

# **THE SHIFTING POLICY IMPACT OF INTENSIVE FAMILY PRESERVATION SERVICES**

## **ABSTRACT**

This report traces the evolution and impact of Intensive Family Preservation Services (IFPS) on state and national policy over the past twenty years. In the relatively short period, IFPS has been—often simultaneously—a cutting-edge service for families in crisis, a major policy direction for innovative state child welfare agencies, the focal point of national child welfare legislation, and the subject of fierce and partisan debate about the future directions for the child welfare field.

The IFPS story is complex because its impact varies across the many jurisdictions at the county, state, and federal levels and because it is still evolving. Although IFPS has achieved a remarkable prominence in a relatively short period, it has not transformed child welfare services as some of its pioneers had envisioned.

IFPS' development represented the deliberate, combined efforts of a group of influential state and local policy makers, child welfare provider agencies, a national foundation, children's advocates at the state and national levels, and a number of constituency and policy organizations. Proponents often differed over strategy, but they combined to create sufficient momentum to lead to widespread implementation and to federal child welfare legislation. This overall process can be summarized in three phases. The first involved translating a specific service program into a policy movement in an influential group of states. The second phase involved embodying the concepts of IFPS and family preservation in federal legislation. The third phase consists of the post-federal legislation period and the backlash against the concept of family preservation.

Since 1993, policy development related to family preservation has followed two paths. In the field, family preservation services have remained an important part of the service array offered by state and local child welfare agencies. National policy discussions about family preservation, however, have put FPS at the center of the most polarizing debates about child welfare's future. The reversal arises from four sources: evaluations that created doubt about FPS's effectiveness in preventing unnecessary placements; critical commentators attacking the concept of family preservation at a rhetorical level; the underestimation of the issue of children's safety by family preservation's supporters; and an abiding distrust of the families whose care of their children is suspect.

Several conclusions can be drawn about the status of family preservation's impact on the nation's child welfare system. Family preservation services have created and confirmed a now-widespread professional belief that intensive interventions can make a positive difference to families. Even as the momentum behind family preservation services has slowed, it is now part of a larger array of services that is developed more integrally with local communities and neighborhoods. This approach may provide a refuge from the polarizing and fruitless debate between protecting children and strengthening families.

Frank Farrow

July 2001

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# The Shifting Policy Impact of Intensive Family Preservation Services

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Frank Farrow

This essay is part of a set of three that examines the history and legacy of family preservation services. The essays—*What Is Family Preservation and Why Does It Matter?* by Jacquelyn McCroskey, *The Shifting Policy Impact of Intensive Family Preservation Services* by Frank Farrow, and *What to Make of Family Preservation Services Evaluations* by Francine Jacobs—grew from the realization that, whereas family preservation services have matured and become a standard part of child welfare, if not human services, they continue to evolve and to elude clear description. It is our hope that these essays add to family preservation’s development and to a shared understanding of its importance to the field.

## INTRODUCTION

Intensive family preservation services (IFPS) have been an important part of the child welfare policy landscape since the late 1980s. In the relatively short period since then, IFPS has been—often simultaneously—a cutting-edge service for families in crisis, a major policy direction for innovative state child welfare agencies, the focal point of national child welfare legislation, and the subject of fierce and partisan debate about the future directions for the child welfare field. Intensive family preservation services, “invented” for all practical purposes approximately twenty years ago, have left their mark on almost every aspect of the child welfare field.

In light of IFPS’ prominence, it is surprising that conclusions about these services’ policy impact are difficult to draw. By “policy impact,” this chapter means the effect of IFPS on:

- (1) Service delivery to families (i.e., whether family preservation services are a major component of what states and localities provide to families);
- (2) Child welfare expenditures;
- (3) The statutory mandates that govern child welfare; and
- (4) The general ethos, mindset, and set of principles that affect child welfare policy decisions.

On any of these dimensions, the IFPS story is complex, for several reasons.

IFPS’ impact differs greatly depending on *where* the analysis is focused. In Michigan, Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky, and other states that have made family preservation services an anchor of their child welfare systems, IFPS’ impact has been significant. In some other states, family preservation services have played a minor role. In addition, when national policy is considered, IFPS’ position within the landscape of child welfare initiatives has yet another dimension. Thus, the appropriate question is perhaps about “policy impacts,” with the emphasis on the plural. There are multiple examples of IFPS’ impact throughout the country, each important in its own right.

In addition, IFPS’ effects on policy are still evolving. Ten years ago, five years ago, even two years ago, conclusions about IFPS’ impact would have been dramatically different than they are today, and the story is still unfolding. Any final judgments about how IFPS has affected child welfare policy are premature, and even interim observations must be clearly labeled “as of now.”

