewhat' or 'very much'.

Family Resource Centers (FRCs)

Funded Programs

The First 5 Commission also continues to support four FRCs serving the communities of Corcoran, Hanford, Kettleman City, and Lemoore. FRCs are place-based collaboratives that provide a single point of access to an array of health, early childhood, and parent support services for children 0 to 5 and their families. The FRCs' goal is to increase children's readiness for school and to provide quality early learning experiences for all children, including those who may lack access to formal preschool opportunities. In 2022-23, FRCs reached 569 children and 520 parents and caregivers and recorded 17,992 total service contacts across centers. This represented a 19% increase in service volume from the previous fiscal year despite reductions in annual budgets.

Exhibit 5. Service Contacts by FRC Location (n=17,992)



The FRCs varied with regard to the size and scope of their budgets, as well as the array of programs and services offered to families. The two largest FRCs in terms of total service volume were Hanford (36%) and Lemoore (35%) followed by Corcoran (22%) and Kettleman City (7%). FRCs recorded an average of 20.7 service contacts per child participant over the course of the program year and 11.4 contacts per caregiver, indicating a high level of engagement among families. The Lemoore (25.7) and Hanford (22.0) FRCs recorded the highest level of engagement per child participant, which may reflect the larger number of service offerings available through these two locations.

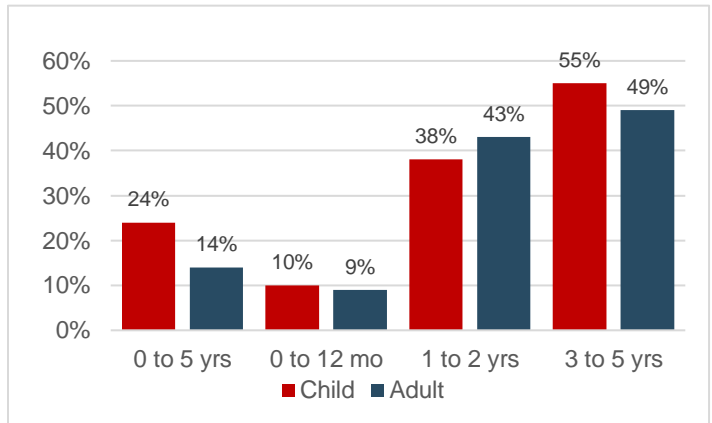
Exhibit 6. Average Number of Service Contacts per Participant

All FRCs	Corcoran	Hanford	Kettleman	Lemoore
Child	19.0	22.0	9.1	25.7
Adult	6.95	14.4	8.2	14.1

Early Childhood Programs

Of the 569 children reached through FRCs countywide, about 52% were infants and toddlers (0-3), and 48% were preschool or kindergarten age. Early childhood programming featured interactive classes for children and their parents or caregivers focusing on art, music, cooking and nutrition, movement, storytelling, and sensory exploration. The number of participants who accessed programs within each age grouping, as a percentage of total participants served, is shown below.

Exhibit 7. Percent of Unduplicated Children and Parents



Home Visiting Services

Kettleman City FRC received funding to offer prenatal and postnatal home visits to families in the Kettleman City service area. The program serves expectant parents and families with young children 0-2 years of age. Home educators conduct both virtual and in-person home visits using the Parents as Teachers (PAT) evidence-based curriculum. Home educators also deliver Raising a Reader bags and educational activity packets to families as an evidence-based strategy to promote early literacy development. In FY2022-23, due to turnover in staffing, the PAT program was temporarily suspended until a new home visitor could be hired and trained. Once new staff were hired, the program was successfully relaunched in FY 2023-24.



Developmental Screenings

First 5 Kings County aims to increase the number of children who receive developmental screenings. There is specific focus on maximizing the number of children screened prior to their 3rd birthday, which is the optimal age for delivering early intervention services to remediate developmental delays. Funded partners screen children using the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) screening tool. For the current fiscal year, funded partners completed 329 screenings. This included 127 screenings conducted through the Hanford Family Connection, 112 screenings conducted through the Lemoore Family Connection, and 90 screenings conducted through the Kettleman City FRC. Eighty-six percent of children (86%) were screened using the English language version of the ASQ and 14% were screened in Spanish.

