

INTRODUCTION

Brain research clearly tells us that the first five years of a child’s life are critical for developing lifelong social, emotional and learning skills. Extensive research on the biology of stress now shows that healthy development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the body and the brain, with damaging effects on learning, behavior, and health across the lifespan.¹

In partnership with parents, school districts, community leaders, and social and healthcare agencies, First 5 Ventura County works to fill the gaps through its network of essential services for young children and their families—a network that strengthens futures for children, families and communities.

At the heart of First 5 Ventura County (F5VC) are 11 Neighborhoods for Learning (NfLs), a community-based service system for early care and education. This nationally recognized place-based model has provided parents with high quality, locally based resources over the past 15 years. First 5 NfLs help families raise children who are healthy, nurtured, and prepared to meet their full potential.

Each of our First 5 NfLs is governed by its community and decides how best to serve the area’s health, early learning and family support needs. NfL resources may include preschools or preschool scholarships, family resource centers (currently 25 throughout the county), and early learning activities for parents and children 0-3. Through partnerships with the Ventura County Health Care Agency and other local organizations, F5VC also provides community-based access to health services, information and referral through 2-1-1, dental treatment, developmental check-ups, behavioral health services and parent education through the local Neighborhood for Learning, thereby increasing access to essential services for families with young children.

First 5 Ventura County has long been a champion of expanding quality preschool for 4-year-olds throughout the county. Since our inception, an additional 1,500 spaces have been made available through partnerships with community organizations, operating dollars and loan funds. Our Community Investment Loan Fund alone has fostered the development of 255 new early care and education spaces, including 85 infant/toddler spaces, implemented in partnership with the Economic Development Collaborative-Ventura County. In partnership with the Ventura County Office of Education and bolstered by support from Federal Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant funds and First 5 CA’s Child Signature Program, Ventura County has developed a robust local quality-rating and-improvement initiative. More than 135 teachers have been supported by CARES Plus stipends to attain an associates or bachelors degree.

¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2005/2014). *Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain: Working Paper 3*. Updated Edition. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

First 5 Ventura County is largely funded through Proposition 10, the California Children and Families Act, a tobacco tax dedicated to developing locally managed resources and systems that improve health and education for children 0-5, passed by the voters of California in 1998. In addition to Prop 10 tobacco tax revenue, First 5 Ventura County is funded through leveraged state and federal dollars, grants and charitable donations. Together these resulted in local First 5 investments of nearly \$12.5 million in FY 2013-14.

The Commission has also made great strides in leveraging additional resources through partnerships, continually expanding collaborative partnerships with foundations, businesses, parents and local leaders for community-wide efforts to make sound, lasting investments in children. Recognizing that no one agency can do it alone, the Commission has been an active participant and convener of several community-wide initiatives for combating obesity, improving oral health, promoting developmental screening, implementing preschool quality improvement, and improving access to prenatal care.

Governed by a nine-member Commission appointed by the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, First 5 Ventura County funding decisions are guided by a strategic planning process.

STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

In July 2014, the Commission began its comprehensive planning process to develop a new strategic plan. Typically, the Commission adopts a new plan one year prior to implementing new funding investments, to allow time for the service system to adjust to any changes. The new strategic plan spans the period from FY 2015 – 2020, with funding investments covering FY 2016 – 2021.

To inform decisions, First 5 Ventura County researched the current literature, commissioned a five-year data analysis of key trends affecting young children and their families, conducted countywide parent surveys along with partner/stakeholder surveys, and received input from Commission standing committees which include funded partners. Data from annual evaluation reports on current investments also informed the decision-making process. A copy of these documents can be found on the Commission's website. (www.first5ventura.org)

The five-year data analysis highlighted several issues affecting children and families across the county:

- Poverty among children is growing.
- Available spaces for early education/ pre-schooling have not increased despite the increase in population over the last decade and a half.
- Third-grade reading scores have remained stagnant over the last decade and are far worse among low-income children.

