



# OPT-IN

*For Families*

Opportunities for Prevention &  
Transformation Initiative

An initiative of



DORIS DUKE  
FOUNDATION

# Who We Are



## OUR INITIATIVE

# Supporting Children and Families From Day One: A New Model for Child Well-being

The current child welfare system, with surveillance at its center and maltreatment concerns as its trigger, too often causes lasting harm to children and families and misses the opportunity to support them in their community and help them thrive.

We believe there is a better, more cost-effective, scalable way to prevent abuse and neglect.

Opportunities for Prevention & Transformation Initiative, or OPT-In for Families, builds on work done across the country to create and test a meaningful alternative to the child welfare system—one that moves from a punitive system focused on assessing whether children should be removed from their homes to a prevention-oriented well-being system that leads to better outcomes across a child's life. Launched by the Doris Duke Foundation, this three-year initiative across four demonstration sites aims to show that actively meeting families where they are and connecting them to coordinated support services in their communities—along with direct support for families—is a cost-effective, scalable way to prevent abuse and neglect. Each site will receive \$9 million in technical assistance and direct support for families.

## WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT

# Creating Voluntary, Welcoming and Engaging Opportunities for Families

OPT-In for Families builds on data and lessons learned, insights from communities developing new pathways for support, and the perspectives of people with lived experience. Research shows that child welfare, by design, addresses acute safety issues but does not meaningfully help families thrive.

Collaborating with the demonstration sites, OPT-In for Families changes the paradigm by connecting families to resources and voluntary services that respond to what families say they need—positioning families to safely care for their children in their own homes and communities without fear of child welfare involvement. The four sites, selected for their commitment to and progress in developing new ways of supporting families, are Oregon, Kentucky, Washington, D.C., and South Carolina.

Here's how OPT-In for Families creates opportunities for help and change:

### *Access*

Each selected site will focus on families at an early signal of need. This includes, for example, children and families screened out at child protection hotlines, who usually are in real need of support but are not currently connected to further services.

### *Engagement*

With compassion and respect, community-based programs that are outside the child welfare system will then reach out and engage these families. We believe that by opening with the question, “How can we help you?”, prevention initiatives will be better positioned to deliver support that matches families’ actual needs.

### *Navigation*

A trusted community-based person will help families navigate complex and bureaucratic services (including supports in housing, healthcare, nutrition and school-based resources), so the search for help doesn't itself become a hardship.

### *Support*

We will provide funding so the sites can implement a strategy that has been shown to be effective: supporting families directly as an intervention or in combination with services to prevent abuse and neglect.



WHAT WE CAN ACHIEVE TOGETHER

## Activating Potential

With the support of OPT-In for Families, the selected sites can activate the potential of a new prevention-forward approach to child and family well-being, demonstrating how life-changing it can be when supports reach families in the right ways at the right time. Ultimately, we believe this blueprint for change can help families build the lives they want and deserve, for themselves and their children.



Roughly  
**37%**  
of all US children

More Than  
**50%**  
of Black children

experience CPS investigation by age 18<sup>3</sup>, which, even when necessary, can be terrifying and traumatic.



# 50%

of referrals to child welfare are screened out<sup>1</sup>—with families receiving no help at all.

Screened-out families are at high risk of re-referral.<sup>2</sup>

# 60+%

of substantiated CPS referrals are for neglect only.<sup>4</sup>

The strongest predictors of investigated neglect referrals relate to financial need, including food pantry use and cutting meals, difficulty paying rent, and utility shutoffs.<sup>5</sup>





# How We Work



## GETTING THINGS DONE

## Innovating and Collaborating to Drive Change

Transforming the child welfare system is hard work, and we must meet it with the core elements of successfully implementing innovation—data and programmatic analysis, access to best practice, design of practice and programs, testing, and rapid and responsive improvement. OPT-In for Families provides each site with intensive on-the-ground program design, implementation and research support to develop their new initiatives.

