

2025 Policy Progress Across 50 States and DC: State Policy Wins in Child Welfare

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This analysis of the year in early childhood state policy advocacy relies on data from a survey of early childhood policy advocates in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, conducted May 2025 through December 2025. The survey asked them for highlights from the year, so the results are representative and not comprehensive. Policy "wins" include legislation, funding increases, executive actions, and regulatory changes.

The survey was developed and executed by Dr. Lisa Kerber of Frontera Strategy. Frontera supports advocacy efforts nationwide by providing qualitative and quantitative research services, including needs assessments and environmental scans, program and policy evaluation, statistical analyses, and survey research for associations, foundations, and nonprofit service organizations active in state capitols.

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Increased State Funding to Improve Child Welfare

Alaska

\$5 million in state funding for Alaska's child advocacy centers to backfill a loss in federal funds, passed with broad bipartisan support. Child advocacy centers are safe, child-focused facilities that coordinate the response to child abuse by bringing together professionals from law enforcement, prosecution, child protective services, medical, and mental health fields.

State funding: Relatively small increase of state funding

Idaho

The 2025 Idaho Legislature passed a budget bill that included a record investment for the state's foster care system. Senate Bill 1208 adds \$23.2 million in new funding for foster care services and 63 additional staff to build the system's capacity.

Target population: Children and families impacted by foster care

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

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West Virginia

New dedicated state budget line-item (\$300,000) for Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) programs and \$12.9 million in state funding for VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) supported programs including CASA, domestic violence services, rape crisis centers, and other programs addressing family violence. This funding was necessary to offset federal funding cuts that have limited access to federal VOCA funds.

Target population: CASA and social services funding is targeted to children and families involved in abuse and neglect cases within the child welfare system. VOCA funding supports victims of crime, especially child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual assault.

State funding: Relatively small increase of state funding

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Child Welfare Laws Related to Tribal Families

Montana

SB 147 revises Indian Child Welfare laws to be more equitable for tribes and tribal children.

Target population: Tribal children and families engaged in the child welfare system

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

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North Dakota

HB1564 updates the state's application of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), bolstering tribal sovereignty and shielding Indigenous families from unnecessary separation. HB1564 enhances

state law by clarifying definitions and raising the standards for child removal involving Indigenous children. It enshrines “active efforts” requirements, which mandate that authorities work diligently to keep Indigenous children with their families whenever safe and appropriate. The bill further establishes clear placement preferences that prioritize relatives and tribal members and refines emergency removal protocols to ensure they are used only when necessary. HB1564 mandates that North Dakota courts recognize and respect tribal court decisions, fostering a spirit of cooperation and trust between the state and tribal justice systems. The law also requires improved record-sharing practices with tribal authorities and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), addressing historical barriers that have hindered transparency and accountability. This legislation addresses long-standing issues of the disproportionate removal of Indigenous children from their families, which has contributed to generational trauma in Native communities. By aligning state child welfare practices with federal ICWA standards, HB1564 helps prevent the unnecessary disruption of Indigenous family bonds, promotes cultural preservation, and supports tribal sovereignty.

Target population: Indigenous children and their families

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

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State Support for Kinship Care

North Dakota

HB1072 formally recognizes and funds kinship guardianship arrangements. This bill ensures that children placed with relatives or family friends receive state financial support even when federal funds don’t apply. By codifying this practice into law, HB1072 strengthens family-based care options and promotes stability for children. It provides more explicit guidance for social workers and families involved in the foster care system, reinforcing the state’s dedication to keeping children in safe, familiar homes.

State funding: Relatively small increase of state funding

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Missouri

The legislature allocated \$200k for legal support for informal kinship caregivers in the Kansas City region and mid-Missouri. Last year, the legislature allocated \$55,000 to start a legal support pilot in a four-county region in and surrounding Kansas City. This program will continue, and a second program will begin in a five-county region in mid-Missouri.

Target population: Informal kinship caregivers

State funding: Relatively small increase of state funding

Quantify: \$200,000 was allocated. In the first 6 months of the pilot, over 40 families were served. The goal is to serve at least 120 families with additional funding and the expanded program.

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New Mexico

A three-year pilot program to provide support to kinship caregivers will be established in five to seven counties in the state with 50 participants chosen in each county. Program participants will receive cash payments and be connected to case management assistance, legal assistance, mental health support, and respite care.

Target population: Grandparents or other kin raising children in six high-need counties.

State funding: Relatively small increase of state funding

Quantify: 36,000 New Mexico children were raised by grandparents or other next of kin in 2023 – an increase from about 30,000 in 2017.