Top services identified in both parent and partner surveys include:

- Preschool and preparing for kindergarten (including enhancing quality)
- Developmental screening
- Parent and child together classes/early literacy
- Parent workshops/education
- Dental treatment/health care access

STRENGTHS OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES (“SWOT” ANALYSIS)

Utilizing information gleaned from the data trend analysis, literature review, surveys and community input, the Commission developed a “SWOT” analysis (page 4) to identify strengths and opportunities and current internal and external challenges.

Significant Challenge - Declining Fiscal Resources

Since 2000, Proposition 10 distributions for Ventura County have declined by approximately 40 percent. Future annual revenues from the Proposition 10 distribution are expected to continue to decline due to the decrease in the amount of tobacco sales within the State, smokers purchasing tobacco via the Internet, illegal sales of tobacco, and Board of Equalization administrative costs. The Commission estimates the future annual rate of decline in tobacco tax revenues at 4 percent.

To date, the Commission has managed declining fiscal resources through the establishment of a sustainability fund, operating reserves, leveraging of additional federal and state dollars, and Foundation funding. The sustainability fund will be exhausted by the end of FY 2018-19 and Proposition 10 revenues in FY 2019-20 are estimated to be half of what they were at our inception. A financial chart, included as Appendix A, illustrates the fiscal landscape since 2000 and projections for the next five years. In FY 2021-22, Prop 10 revenues and the trajectory of decline intersect with spending levels; in future years as reserves are no longer available, funding levels will be aligned with Proposition 10 revenues.

“SWOT” ANALYSIS

First 5 Ventura County Strengths	First 5 Ventura County Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Established efficient early childhood system of services for children 0 – 5 countywide • Successful strategies are in place to maximize parent and family engagement • Funded partners are reaching children early (65 percent served are 0-3) • Funder partners serve at-risk populations in their neighborhoods • Funding certain services to fill gaps that no one else provides, e.g. PACT (parent and child together classes), oral health treatment • Strong preschool investments resulting in 1,500 additional spaces and high quality system • Maximizes resources through demonstrated ability to leverage and braid different funding streams • Strong collaborative partners • Strong convener around children’s issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declining First 5 resources (both Prop 10 distributions and Commission’s sustainability reserves) • Balancing local innovation and program design with consistent implementation practices across all funded partners • Sustainability • Comprehensive assessment of families and child needs at all points of intake • Demand often exceeds service capacity in First 5 funded programs
Environmental Opportunities	Environmental Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing public and political will for early childhood investments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ State Funding(QRIS Block Grant) ○ Federal Funds (RTT-ELC) ○ Local (EDC-VC’s strategic priority) • Overall collaborative environment in Ventura County • Expanded health care access through Covered California • Increased focus on prevention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High number of children in poverty <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Increasing rates of homelessness in children • High rates of child abuse/domestic violence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Impact of toxic stress • Little change in 3rd grade reading and math scores <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Large ethnic and income disparities in school achievement • Insufficient service capacity, e.g. oral health, preschool <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Challenges with Denti-Cal participation and Denti-Cal rates • Access to care for special populations • High rates of obesity (lack of parental awareness and information about healthy weight) • High number of dual-language learners • Insufficient number of culturally competent staff • Lack of facilities • Lack of emphasis/knowledge on the needs of infants and toddlers • Prioritizing the needs of children in policymaking and budget setting • Building on community assets at neighborhood level

STRATEGIC PLAN, FY 2015 – 2020

VISION

First 5 Ventura County envisions a future where all Ventura County children thrive in healthy supported environments.

MISSION

Our mission is to promote school readiness through investments in health, early learning and family strengthening, benefitting children from prenatal to 5 years of age.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

These guiding principles represent the values that First 5 Ventura County has adopted and uses to guide its funding decisions. (These guiding principles are not intended to represent any prioritized order.)

1. Engage Parents² and Community

- Engage parents as partners - through their participation in early learning programs, involvement in program design and as members of governance boards in decision-making.
- Promote inclusion that values the diversity of communities.
- Promote service integration by reducing fragmentation of existing services and supporting shared resources and shared decision-making among partners.
- Build opportunities to engage people with special talents and knowledge to be involved in teaching our young children and encourage local people (including businessmen, artists, chefs, farmers, builders, craftsmen, educators and the elderly) to interact with and come to know and recognize neighborhood children, leading to an educationally and culturally richer and safer environment for our youngsters.