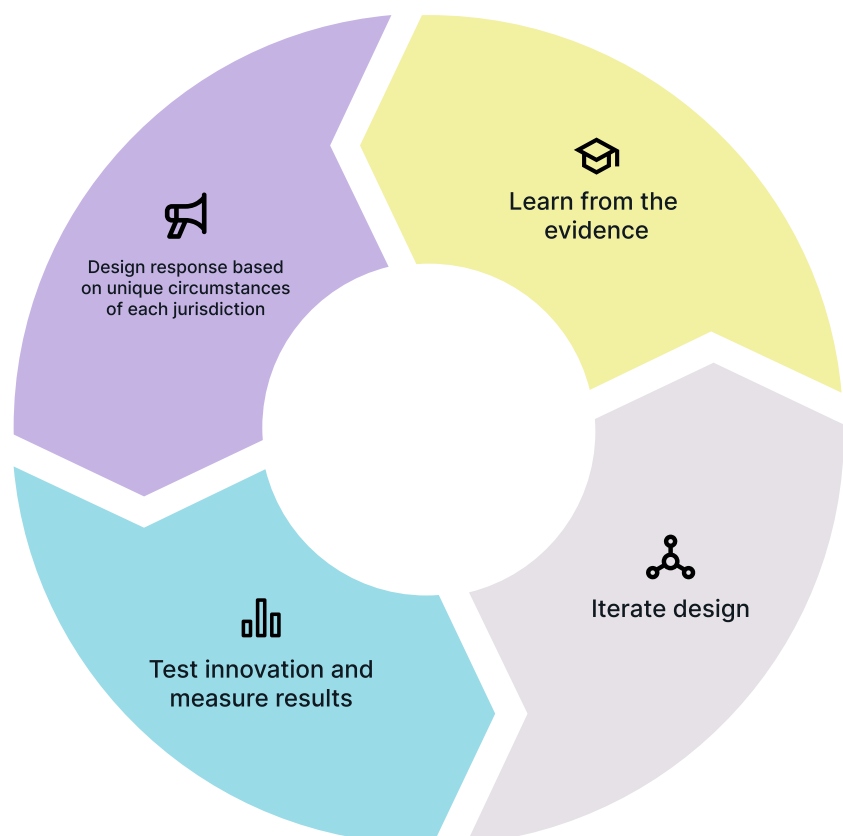
With co-design at our core and best-in-class collaborators providing technical assistance, OPT-In for Families provides each site with start-up support, including staff, technology and expertise, in addition to flexible financial support for families.

To help the demonstration sites meet the challenge of implementing innovation while continuing daily operations, OPT-In for Families:

- Provides targeted resources and dedicated staff
- Coordinates closely with other relevant initiatives and other technical assistance providers within the selected site
- Makes a strategic and time-limited investment to support the creation and evaluation of the innovation
- Supports sites to scale and carry forward the work by maximizing government funding streams that are designed to benefit children and families in need but are often underutilized, including the Family First Prevention Services Act

## Building infrastructure to activate change

- Ensure appropriate stakeholder development feedback loops
- Ensure that families who are the beneficiaries remain at the center of the design



MEASURING OUR IMPACT

# Learning—and Scaling—What Works

## 2023 - PLANNING YEAR

### Planning

- Formed planning group
- Gathered input (those with lived experience, child welfare professionals and others)
- Reviewed research and best practices
- Designed initiative and vetted with lived experts and key partners

### Collaborator selection

*Grants to technical assistant (TA) providers:*

- Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL)
- Foster America
- Think of Us
- Chapin Hall

### Site selection process

- Review of key data
- Discussion with participants
- Site visits
- Considered 20 sites → 4 selected

## 2024 - YEAR ONE: LAUNCH

### March 2024: Selected sites announced

- Kentucky
- Oregon
- South Carolina
- Washington, D.C.

### Advisory

- DDF launches national advisory board and evaluation advisory board
- Local advisory groups formed in each site

### Co-design and launch

- TA providers collaborate with sites and local partners to co-design and launch key elements and approaches:
  - New screen-out pathway for children and families that do not enter the CWS but are contacted because of a report of abuse or neglect
  - New welcoming approaches to family engagement
  - Service navigation
- Delivery of material supports
- Chapin Hall designs and begins to implement formative evaluation
  - Key baseline measures are established



Together, we will test new approaches, build a learning collaborative, conduct research, and advocate for national policy changes. We commit to learning what works through data and research-informed demonstrations, and we will share our findings widely.