## Acknowledgments

*Behind this essay and the two others that share in its examination of family preservation are numerous people who helped shape this work. First, the editors thank Susan Notkin of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation for supporting and guiding the project. Her patience and judgment were indispensable as the project continually transformed in our effort to define family preservation and capture what it means for human services. Thanks, too, to the many scholars and practitioners who offered their insights in the initial steps of the project: Douglas Besharov, Barbara Blum, Charlotte Booth, Charles Bruner, Steven Budde, Frank Farrow, Peter Forsythe, Mark Fraser, David Haapala, Robert Halpern, Francine Jacobs, Susan Kelly, Jill Kinney, Duncan Lindsey, Tony Maluccio, Peter Pecora, Peter Rossi, Lisbeth Schorr, Matthew Stagner, Gary Stangler, Cecelia Sudia, Elizabeth Tracy, Lynn Usher, Kenn Visser, Michael Wald, Michael Weber, Carol Weiss, Kathleen Wells, James Whittaker, Carol Williams, and Ying Ying Yuan. In preparation for an ensuing symposium, five authors wrote papers that were critical in shaping the days’ discussions: Frank Farrow, Francine Jacobs, Jacquelyn McCroskey, Martha Shirk, and James Whittaker. The symposium participants included Charlotte Booth, Francine Jacobs, Susan Kelly, Jacquelyn McCroskey, Kristi Nelson, Susan Notkin, Harold Richman, Lisbeth Schorr, John Schuerman, Martha Shirk, Gary Stangler, and James Whittaker. Their perceptiveness and engagement provided for lively debates and for an enhanced, if not always shared, understanding of family preservation.*

*The project also owes a great debt to Pattie Bengston who provided administrative and logistical support for the project. The project also thanks Susan Campbell, Jeff Hackett, and Laurie Juliana for their careful editorial support.*

*Finally, this work owes its existence to the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, which supported this effort as a way of examining family preservation’s history and legacy, including but also beyond its own role.*

Further complicating the story, analyses of IFPS' impact depend on the expectations that serve as the starting point. By most standards, the prominence that IFPS achieved in a relatively short period is remarkable. From another perspective, however, IFPS has not had the transformative effect on the child welfare system that many of its original proponents envisioned. These early leaders—state policy makers, practitioners, national organizations, foundation staff, and children's advocates—saw IFPS as an entry point for a host of additional changes. They hoped that IFPS would trigger larger investments in

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in-home supports for children and families and a pervasive respect for families throughout the child welfare system. Judged by these expectations, the introduction of family preservation services into child welfare has fallen short of its aims.

In light of the complicated story that family preservation has become, this chapter analyzes the policy effects of IFPS in two ways. First, it traces the evolution of IFPS' impact on state and national policy over the past twenty years. Given the shifts in how family preservation has been perceived, it seems essential to track its history in detail (where possible, by state and by time period). In addition, IFPS' development throughout the 1980s and 1990s is directly relevant to how it is viewed today. The process by which IFPS moved to the center of state and national debate can teach many lessons about the opportunities and pitfalls inherent in child welfare policy. Second, this chapter advances several observations about the status of IFPS and its legacy for the future. These observations reflect opinion as well as fact and represent a "point in time" in a rapidly evolving field. Within those limitations, they are offered as food for thought.

Before proceeding, it is important to define terms. In this chapter, "intensive fam-

ily preservation services," or IFPS, denotes a specific service approach that is characterized by intensive, short term, crisis-oriented in-home services, designed to maintain children safely at home in the care of their parents or family. This approach is represented by the Homebuilders model of IFPS, as well as by several other service models with similar characteristics. The terms "family preservation services," or simply "family preservation" include the IFPS approach, but also denote a broader range of service approaches designed to accomplish the same goal.

This chapter tracks most closely the policies that developed in association with intensive family preservation approaches. However, the distinctions among the various meanings of the term "family preservation" are often hard to maintain, just as they have been in state and national policy. The analysis in this chapter struggles with these fungible terms and simply tries to be clear about the differences when these are important.

## **FROM PRACTICE TO POLICY: THE EVOLUTION OF IFPS AND FAMILY PRESERVATION SERVICES**

IFPS' emergence as an important aspect of state and national child welfare policy is an instructive story. IFPS' development represented the deliberate, combined efforts of a group of influential state and local policy makers, child welfare provider agencies, a national foundation (the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation), children's advocates at the state and national levels, and a number of constituency and policy organizations.

At many points in IFPS' development, these partners articulated a strategy in advance and pursued it. A handful of key states placed this new service at the center of their child welfare system development. This groundswell of state and local investment in IFPS was in turn celebrated, reinforced, and promoted by an unusual mix of direct service organizations, advocacy groups, and national organizations. Together, for a number of years, the states and technical assistance providers invented the practice tools, training, fiscal strategies, legislative models, and other technologies that were necessary to support IFPS' rapid growth in the field.