2. Focus on Prevention

- Work with other countywide systems to facilitate and prioritize community-wide prevention oriented approaches.

² Throughout this document, when the term “Parents” is used, it refers to parents, families, guardians and caregivers.

3. Leverage Resources

- Build on neighborhood assets and organizational capacity and work through partnerships to leverage the use of First 5 Ventura County resources.
- Build upon and catalyze investments in the larger community, wherever possible, and invest with First 5 dollars only when there is an inability of current services or other resources to meet the demonstrated need.
- Maximize opportunities to leverage First 5 Ventura County funds with public and private dollars.

4. Support Sustainable Investments

- Actively identify and prioritize investments in systems and/or infrastructure development that have a broad impact and are likely to affect long-lasting change.
 - Any investments in direct services must have a long-term plan for sustainability.
 - Any investment in direct services should focus on serving those most likely to benefit.
- Fund best evidence-based practices, making room as well for promising practices and innovation.

5. Minimize administrative costs

- Keep funding for administration to a minimum in order to maximize resources available for development and support of an early childhood service system.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

First 5 Ventura County has identified 4 strategic priorities for achieving the vision that all children thrive in healthy supported environments, as follows:

- I. Children grow up healthy
- II. Children enter school ready to learn (cognitively, social-emotionally and physically)
- III. Parents have the knowledge and resources they need to provide a nurturing environment
- IV. Communities are engaged in supporting and prioritizing children

GOALS

For each of the strategic priority areas, the Commission has identified the following goals and its “five year vision” of success as key to improving outcomes for young children in Ventura County. Recognizing that none of this can be achieved by First 5 alone, the Commission will work in collaboration with countywide partners toward these goals and will determine how First 5 strategic investments can best advance each of these goal areas.

I. CHILDREN GROW UP HEALTHY

Because it all starts with a healthy pregnancy...

Goal 1: Pregnant women access quality prenatal care

- Families understand the importance of and demand quality prenatal services.
- Families have a place to go and a way to pay for prenatal care.
- Providers offer coordinated education, screenings and referrals, including resources for postpartum depression.

Because early detection identifies challenges when they are most treatable...

Goal 2: Children and expectant parents receive screenings in medical offices and community settings (developmental, 4Ps plus, ACEs)

- Parents understand the value of early screening.
- Healthcare providers offer routine screening for prenatal substance abuse, developmental delays and childhood trauma (ACE's).
- Effective systems are in place for referral and follow-up.

Because health-for-life starts early...

Goal 3: Children have good health practices, such as oral health, healthy eating and physical activity

- Mothers exclusively breastfeed for at least six months.
- Children have good oral health habits and receive regular preventive care.
- Children have a medical home and receive regular preventive care.
- Children eat healthfully and exercise regularly.
- Communities support healthy lifestyles.

II. CHILDREN ENTER SCHOOL READY TO LEARN

Because 80 percent of a child's brain growth takes place before age three ...

Goal 4: Children – especially those most at risk – are being reached as early as possible (0-3)

- Infant and parents have optimum attachment and bonding.
- Children 0-3 have robust early literacy experiences.
- Children receive early developmental screenings and follow-up.
- Families benefit from home visitation programs.

Because preschool closes the school readiness gap before it becomes an achievement gap ...

Goal 5: 3 and 4 year olds have access to high-quality preschool

- Parents understand the value of preschool.
- Communities have quality preschool spaces and ample facilities.
- The preschool workforce is well educated.
- Decision-makers and the public value preschool.

III. PARENTS HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCES THEY NEED TO PROVIDE A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

Because knowledgeable, nurturing parents are key to a child's development...

Goal 6: Parents have knowledge of early childhood development, (including healthy eating, healthy lifestyles and the impact of trauma and toxic stress)

- Parents understand the importance of and want current parenting information.
- Parents have confidence in their role and know how to get support when needed.
- Multiple systems are in place for parent education access (web-based, classes).
- Parents have social connections.
- Parents are engaged and recognized as leaders.

Because linking to resources helps families get what they need...