Over the three-year timeline, our technical assistance partner Chapin Hall will conduct formative evaluations that explore barriers and facilitators to implementation success, and highlight practice, policy, and research implications. Chapin Hall researchers will speak with families, demonstration site teams, and community partners to explore the ongoing implementation experience. The evaluation will distill key factors and strategies for success and how they change over time. Our actionable learnings will bridge critical gaps in what we currently know about how to build, strengthen, and scale a viable alternative to child welfare.

Our goal is to refine and scale OPT-In for Families, assisting other states in building a community-based, prevention-oriented response systems for families at greatest risk of foster care involvement, as well as to effect policy changes at the state and federal level that bends towards prevention—to have an enduring impact on the well-being of families and children.

## 2025 - YEAR TWO: BUILD AND REFINE

### January 2025: Year-one progress report

- Describe key elements and approaches (screen-out pathways, engagement, navigation, supports)
- Review what it took to implement those elements
- Review opportunities, barriers and solutions

### Support and implementation

- Strengthening year-one practices
- Rapid real-time adjustments and iteration during implementation
- Building local capacity around data-driven performance management

## 2024-2027+

- Use learnings to inform policy conversation and policy advocacy on all levels of government
- Share findings widely
- Inform policy and advocacy
- Scale successful strategies

## 2026 - YEAR THREE: EVALUATE AND EXPLORE SCALE

### January 2026: Year-two progress report

- Review adjustments to key elements and approaches (screen-out pathways, engagement, navigation, supports)
- Report data, including:
  - Numbers of families served
  - Demographics and needs of families reached
  - Types of services being provided
  - Amounts of economic and other concrete supports being distributed
- Analyze data to better understand and adjust strategies

### Support and implementation

- Continued support for core implementation activities
- Explore steps towards scaling what works; possibilities might include:
  - Expanding to a broader population or geography
  - Expanding to develop priority “community pathways”
  - Adjusting/expanding prevention services to better meet need

### January 2027: Year-three progress report

- Explore lessons learned
- Evaluate effectiveness of strategies designed and implemented
- Review challenges and solutions
- Report early insights on effectiveness based on:
  - Feedback from families
  - Review of data (including subsequent CPS reports and investigations, and other measures)

# Who We Work With



## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROVIDERS

### Collaborating for Better

OPT-In for Families works with four technical assistance providers to comprehensively support selected sites as they build out their prevention initiatives.

**GOVERNMENT  
PERFORMANCE  
LAB** | AT  
HARVARD  
KENNEDY  
SCHOOL

## Research and technical assistance

The Harvard Kennedy School Government Performance Lab (GPL) supports state and local governments across the country in building just and effective service systems by developing hands-on tools for the design and implementation of reforms. The GPL serves as the overall lead entity coordinating OPT-In for Families. The GPL provides intensive research and technical assistance to help selected sites design and implement their prevention initiative, including how to identify families that need support, effectively engage those families, and connect them to responsive, voluntary resources, including concrete resources for families.



## Site facilitation and governance

Foster America works with communities to transform systems that serve children, youth and families by innovating for a more just, equitable future. Foster America works closely with GPL to support sites with overall coordination of the initiative; facilitation and support of a local advisory committee guiding the initiative; and coordination of the technical assistance that is provided. A dedicated full-time Foster America senior advisor will be jointly selected in collaboration with each site.



## Engaging individuals with lived experience

Think of Us is led and guided by people with lived experience, partnering with leaders and practitioners across the country to create and implement disruptive, scalable solutions and policy reforms. Think of Us works closely with GPL, Foster America and selected sites to meaningfully engage individuals with lived expertise in the design and implementation process.