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Child Care for Foster Youth Parents

Maryland

HB 1121 aims to improve foster youth access to child care scholarships as part of the Successful Adult Program. The bill would establish a three-year pilot program to help remove barriers for foster youth parents by simplifying the application process. It eliminates the need for non-custodial parent signatures and removes the requirement for proof of employment or enrollment in educational or job-training programs. By removing these obstacles, the program would encourage parenting foster youth to seek career opportunities or education without the fear of childcare issues. Ultimately, these changes would likely increase program participation and support foster youth in successfully transitioning to independent adulthood while raising their children.

Target population: Foster youth who are parenting

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AI-Generated Child Pornography

South Carolina

It is now a felony in South Carolina to create, distribute, or possess AI-generated sexual images, including child sexual abuse material. The legislation addresses not only AI-generated CSAM but also "morphed images"—digitally created or altered explicit images that depict a person in a sexual act they never participated in.

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Preventing Harassment of Families

New York

The Anti-Harassment bill requires callers to the State Central Register of Child Abuse and Neglect to leave their contact information before the report is sent to counties for investigation. Currently, callers are not required to leave their information, which has resulted in bad actors taking advantage of this weakness in the system to harass families.

Target population: New York families – overwhelmingly low-income and Black and brown families, who are disproportionately subject to child welfare investigations

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

Quantify: Each year, anonymous reports to the State Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) lead to thousands of unnecessary, traumatic investigations into New York families that are eventually determined to be unfounded. When a county receives a report of suspected child abuse or neglect from the Statewide Central Register, they are required to start an investigation. The investigations last as long as two months, and often involve searching the home, interviewing family members and everyone they know—often without notifying the family of their rights, such as their right to be informed of the allegations, or their right to consult an attorney. Notably, more than 60% of calls to the Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment (SCR) are determined to be unfounded.

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Poverty Does Not Equate to Neglect or Abuse

Maine

LD 1406 modifies the language in Maine's child protection statute to better differentiate between family circumstances due to poverty and family circumstances that are abusive or neglectful.

Target population: Children and families involved in the state's child protection system

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

Quantify: There are 2,234 children in state custody as a result of abuse or neglect.

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Improvements to Data Systems

Minnesota

Minnesota made progress to improve data systems and strengthen state infrastructure by investing in the Social Services Information System, used for Minnesota's child welfare cases. New legislation (HF 2925) provides \$35 million for the upgrade and modernization of the platform to help streamline casework, improve efficiency, reduce administrative burdens, and allow caseworkers to spend more time directly supporting children and families.

Target population: Families and children involved with Child Protection Services, caseworkers, and those making referrals

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

Legal Protections for Children of Immigrant Families

California

AB 495: Family Preparedness Plan Act strengthens legal protections for children at risk of family separation. The bill creates a probate joint guardianship between a parent and a joint guardian.

AB 495 requires the Attorney General to publish model policies limiting assistance with immigration enforcement at all child day care facilities and state preschools. The Family Preparedness Plan Act provides families with clear, legally-recognized options to ensure caregiving continuity during family separations.

Target population: AB 495 is intended to protect immigrant and mixed status families

State funding: No change in state funding related to this win

Quantify: AB 495 is intended to protect the nearly half (46%) of California's 9 million children who are part of immigrant families, almost all are U.S. citizens. 1 in 5 children (20%) live in a mixed status family.

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Short-Term Housing and Treatment for Kids Awaiting Foster Homes

Ohio

Ohio has invested an additional \$20 million to establish Child Wellness Campuses, a new statewide strategy to provide short-term treatment and stabilization for children in crisis who are awaiting foster care placement. These children, who often have significant behavioral health needs, have increasingly been left with nowhere to go, resulting in some spending nights in county children's services offices. The funding will support the creation of five regional campuses designed to serve children who are in state custody and need immediate, specialized care. Each campus will offer therapeutic support, assessment, and coordinated services to help stabilize children and prepare them for a safe, appropriate, and longer-term placement. The goal is for each child to transition to a more permanent placement within 45 days, reducing trauma, improving continuity of care, and helping children move more quickly into environments that can meet their needs. This investment strengthens the state's foster care infrastructure, reduces the burden on local children's services agencies, and creates a more humane, responsive approach to supporting children with high needs.

Target population: The target is children in state custody with complex needs. It includes children aged birth to five, but often these children are older youth.

State funding: Relatively large increase of state funding

Quantify: \$20 million in state funds. 5 regional campuses

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