Goal 7: Parents are connected to resources

- Parents have access to resources.
- Parents have help to coordinate complex resource needs.
- Parents learn how to navigate systems on their own.
- Communities ensure that resources are available.

IV. COMMUNITIES ARE ENGAGED IN SUPPORTING AND PRIORITIZING CHILDREN

Because the first five years impact a lifetime ...

Goal 8: Communities support kids at all levels, building a web of support that no child can fall through

- Policy and infrastructure decisions place a priority on children.
- Intergenerational relationships enrich childhood.
- Business owners engage with and support children and families.
- Childhood poverty and abuse/neglect are understood and addressed by the whole community.
- Children are treasured and respected members of our community.

FIRST 5 VENTURA COUNTY STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS

First 5 Ventura County faces a significant decline in resources during this strategic planning period. For the past 15 years, the Commission has augmented Prop 10 revenues through operating reserves and a designated sustainability fund. The Commission began using its sustainability fund in FY 2014-15 to maintain programmatic funding levels. This fund will be exhausted by the end of FY 2018-19 coupled with the continued decline of Proposition 10 revenues. Whereas, approximately \$54 million in local First 5 funding was available during the last strategic plan, the Commission anticipates \$45 million in available funding resources for FY 2016 – 2021, inclusive of Prop 10 distributions and remaining sustainability funds.

While the Commission's key goals and desired outcomes for children will not change, the strategic investments to advance the goals over the course of this plan will be modified, in alignment with funding levels. First 5 Ventura County anticipates two different funding horizons for this 5 year plan: investments of approximately \$11 million per year for the first 3 funding years of the new strategic plan; and, investments of approximately \$6 million per year for years four and five, when anticipated funding levels will be largely maintained by the annual Prop 10 distributions.

The Commission will continue to actively leverage local funding with public and private sources. First 5 Ventura County will also join statewide efforts to seek out new revenue sources to best support early childhood investments. As the public and policymakers have begun to increasingly value the importance of early investments, there has been an increase in public investments, e.g., quality preschool, health insurance enrollment. When new public funding sources become available, the Commission will make adjustments to the plan to maximize investments of local resources.

Years One through Three

The Commission anticipates maintaining current strategies through FY 2018-19, the first three years of this strategic plan. During these first three years, the Commission will identify opportunities to adjust implementation strategies to better prepare for years four and five.

Years Four and Five

In years four and five, the Commission will initiate a shift in strategic investments towards capacity building efforts to support and build the overall early childhood system of services, as illustrated by the following:

- Promoting/building parent engagement and empowerment
- Advocating for young children and families by building a shared vision and creating public/political will for programs for young children
- Convening partner organizations to address issues affecting child development
- Disseminating best practices and quality standards across service systems
- Working toward cross-system governance and decision-making for issues affecting children and families
- Developing/facilitating shared data systems
- Encouraging countywide public and private organizations to increase their alignment of resources for improved outcomes for young children and their families through challenge grants.

Sample investment strategies for years four and five are provided in the following chart.

FIRST 5 VENTURA COUNTY
SAMPLE STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS
YEARS 4 AND 5

<u>STRATEGIC PRIORITY</u>	<u>GOALS</u>	<u>SAMPLE STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS</u>
<p>Children grow up healthy</p>	<p>Pregnant women access quality prenatal care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Deployment of public health educators/nurses at clinics, medical offices and through 2-1-1</i> • <i>Training for practitioners on screening, referral, and early intervention services</i> • <i>Convener to align systems, e.g., prenatal care</i> • <i>Educational campaigns on the importance of prenatal care and on postpartum depression</i> • <i>Challenge grants to support “Baby Friendly Hospitals”</i>
	<p>Children and expectant parents receive screenings in medical offices and community settings (developmental, 4Ps plus, ACEs)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Public Health Educators/Nurses deployed to clinics, medical offices, and 211</i> • <i>Training for practitioners on screening, referral, and early intervention services</i> • <i>Building demand through parent education</i> • <i>Building and integrating systems for referral and follow-up</i>
	<p>Children have good health practices, such as oral health, healthy eating and physical activity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Parent education at NfLs and through broad-based educational campaigns on oral health, nutrition and physical activities</i> • <i>Provider training and capacity building</i> • <i>Challenge Grants: oral health prevention, restaurant and recreation projects</i> • <i>Convener to align systems, e.g., oral health, Healthy Ventura County</i> • <i>Advocate for policy change</i>
<p>Children enter school ready to learn</p>	<p>Children – especially those most at risk – are being reached as early as possible (0-3)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Early Learning PACT (Parent and Child Together classes for 0 -3) at NfLs, targeting at-risk parents, teen parents, first-time parents, children with special needs</i> • <i>Professional development and technical support for NfL staff</i> • <i>Implementation of consistent best practices</i> • <i>F5 as advocate for importance of early years and building public will/community engagement</i> • <i>Messaging campaign, e.g. importance of early literacy</i>