Fifty-seven percent (57%) of children screened were under the age of 3 and about half of all children screened (49.5%) were identified with at least one area of concern, indicating a potential delay. The percentage of children identified with suspected delays was highest on measures of communication (14.6%), problem solving (13.4%), and personal-social skills (12.2%). Once a suspected delay was identified, children were referred to appropriate services in their communities for further assessment. FRCs made 14 referrals to SELPA, 7 referrals to the UCP Special Needs Project, and 325 referrals to UCP Parent & Me programs in FY 2022-23.

Exhibit 8. Developmental Screening Results (n=329)

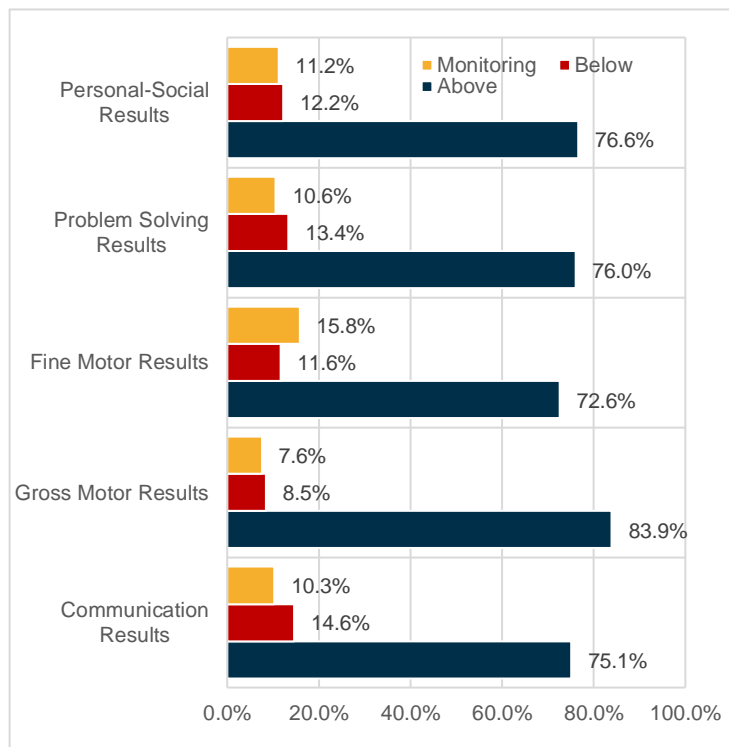
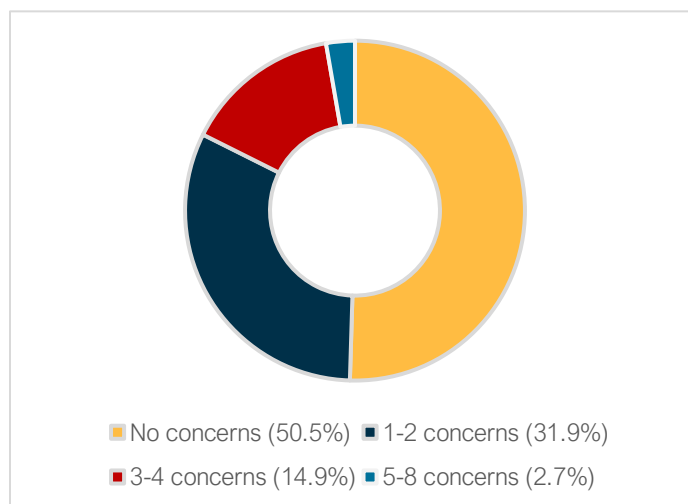


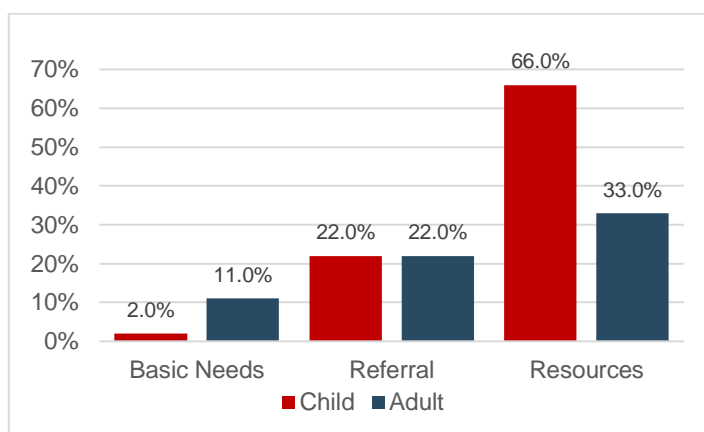
Exhibit 9. Overall Concerns among Children Screened (n=329)