The "mini-movement" around IFPS was linked to—yet sometimes at odds with—still

broader movements focused on “family-based services” and family support. While the principles underlying IFPS, family-based services, and family support had much in common, proponents of these approaches often differed over strategy. (For example, IFPS providers argued the merits of agreeing on a specific, well-tested practice approach. People committed to a wider array of family-based services believed it wiser to promote many service models.) Over time, however, the combination of strong state IFPS initiatives, along with the presence of other family-based services and the growing field of family support, helped to create sufficient momentum to lead to federal child welfare legislation.

This overall process can be summarized in three phases. The first involved translating a specific service program into a policy movement in an influential group of states. The second phase involved embodying the concepts of IFPS and family preservation in federal legislation. The third phase is the story of what happened after the federal legislation was passed, and the strength, ultimately, of a backlash against the concept of family preservation. Each of these phases is reviewed briefly below.

#### **A. Building State Policy Around Intensive Family Preservation Services**

The evolution of family preservation services begins with the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation’s efforts in the early 1980s to identify and support programs which could help families in crisis remain intact. Since 1972, the Foundation had supported foster care and adoption innovations and had taken a strong interest in passage of the landmark child welfare legislation of 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, P.L. 96-272.

One provision of that statute, in particular, intrigued the then-director of the Foundation’s Children’s Program, Peter Forsythe. Under the law, states were required to demonstrate “reasonable efforts” to prevent the removal of children from their homes and placement into out-of-home care (i.e., foster homes or residential settings). Because P.L. 96-272 provided little definition of reasonable efforts, and few states had services in place to meet this requirement,

Forsythe funded ten innovative direct service programs in hopes of identifying particularly successful interventions. All of the funded programs were short-term, crisis interventions, built on principles of recognizing and working with families’ strengths. Together, they were termed “family preservation” services.

After supporting these programs for several years, the Foundation in 1986 also invited three states to participate in its work (Arkansas, Georgia, and Nebraska). Each state chose one model of “family preservation” to pilot test it within its child welfare system.

As the state demonstrations unfolded, one of the ten family preservation programs distinguished itself in several ways. The Homebuilders program, developed by Behavioral Sciences, Inc. (BSI), a nonprofit agency in Tacoma, Washington, stood out because of the clarity of its service approach, the attention given to training and to service quality, the agency’s capacity to disseminate its approach to others, and—perhaps most strikingly—BSI’s commitment to continuous improvement based on constant self-assessment and evaluation. The Homebuilders approach was also unusual in its capacity to invent or incorporate dozens of

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ways to operationalize the principle of recognizing each family’s individual strengths, capacities, and priorities.

By 1987-88, after watching states’ experience with Homebuilders, Forsythe became convinced that this service could be introduced into state child welfare programs on a larger scale. The Foundation at that point broadened its investment, choosing to begin a course of policy innovation as well as prac-

tice change. The revised strategy sought to build capacity in the field for a more serious and sustained approach to “family preservation”—or, as this approach soon was to be called, “intensive family preservation services,” or IFPS. Three parts of this strategy emerged.

First, the Foundation continued funding to BSI for further development of the Homebuilders practice model, as well as to develop BSI’s training capacity. Over time, BSI continually worked to adapt the service model to increase its utility in the context of large public systems

Second, a loose coalition of national organizations was formed whose role in the coming years would be to work conceptually, operationally, and strategically on applying the Homebuilders approach to prevention of unnecessary foster care placement in large public child welfare systems.

Each of the participating organizations carried out a specific piece of strategic work. As time passed, this group evolved into an informal coalition that shared a common perspective on the importance of this service and developed materials emphasizing the policy dimensions of IFPS. This group included the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), the Mental Health Institute of the University of South Florida, the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL), the Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), and, of course, BSI.

Third, and most importantly for the future of family preservation, the Foundation provided support to a group of states that were committed to “strategic implementation” of IFPS, using the Homebuilders model. These states became the pioneers in many of the applications of family preservation services. As they came to “own” IFPS and see it as their innovation rather than as a Foundation-funded process, they became the translators of what had essentially been a small scale program, developed by a private agency (BSI), into a large scale approach to practice, program, and policy that had relevance within public child welfare systems.

These separate parts of an implementation strategy—attention to IFPS practice, to the tools required for its implementation, and to large scale implementation in the field—

became, over time, one strategy, as the states and the national organizations worked closely together. Sharing information on a regular basis, meeting periodically, and focusing on a common objective—to implement IFPS statewide in each of the states—the coalition of states and national organizations became increasingly deliberate about their impact as a group, an impact that far exceeded what any one of the organizations or states could achieve on its own. Participants in this coalition saw themselves as promoting an important dimension within children’s services that they felt had been lacking before.