<u>STRATEGIC PRIORITY</u>	<u>GOALS</u>	<u>SAMPLE STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS</u>
	3 and 4 year olds have access to high-quality preschool	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Preschool for low-income children not able to access existing publicly funded programs (through NfL scholarships or Challenge Grants)</i> • <i>Challenge Grants:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Preschool Spaces and Facilities</i> ○ <i>P-3rd grade alignment</i> • <i>ECE Workforce development, with attention to the needs of dual-language learners</i> • <i>Convener to build Pre-K to 3rd grade system</i> • <i>Building public and political will</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">Parents have the knowledge and resources they need to provide a nurturing environment</p>	Parents have knowledge of early childhood development, (including healthy eating, healthy lifestyles and the impact of trauma and toxic stress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Parent Education at NfLs (including Triple P Levels 2 and 3, developmental milestones, early childhood development, healthy eating/active living)</i> • <i>PACT Classes</i> • <i>Five Protective Factors framework fully incorporated in all programs</i> • <i>Professional development for NfL staff to improve the quality of family support services, including Triple P Levels 2 and 3</i> • <i>Training for professionals on ACEs, toxic stress, postpartum depression</i> • <i>Parent leadership and advocacy program</i> • <i>Distribution of Kit for New Parents</i>
	Parents are connected to resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Maintain NfL/FRCs in high-need communities</i> • <i>Assessment of families needs at intake at NfL and referral/service coordination to appropriate services based on the protective factors framework</i> • <i>Build-out of “portals” and resource directories within 211</i> • <i>Integration of clinic based health professionals into 211</i> • <i>Convener to promote alignment and integration of systems</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">Communities are engaged in supporting and prioritizing children</p>	Communities support kids and childhood poverty, child abuse and neglect and toxic stress are addressed at the community level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Challenge Grants for “kid-friendly communities”</i> • <i>Public Education</i> • <i>Convener to align systems</i> • <i>Advocate for policy change</i>

RESULTS BASED ACCOUNTABILITY

First 5 Ventura County's results based accountability framework incorporates its desired outcomes, indicators used to measure progress and accountability frameworks to monitor programmatic investments. The evaluation framework³ and indicators are included as Appendix B; accountability frameworks for each of the Commission's program areas can be found on the Commission's website, www.first5ventura.org.

In FY 2014-15, the Commission implemented a point-in-time parent survey to assess the overall impact of First 5 Ventura County services, along with program improvement surveys to provide quality feedback to First 5 funded partners. The parent survey measures the outcomes identified in the evaluation framework and will be used to track changes over time. Four program improvement surveys (family resource center services, early learning for parents and children together (PACT), parent education programs, and single-session parent workshops) asks participants to provide demographic information and to rate their experience with services to assess how the programs/services can be improved.

Annual reports are issued by the Commission on the overall evaluation framework and the accountability frameworks to ensure optimal allocation of public resources, continuous quality improvement, and to guide strategic decision-making.

IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Following the adoption of the strategic plan, the Commission will develop an implementation plan to guide annual funding decisions. The goal of the Commission is to adopt the annual implementation plan a minimum of six months prior to the funding year for which it is intended.

³ This evaluation framework reflects the Commission's current investments which continue through FY 2018-19; the existing framework will be modified as the Commission shifts investments in years four and five.