## Evidence-based interventions and evaluation

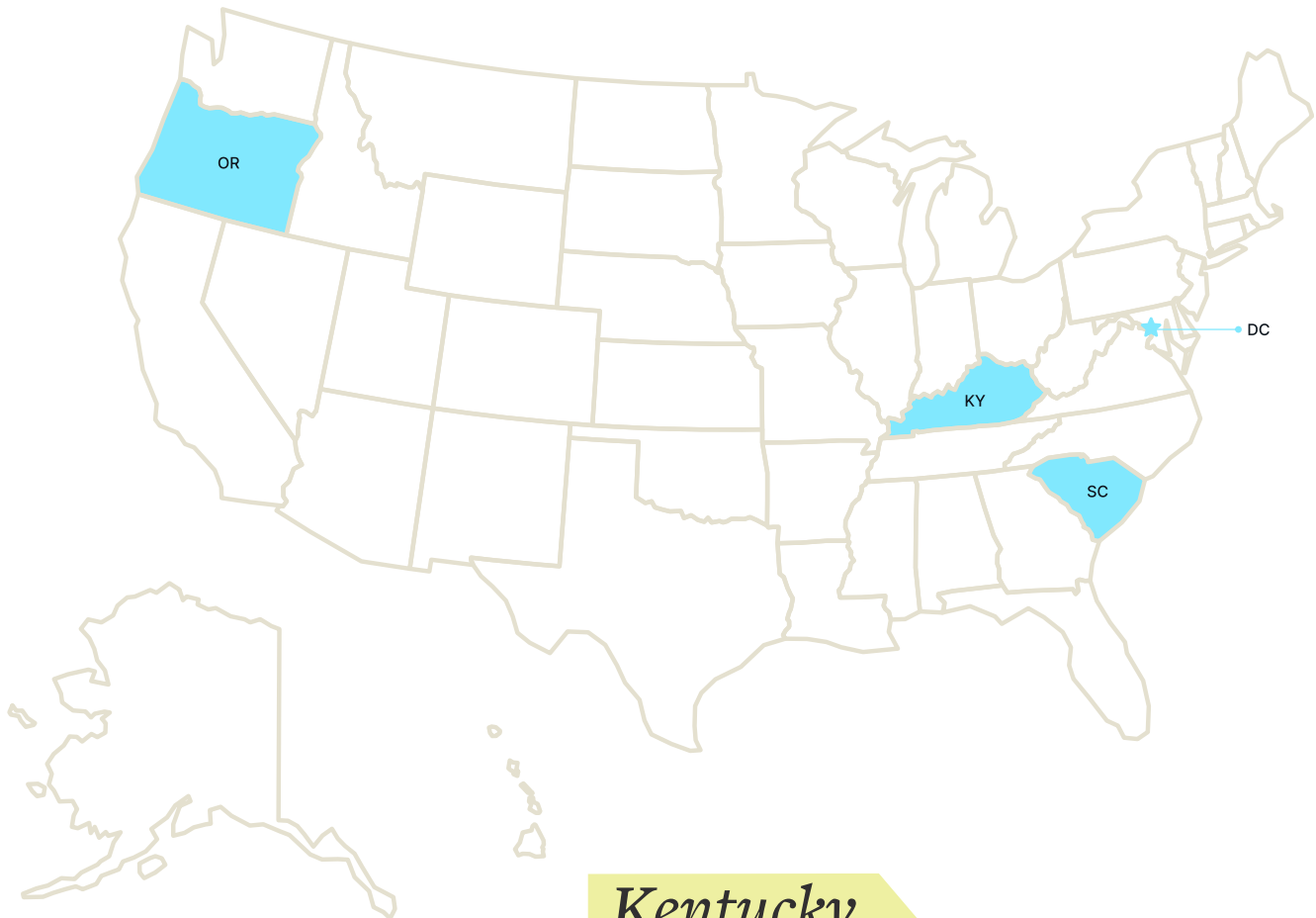
Chapin Hall is a nationally recognized leader in child welfare and human services policy, research, and implementation. Chapin Hall provides relevant information about evidence-based interventions that can inform the selected sites in the planning and design of their prevention initiatives. Chapin Hall will also conduct a process evaluation of the demonstration.



## SELECT SITES

# Supporting Visionary Communities

The Doris Duke Foundation has selected four sites to demonstrate our proof of concept. These sites are well positioned to succeed, demonstrating great promise and vision for change and having resources, partners, and innovative pathways in place or in sight. We are excited to provide them the comprehensive support they need to carry out their vision.