As the states and the national organizations became more strategic, they identified the elements which would demonstrate that IFPS was not just an important programmatic “add-on” to state child welfare systems, but a major strategy of state child welfare policy. The pioneering states focused their implementation on these elements:

- *Statewide implementation of IFPS.* Policy makers turned their attention from testing IFPS as a pilot project to having this service available to families throughout the state. This was an important change in perspective. It was the beginning of seeing IFPS (and family preservation more broadly) as a core element of a continuum of child welfare services, not as a “pet project” of one administrator.
- *Supports for the practice of IFPS.* State program staff began focusing on how to maintain IFPS as a quality service. More attention was given to how IFPS “fit” with other services (i.e., how referrals were made to and from the service, how eligibility was defined, etc.). In addition, the infrastructure of quality services—training, good supervision, consideration of staffing patterns—emerged as important considerations.
- *Legislation.* The aim here was to clarify and stabilize the mandate for IFPS. Policy makers in some states felt that unless their child welfare statutes included specific authorization or requirements for IFPS, this service could be eliminated based on administrative whim.
- *A financing strategy.* As statewide availability of IFPS grew, the issue of how to



finance it became critical. Each state ultimately developed its own strategy, but the intent was to create options—from new state appropriations, to maximization of federal reimbursements under Title IV-E—that states could tailor to their own circumstances.

- “*Saturation*” of service availability. By “saturation,” policy makers meant that IFPS would reach all the families for whom it was appropriate. This aim differed from statewide implementation by adding another measure of service volume. Eventually, the states’ goal became to have IFPS available to serve the equivalent of 30 percent of the families whose children were entering foster care (based on caseworkers’ estimates that roughly that number of families might be able to care for their children safely if services were available).

Each of the states worked on these policy dimensions within its own context. During these developmental years (roughly 1988 to 1992), no state achieved all of these goals to its leaders’ satisfaction. However, “across” the eight states there was an example of almost every aspect of IFPS policy development. These examples were later to prove important, as congressional staff turned to these states to learn how IFPS could best be implemented and to determine what effect it had had. Each state contributed important learnings to the overall knowledge IFPS.

**Michigan** was one of the first states to adopt IFPS. Implementation was led from within the Department of Social Services by Susan Kelly, a senior staff person respected both by field staff and by agency leaders. Michigan implemented the program as comprehensively as any state, and its particular contributions were the attention that state officials gave to high quality service, to training, and to the other supports needed for first-rate program implementation (e.g., supervision, central office support, professional development, etc.). Michigan also pioneered the use of IFPS with families experiencing substance abuse, a population that was soon to overwhelm urban child welfare systems.

**Missouri’s** IFPS program grew from an unusual public-private partnership between the State Department of Social Services, directed by Gary Stangler, and the statewide

children’s advocacy group, Citizens for Missouri’s Children, founded and directed by Phyllis Rozansky. In addition, the State Mental Health agency, led by Keith Shaeffer, was an early partner in this effort. Over time, Missouri emerged as the state most committed to implementing IFPS across its child welfare, mental health, juvenile justice, and special education programs. Missouri also was creative in its mechanisms for financing IFPS on a broad scale: the state’s use of Title IV-E revenue maximization for this purpose started a trend that other states soon adopted.

**Kentucky** was both one of the first states to implement IFPS, and, became the first to introduce legislation mandating this new service as part of a state’s child welfare continuum. An unusual alliance among the State’s Commission on Family Services, led by then-director Nancy Rawlings; a key Judge, Richard Fitzgerald; Kentucky Youth Advocates; and a legislative leader, Representative Tom Burch, succeeded in passing IFPS legislation in 1989. Kentucky’s law required IFPS to be offered to prevent unne-

*States’ linkage of IFPS to other changes in child and family service delivery was also to be influential during later national policy debates.*

cessary foster care placements. Like Missouri, Kentucky also adopted a cross-systems approach to IFPS, with particularly strong ties to the mental health system.

**Iowa’s** IFPS program was distinguished by two characteristics: its size in relation to its child welfare program, and its close ties to a unique financing strategy, called decategorization. This was in part due to the leadership of a key legislator, Charles Bruner, in crafting the state’s IFPS strategy. Bruner helped the legislature appropriate funds for statewide IFPS implementation. In addition, he helped to develop (along with Doug Nelson, then with the Center for the Study of Social Policy) a strategy for giving local jurisdictions discretion over a pool of twenty-six separate child welfare funding streams so that localities could use these dollars flexibly to fund new community services. Iowa’s fiscal strategy directly addressed the funding trade-offs that were possible between out-of-home care funding and IFPS.