Resource & Referral and Coordinated Services

FRCs offer access to a range of services to address family needs. These include basic needs assistance, such as emergency food and clothing, and other resources available on site, such as translation assistance, book giveaways, incentive closets, and access to office facilities (e.g., fax, phone, copier, computer). Families were also referred to community-based services including preschool and childcare spaces, employment assistance, utilities assistance, legal services, medical services, WIC and special education. FRCs also made 357 referrals to Parent & Me programs. The number of participants who accessed each category of resources is shown below as a percentage of total participants served.

Exhibit 10. Percent of Unduplicated Children and Parents



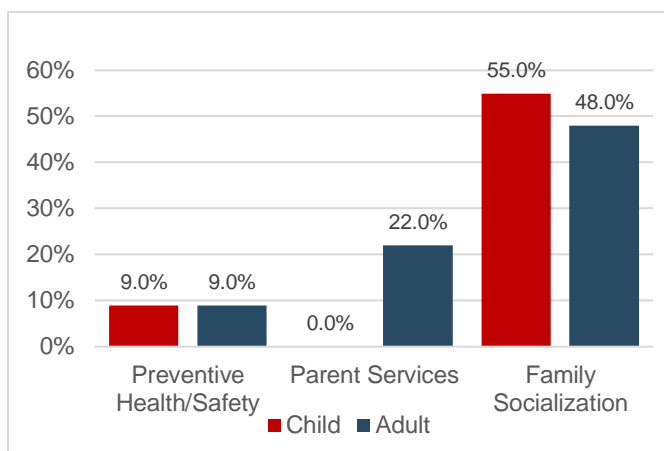
Parent Education and Coordinated Services

FRCs also offered a wide range of educational and support services to benefit parents and other caregivers, including family-centered activities, such as family literacy and socialization events, and parenting education workshops.

FRCs also offered access to a range of services that were co-located at FRC locations and coordinated through partnerships with other community-based providers and agencies. Services included parent education workshops, behavioral health services, food distributions, healthcare enrollment assistance, breastfeeding support, eye exams, car seat installation and safety training, as well as family literacy and socialization activities, and other special events.

Collaborating agencies that partnered with FRCs this fiscal year, included Bank of America, Cal Fresh, Cal Viva, Kings County Action Organization (KCAO), Kings County Behavioral Health, Kingsview Behavioral Health, La Leche League, SNAP ED, and UC Cooperative Extension (UCCE) Kings County.

Exhibit 11. Percent of Unduplicated Children and Parents



Disruption to the Avenal Family Resource Center

Although most FRCs were able to successfully rebound following the COVID-19 pandemic, the Avenal FRC was forced to suspend its operations when the former lead agency chose not to reapply for funding. First 5 has not yet been able to secure a lead agency despite available funding, which has created a gap in early childhood services for the community. First 5 has explored different options for service implementation to close service gaps, which were compounded by the loss of the portable building that had been used to house both UCP and Avenal FRC activities prior to COVID. This represents an ongoing challenge and area of future focus for First 5 staff.

Evaluation Summary

The First 5 Kings County 2022-2023 Annual Evaluation Report details the scope and reach of Commission investments in early education, health, and family support services for Kings County families with young children. The report profiles child and family needs within the community and highlights the efforts of funded partners, working in collaboration with First 5 staff and the Commission, to positively impact the lives of children 0-5 countywide.

The 2022-23 program year was the third year of a five-year strategic plan. Under the five-year plan, the Commission continued to invest in four key strategic initiatives—the School Readiness Initiative, the Family Resource Center Initiative, the Early Care and Education Initiative, and the New Projects Initiative—expending nearly \$1.2 million in contracts with funded partners for the 2022-23 fiscal year. Collectively, funded partners reached 800 children and 1,418 parents and caregivers. These investments supported an array of direct service programs, workforce opportunities, and new infrastructure aimed at improving child health, improving early learning and development, strengthening families, and promoting systems integration.