## Kentucky

**Agency lead:** Division of Prevention and Community Wellbeing

**Foundational work:** The Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services recently created the Division to connect existing prevention-oriented initiatives, amplifying their impact and furthering the state's longstanding commitment in this area. The Division oversees community-based pathways of support including through school-based Family Resource and Youth Services Centers and other nonprofits.

## Oregon

**Agency lead:** Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS)

**Foundational work:** Focused on improving the well-being of people at all stages of life, ODHS offers vulnerable families one-on-one coaching to better understand and meet their specific needs. Oregon is working to expand its high-touch approach to prevention, connecting families with an ODHS coach or a community-based nonprofit to help them better access supports and services.

## Washington, D.C.

**Agency lead:** DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA)

**Foundational work:** Building on innovative approaches to prevention, including incorporating family voice, CFSA is developing a unified, updated prevention services network under the “211 Warmline” umbrella, through which families can more easily connect to community services.

## South Carolina

**Agency lead:** South Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS)

**Foundational work:** An integrated human service agency, DSS is responsible for not only child welfare but also food and nutrition programs, cash and employment assistance, child support, refugee resettlement and child care. The state is developing a prevention initiative that partners with community agencies to provide support, including material support, to families at risk of child welfare involvement.

### Baseline Criteria for Site Selection

- Presence of **fundamental programmatic building blocks**, including experience designing and implementing new programs as well as trusted community partners with the capacity to deliver services.
- Commitment from and alignment with **agency leadership** willing to make the prevention initiative a priority.
- **Sufficient data capacity** to collect reliable information about families served, intervention utilization, and child and family outcomes.
- Commitment and capacity to address issues of **racial equity** and to incorporate the **voices of the families being served** (demonstrable evidence).
- **Conducive authorizing environment**, including key stakeholder buy-in to ensure existing statute/policy permits the kind of experimentation involved in this demonstration program.

In our demonstration group, we sought *diversity* of:

- Foster care population size and entry rate
- Geography (Northeast, Pacific Northwest, Midwest, South)
- Urban, suburban and rural
- Demography, including Native American populations

## National Advisory Group

*Anthony Barrows*

Project Evident

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*Mary Wolf*

Tribal Consultant with the capacity  
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*Lonnie Berger*

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*Dee Bonnick*

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Casey Family Programs

*Joe Ribsam*

Annie E. Casey Foundation

*Leonard Burton*

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Duke University

*Joseph Doyle*

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*Jaymie Lorthridge*

Kaye Implementation & Evaluation

## Our Funders





## End Notes



<sup>1</sup> Administration for Children & Families. (2023). *Child maltreatment 2021*. U. S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/report/child-maltreatment-2021>

<sup>2</sup> Simon, J. D., Gandarilla Ocampo, M., Drake, B., & Jonson-Reid, M. (2022). A review of screened-out families and child protective services involvement: A missed opportunity to prevent future maltreatment with community-based services. *Child Maltreatment*, 27(4), 693–706. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595211033597>

<sup>3</sup> Kim H, Wildeman C, Jonson-Reid M, Drake B. Lifetime Prevalence of Investigating Child Maltreatment Among US Children. *Am J Public Health*. 2017 Feb;107(2):274–280. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2016.303545. Epub 2016 Dec 20. PMID: 27997240; PMCID: PMC5227926. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5227926/>

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. (August 18, 2021). *New resources available for renters and landlords: Dear colleague letter*. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/new-resources-available-renters-landlords.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Slack, K. S., Berger, L. M., DuMont, K., Yang, M.-Y., Kim, B., Ehrhard-Dietzel, S., & Holl, J. L. (2011). Risk and protective factors for child neglect during early childhood: A cross-study comparison. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 33(8), 1354–1363. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2011.04.024>

## About the Doris Duke Foundation



The mission of the Doris Duke Foundation (DDF) is to build a more creative, equitable and sustainable future by investing in artists and the performing arts, environmental conservation, medical research, child well-being and greater mutual understanding among diverse communities. To learn more, visit [www.dorisduke.org](http://www.dorisduke.org).

If you'd like to receive updated information on the initiative's progress, please go to the OPT-In for Families webpage by scanning the QR code and sign up for our newsletter.



Questions? Please email us at [Opt-In@dorisduke.org](mailto:Opt-In@dorisduke.org).



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