*Tennessee's* implementation of IFPS was also spearheaded by a prominent legislator, Senator Bill Purcell, then the chair of the Select Committee on Children and later the majority leader. Purcell championed IFPS because he saw it as the clearest embodiment of the directions in which he believed the entire system needed to move, i.e., toward home and community-based services, tailored to the needs of individual families and children. Tennessee's IFPS implementation was interwoven with broader changes that the state sought locally (eventually involving the creation of local boards to redesign human services).

The group of states and local jurisdictions deliberately implementing a large scale IFPS strategy was completed with New Jersey, New York (particularly New York City), Connecticut, and Contra Costa County in California.

While these states began implementing IFPS at different times, by 1992 they had all made progress in anchoring IFPS in important dimensions of child welfare policy.

- Service capacity had grown markedly.
- Legislation (three states) or executive branch authorization (five states) was in place. IFPS had been introduced into the core legislative and regulatory mandates of these states' child welfare systems.

*Statutory backing for IFPS was a goal of most of the pioneering states, as well as of the national organizations who helped them, including the National Conference of State Legislators, the Children's Defense Fund, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy.*

- All of the states had found ways to finance this rapid service growth. IFPS was a regular part of child welfare appropriations in all of these states. Several (especially Missouri, Michigan, Iowa, and Tennessee) had specific budget line items for IFPS.
- The ethos of child welfare service delivery was affected in most of these states. Generally, Missouri, Michigan, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Iowa were the

most explicit in using IFPS to help create a deliberate "culture change" in child welfare. These states sought a shift toward a greater respect for families' strengths, a more careful judgment about when a child needed to be removed from his or her home, and a renewed confidence in frontline staff's ability to implement practice innovations. Not coincidentally, these states were those in which the commitment to IFPS was strongest among senior policy makers, either agency heads or legislative leaders.

Program growth was rapid and the number of children and families served was significant. By state policy makers' own goals, they were still short of "full implementation." However, compared to the pace of most program innovations, IFPS' spread within these states was fast, especially considering that it was implemented voluntarily by each state, not as the result of a federal mandate or even a federally inspired policy direction.

Several characteristics of these states' IFPS implementation were to prove important when, in subsequent years, family preservation became a theme of national child welfare policy as well as of state policy.

These states had all positioned IFPS as a level of service on the continuum "between" (1) regular casework services to support and stabilize families, and (2) the point of placement of a child outside his or her home. State policy makers, as well as national organizations and Foundation staff, agreed that the "last resort before placement" utilization of IFPS was the most appropriate, defensible, and cost-effective. In large measure, states' positioning of IFPS as a placement prevention service (with the attendant hopes for cost savings) was responsible for IFPS' rapid growth. Moreover, eventually, the inability to prove on a national scale that IFPS could alter foster care placement patterns was to lead to later problems.

States' linkage of IFPS to other changes in child and family service delivery was also to be influential during later national policy debates. The most prominent state spokespeople for IFPS at this time saw IFPS as one of a number of changes they were advancing—changes that, taken together, would make service delivery more responsive to family needs. Thus, Gary Stangler, Bill

Purcell, Susan Kelly, Nancy Rawlings, and Charles Bruner, each in his or her very different way, were as committed to overall service delivery reforms as they were to IFPS. This early history of linkage helped shape later federal policy on IFPS, which continued the aim of advancing a broader continuum of services as well as “infrastructure” changes such as local involvement in the design of child and family service systems.

The focus on legislation within these states proved important. Statutory backing for IFPS was a goal of most of the pioneering states, as well as of the national organizations who helped them, including the National Conference of State Legislators, the Children’s Defense Fund, and the Center for the Study of Social Policy. (NCSL was particularly important in reinforcing the value of legislation, and in the late 1980s had convened three meetings of legislative leaders from these eight states, garnering their support for IFPS and their willingness to put an IFPS mandate into state law.) The fact that state legislation had been enacted helped build the implicit case for the appropriateness of federal statutory change.

Perhaps most importantly, these states’ actions generated a groundswell of professional opinion in favor of IFPS (and family preservation more broadly). As mentioned above, support for family-based services had also grown markedly during this same period and contributed to a broadly shared belief about what the important “next step” in federal child welfare legislation should be. However, these states’ IFPS implementation provided evidence that child welfare agencies’ commitment to family-based services was more than rhetorical; administrators now knew how to translate these concepts into large scale action. Thus, family preservation could be comfortably promoted at the national level. The approach had passed muster with state administrators and legislators. The logical next step, then, was to incorporate this new policy direction into federal law.

## **B. National Legislation to Support Family Preservation**

By 1990, the most recent significant child welfare legislation was ten years old. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act, passed in 1980, had been landmark legislation, creating a framework for child welfare

policy nationally that centered around procedural safeguards designed to promote permanency for children and protect against overlong stays for children in out of home care.