First 5 Kings County partners documented several key accomplishments from the 2022-23 fiscal year that include the following:

- The UCP Parent & Me and Special Needs programs served a combined total of 231 children who were at risk for developmental delays, filling a critical gap in early childhood systems of care.
- Parent & Me programs screened 142 unduplicated children for developmental delays in 2022-23 and served 19 special needs children in inclusion classrooms where they benefitted from interactions with typically developing children. Parent & Me was significantly impacted by reductions in funding, however, that resulted in a 20% decrease in the number of children served compared to the prior fiscal year.
- FRCs served 569 children and 520 parents and caregivers and recorded 17,992 service contacts countywide. This represented a 19% increase in service volume from the previous fiscal year despite reductions in annual budgets. FRCs provided 20.7 contacts on average per child and 11.4 contacts per parent/caregiver. FRCs continued to offer an array of health, education, childcare, and family support services coordinated with community partners to

expand service offerings. FRCs also screened 329 children for developmental delays. Half of those screened (52%) were under 3 years of age, when early intervention is most effective.

- The Kings United Way used First 5 funds to support the development of the Unite Us referral exchange to establish a countywide network of care. The Referral Exchange supported 36 active user organizations this fiscal year. However, due to ongoing challenges with widespread adoption and more recent restrictions on access to the platform, KUW has determined not to go forward with the platform.
- CARES continued to promote children's access to quality ECE opportunities by providing coaching, technical assistance, and stipends to build the capacity of the ECE workforce. The program reached 172 providers over the course of the 2022-23 program year. Recognizing that a key goal of the CARES program model is to promote retention in the larger ECE field, participants were also asked about future career plans and perceived impacts on career development. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of participants surveyed stated that they would 'probably' or 'definitely' be working in the ECE field in the next five years and 94% felt that the CARES program had advanced their professional careers at least 'somewhat' or 'very much'.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Specific recommendations to guide ongoing implementation of the First 5 Kings County 2020-25 Strategic Plan include the following:

Build Capacity to Generate New Funding

Kings County funded partners continue to face reductions in Commission funding due to declining revenue. First 5 Kings County and its funded partners should continue to look toward pursuing new avenues for fund development. This may require a proactive leadership role from the county and Commission to help build the professional capacity of partner agency staff to seek and obtain new funding (e.g., identifying funding opportunities, supporting proposal development, fiscal management). This would help partners, such as FRCs, build internal capacity, while expanding the breadth and depth of available services (e.g., early childhood behavioral health services). This includes services referenced in the First 5 Kings County Strategic Plan that are not yet widely implemented (e.g., prenatal education, breastfeeding support, smoking cessation, health screenings).

Integrate EBPs and Emerging or Innovative Programming

Funded partners should continue to seek ways to integrate EPBs, model curricula, and innovative program models that are culturally responsive and that meet emerging needs in the community. This may include parenting interventions and school readiness programs to prepare children for kindergarten. Using EPBs ensures that knowledge and research findings of professional experts guide programming, and that program strategies are proven effective for achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

Increase Partnership and Collaboration

FRCs have been highly successful collaborating with community partners to co-locate services and refer families to resources in the community. Given evidence of a successful rebound in service delivery post-COVID, FRCs represent a sound investment with regard to capacity to reach children and families in the community. FRCs should also continue to pursue opportunities to coordinate with other early childhood and family providers and county initiatives, including working with PreK and elementary school systems.

Identify Solutions for Program Gaps and Identify and Reduce Duplication

First 5 leadership should pursue data driven strategies, including supplemental needs assessment and planning activities, to identify new and emerging community needs or gaps in systems of care. This is particularly important given changes in community conditions post COVID-19 and changes in the funding and service landscape. Specific efforts should focus on addressing immediate challenges related to the loss of an implementing agency in Avenal and the decision to discontinue outreach supporting further development of the Unite Us platform. First 5 should also focus on identifying and reducing any potential service overlap or unnecessary redundancies in programming.

Improve Data Infrastructure

First 5 California requires counties to track unduplicated participants across funded partners for accurate accounting of program reach. First 5 Kings County's data infrastructure has lagged, limiting the capacity for more robust evaluation of programs and services. The loss of the Unite Us platform represents an added setback for the county with respect to data infrastructure. First 5 staff should work to identify low-cost data solutions to track referrals and client utilization across partners. These data system enhancement and accountability measures can help partners monitor program performance longitudinally and be better positioned to use data to assess outcomes in support of future planning and decision-making.