In the views of most advocates and child welfare professionals, however, one aspect of the 1980 legislation had never been satis-

*. . . one aspect of the 1980 legislation had never been satisfactorily defined or implemented. This was the “reasonable efforts,” referred to earlier. It required that states make “reasonable efforts” to maintain children in their own homes before removing them for placement in foster homes or residential care.*

factorily defined or implemented. This was the “reasonable efforts,” referred to earlier. It required that states make “reasonable efforts” to maintain children in their own homes before removing them for placement in foster homes or residential care. For observers of placement trends, this provision was particularly important because the reality was that children from poor and minority families were disproportionately removed from their homes. Advocates hoped that the reasonable efforts provision would translate into systematic state efforts to provide families with help before placement was the only remaining intervention.

However, following passage of P.L. 96-272, no clear definition of reasonable efforts emerged from the Department of Health and Human Services, nor was funding provided to help states with their implementation of this provision. Federal funding for Title IV-B—the part of the 1980 legislation that was most directly intended to finance services to families in their own homes and communities—was “capped” funding and never grew to its full authorized amount, which in any case was only about \$500 million. By contrast, foster care expenditures under the new law continued to mushroom, funded by the open-ended entitlement of Title IV-E.

With the growing sense that federal child welfare policy was incomplete, the national organizations whose work with Congress tends to most influence this policy-

—the Children’s Defense Fund, the Child Welfare League of America, and the Association of Public Welfare Administrators (APWA)—began working with Congressional staff to develop new legislation. The aim was not to alter the basic framework of P.L. 96-272, but to add provisions that would expand the continuum of responses to family need required by federal law and supported with federal funds.

By the early 1990s, almost all of the national organizations whose views influ-

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ence Congress on these issues were proponents of the IFPS approach specifically, and of family preservation generally. They saw IFPS as an important way to give definition to the vague requirement of “reasonable efforts.” In addition to those just mentioned, the National Governors Association (NGA) and the National Conference of State Legislators were willing to actively campaign for an explicit role for family preservation in federal policy, based on their members’ strong interest and leadership in this area. Thus, as initial discussions about legislation moved into the more formal process of legislative development and consideration, there was near uniformity in the national organizations’ opinion that family preservation should be one of the major emphases of whatever legislation was eventually created.

The states that had implemented IFPS became critical sources of evidence about the value of IFPS. Michigan and Missouri

played particularly important roles in this regard. In 1991, Michigan hosted a site visit to enable House and Senate staff to gain more direct exposure to what IFPS meant in practice. For a full day, staff members interacted with child welfare workers, with legislators and administrators who strongly supported it, and—probably most powerfully—with families who had participated as IFPS consumers. The families’ stories—of how IFPS had helped mothers to move beyond addiction, or find a new home outside of a dangerous neighborhood, or weave together a support system in times of stress—communicated the power of this new practice in ways that no amount of written material could do. The fact that well over one hundred people involved in IFPS in Michigan, families as well as agency heads, were urging Congressional staff to “help us to do more of this,” gave committee staff new insights into what states meant when they said that this was the most important child welfare policy direction of recent years.

Other, more conventional parts of the legislative process unfolded in 1990 and 1991. Congressional hearings provided an official record of state, local, and professional support for IFPS. Not surprisingly, many of the people already mentioned in this account testified. From states, Gary Strangler and Susan Kelly testified several times. From the national organizations, CWLA, APWA, CDF, NGA, NCSL, and CSSP all officially urged inclusion of family preservation as an element of federal policy.

The fact that national organizations were so united in their support, especially in the all-important behind-the-scenes discussions with staff and members, was critical. Mary Lee Allen from CDF coordinated a strategy that ensured that key Congressional leaders and their staffs heard from the appropriate people when it would be most important.

Finally, both the incoming and outgoing administrations supported the inclusion of family preservation in federal law, although the primary impetus for this direction had emerged from states, not federal officials.

In the 1992–1993 session, Congress passed the Family Preservation and Support Amendments to child welfare law. It involved some compromises for advocates of IFPS. The specificity attendant on the Homebuilders services model, which had served

the pioneering states well, was lost in the law. Family preservation was defined generally in the Act, consistent with a preference for softening federal mandates and giving states greater latitude in program and policy decisions. More importantly, however, the law provided new funding for state and local family preservation and family support programs. It explicitly recognized the concept and practice of family preservation. Looking ahead to implementation, the statute was again deliberately non-specific. HHS was charged with issuing guidance that would flesh out some of the generalities of the statute.

Throughout this process of legislative development, state experience was an important factor. States provided evidence of widespread support for family preservation and produced people willing to advocate strongly for the new federal law. Similarly, as HHS developed regulations for states, the “lessons learned” about IFPS by states strongly influenced administrative policy directions.

HHS used an unusually participatory process to develop the guidance and regulations for the new federal law. HHS staff held consultative sessions with a wide range of people in the field. In addition, they listened to a consortium of national organizations and state representatives who worked over several months to provide specific written recommendations about the emerging regulations.

Thus, when the “regs” finally emerged, it was not surprising that they reflected many of the directions which had been first implemented in the eight pioneering states and were part of the “lessons learned” which national organizations felt had become evident from states’ experience. The regulations emphasized the importance of:

- state and local discretion in planning the balance between family preservation and family support programs and in developing the plan for implementation of the new law;
- the cross systems connections of family preservation and the need to involve multiple partners and systems in its implementation;
- linkages with other systems changes and community-based delivery system development; and
- state-local partnerships.

When federal regulations were issued in 1993, the process of family preservation’s policy growth from state experience to federal law was complete. The challenge was placed back in the hands of state and local administrators: to use the new resources to build even stronger systems of family preservation and family support.

### **C. Policy Change Since Passage of the Federal Law**

In the years since 1993, policy development related to family preservation has followed two paths. In the field, family preservation services have continued to be an important

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part of the service array offered by state and local child welfare agencies. For example, in the states that were so prominent in the early days of IFPS development, IFPS availability has either been maintained or expanded. In other states, the new dollars provided under federal law were used to develop or expand a variety of home-based interventions aimed at stabilizing families and allowing children to remain in their own homes. In short, in states and localities, family preservation services have continued to grow, even if not at the explosive pace of earlier years. Family preservation has become “institutionalized” within the child welfare continuum..

National policy debates about family preservation, however, followed a different path. For the past several years, family preservation has been at the center of the most acrimonious and polarizing debates about child welfare’s future. “Family preservation” in these debates was rarely precisely defined. However, it came to symbolize for its critics a lack of attention to the safety needs of children, and a willingness to put concern about parents ahead of concern about children. The attack on family preservation was fought largely with anecdotes, stereotypes, and preconceptions, but when the safety of children is the issue, these are powerful weapons. Over a period of several years, the national policy

momentum surrounding family preservation was dissipated and then reversed. By 1998, when the next major piece of child welfare legislation was debated and enacted, the goal for proponents of family preservation services was simply to avoid serious backtracking on a recognition of family preservation as a valid part of the continuum of nationally encouraged service responses. There was no hope of strengthening the family preservation mandate.

What caused the reversal of family preservation's image and influence? Several factors contributed to the success of the back-

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lash and thus a new policy climate in which child welfare had to operate.

First, evaluations of family preservation created doubt about the service's effectiveness in preventing unnecessary foster care placements. Children receiving IFPS rarely entered placement, but neither did children in control or comparison groups. The problem became known as one of “targeting.” IFPS programs seemed unable to use the service systematically for children who would otherwise have been placed. While the evaluations found that IFPS generated other benefits to families, and certainly created no increased risk of harm for children, a cloud had been created over IFPS which weakened arguments on its behalf (at least from those who had justified the service by promising placement prevention). These doubts then left family preservation services more vulnerable to those who opposed these services on more ideological grounds.

Second, the debate about family preservation soon became disconnected from any operational sense of what the service was trying to accomplish or how it was implemented. Originally, the momentum for family preservation had come from the field—from practitioners and administrators who understood what it meant in terms of “real world” child welfare practice. By contrast, the most

severe attacks on family preservation came from observers, commentators, academics, and occasionally politicians. Their dislike of family preservation was rarely generated by firsthand experience, but rather from a fear of what “that concept” could lead to. The argument was no longer about the merits of a specific intervention, but about the possibility that it could generate permissiveness toward parental behavior that would leave large numbers of children at risk. The people who could best counter this argument—workers who provided the service to thousands of families each day because they believed that it increased children's safety and agency heads who worked to expand this service—were not writing editorials about this service, were not making speeches, and had few forums in which to share the evidence of their own eyes.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, the power of the issue of children's safety was underestimated by family preservation's supporters. Fears about children's safety turned out to be the type of flashpoint concern which, when raised, dwarfed every other consideration. Because family preservation's critics positioned themselves early on as the ultimate defenders of children's safety (and accused family preservation supporters of caring more about parents' rights than children's well-being), proponents of family preservation were constantly on the defensive. The course of events may have been entirely different if the original IFPS program had been christened “Safety First” (or something similar) and if the arguments on its behalf had always started by emphasizing the goal of extra vigilance to assure that children were safe. The same service—which in the eyes of its creators and implementers is all about safety—could have had a different history in the last five years.

One final factor may have influenced the extensive criticism of family preservation. The rhetoric about family preservation's dangers reveals an abiding distrust of the families whose care of their children is suspect. The families who enter child welfare systems are disproportionately poor, often have problems with substance abuse, are often single parents, and are disproportionately of color. IFPS' strong assertion that these families have strengths, and that in making the assessment of children's safety those strengths should be counted, may have

triggered prejudices—or at least ignorance—about what these families’ capacities can be.

Whether these or other reasons were responsible, family preservation’s position as the leading edge of child welfare policy had almost disappeared by 1998 when the new federal legislation passed. Federal emphasis shifted to adoption services and to ensuring that children were released for adoption more quickly than in the past. In many ways, the new legislation was explicitly designed to counter the “problems” of family preservation, whether these problems were real or imagined.

Thus, the most recent chapter of policy development around family preservation stands in sharp contrast to IFPS’ earliest years. From being a string of successes, the recent history of family preservation has been one of maintenance (or slow expansion) in the field, and steady erosion of national policy makers’ interest.

## **WHERE WE ARE NOW: THE LEGACY AND THE FUTURE OF FAMILY PRESERVATION POLICY**

Several conclusions can be drawn about the status of family preservation’s impact on the nation’s child welfare system.

First, it seems clear that family preservation has changed child welfare practice in ways that can never completely disappear. IFPS and other forms of family preservation have created and confirmed a now-wide-spread professional belief that intensive interventions can make a difference to families, stabilize or resolve family crises, and—for some families—provide the extra measure of protection that allows a child to remain safely in his or her own home rather than being placed in another setting. In most states, family preservation services are a specific point on the continuum of services that was not there fifteen years ago. Changing the framework of child welfare service delivery in this way is a major accomplishment.

Evidence of these changes can be seen along the policy dimensions on which this chapter has focused.

- Thousands of families receive family preservation services on a routine basis. Child welfare agencies have a new type of intervention at their disposal. The availability of these services has not

“turned the curve” on foster care placements in any state, and nationally it is still debated whether IFPS has any effect on preventing placement. Nevertheless, child welfare agencies provide the service routinely with the confidence that it can make a difference to families facing serious crises.

- Expenditures on family preservation services, while small in comparison with out-of-home care costs, represent a larger investment in in-home services than existed before family preservation’s emergence.
- Federal statutes and the laws in many states recognize “family preservation” as a legitimate part of child welfare services. There seems to be no likelihood that the statutory base for these services will disappear.

It is less clear whether IFPS and other forms of family preservation have changed the ethos, the mindset, and the principles that guide day-to-day child welfare policy deci-

*An emerging direction in child welfare is to envision these services as part of a larger array of services and supports that is developed more integrally with local communities and neighborhoods.*

sions. This varies so much by state, and by locality within states, that it seems impossible at this point to generalize nationally.

Despite these accomplishments, the momentum behind family preservation services appears to have slowed and, in some places, come to a standstill. As indicated above, the paralysis is less in the field, where services continue to be delivered, than at the level of national policy. However, such paralysis eventually affects the field, and it is unlikely that any national attempt to promote large-scale expansion of an in-home service model within the child welfare system could be sustained in the foreseeable future.

What then lies ahead for the development of services that can keep children safe and strengthen families in their own homes and communities?

The answer may lie in a different framework for conceptualizing, designing, and

implementing these services. An emerging direction in child welfare is to envision these services as part of a larger array of services and supports that is developed more integrally with local communities and neighborhoods. With this perspective, the development of service interventions focuses less on any one service model and more on the entire “collection” of help that a community can offer. Put another way, the emphasis for child welfare services shifts to the variety of strategies that a neighborhood (or a city, or a region) can use to achieve the desired outcomes of child safety, permanence, and well-being, rather than to a particular service model in a catalogue of agency services. The goals of child safety, strengthening families, and assuring permanent homes for children become community-wide goals to which a host of strategies can be dedicated.

This approach is not entirely new. It has occurred informally in many communities for years. Los Angeles’ development of neighborhood networks for family preservation represented a version of this approach. More recently, other states and localities have been following this strategy as they develop what is increasingly referred to as “community child welfare.”

A strong argument in favor of this approach is that it seems to avoid the polar-

izing debates that occur whenever “child safety” is pitted against “strengthening families”—which was at the crux of the backlash against family preservation. Community child welfare focuses explicitly on the desired outcomes of safety, permanence, and well-being. Implementation discussions address how best to accomplish those goals through a wide range of services and supports. Debate is, so far at least, not reduced to arguments about one service rather than another. In fact, at the community level, the connection between strengthening families and assuring child safety seems to be a part of accepted wisdom, not a reason for contention.

Whatever develops with community child protection, the important point for the child welfare field as a whole is to avoid in the future the fruitless (and false) debate between protecting children and strengthening families. The fact that the family preservation movement could find itself at the center of such a debate should be a powerful lesson for future child welfare policy makers. Whatever direction comes next, it needs to bind together the goals that have always been the foundation for good child welfare practice: assuring children’s safety, providing children with permanent and loving homes, and strengthening the family life which surrounds children in these homes.







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