

# SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

## 2026-2030 SIP STRATEGY OVERVIEW

### Aftercare Enhancements

**WHAT:** Enhance aftercare planning and connection to prevention providers by preparing families for exiting the system from the start.

**WHY:** Data from the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services shows that ongoing family support after case closure is linked to lower rates of foster care re-entry. Focus groups highlighted that parents and youth often struggle to access needed services after their cases close, feeling unsupported and disconnected. Aftercare services—parenting support, mental health counseling, financial aid, and community resources—help stabilize families and support a safer home environment.

**How:**

- Pilot test innovative, individualized aftercare planning approaches.
- Strengthen service partnerships between FCS and SUD providers to emphasize aftercare/recovery support services.
- Integrate aftercare planning into Child & Family Team practice throughout the case life cycle.
- Define provider expectations to match aftercare service needs of target population.

### Improve Parent Engagement

**WHAT:** Better engage parents in meeting individualized case goals with targeted educational & support activities.

**WHY:** Research indicates parent education is strongly linked to lower re-entry into care by improving family stability, reunification plan compliance, & advocacy skills. Education also reduces parental stress, encourages engagement with services, & increases long-term stability following reunification. Birth parent & community partner focus groups identified need to strengthen skills of social workers & resource parents to address complex needs of parents such as mental health and substance use.

**How:**

- Improve parents' understanding and experience of dependency court processes to improve case planning participation.
- Assess parent engagement experiences via case review data; interviews with recently reunified parents & parent partners; and staff surveys.
- Identify & employ best practices for engaging families with complex needs (mental health & substance use).
- Identify skill gaps and provide training opportunities for social workers & resource parents.

### Increase Networks of Support

**WHAT:** Expand the circle of natural and community-based supports—extended family, friends, mentors, community connections—for every family entering the system.

**WHY:** Creating a more stable and sustainable support environment for children can significantly reduce re-entries into care by helping families become better equipped to handle challenges or crises. Ready access to practical and emotional support from trusted individuals strengthens parents' resilience, confidence, and ability to meet their children's needs before circumstances escalate. When parents feel supported and less isolated, reliance on formal helping systems can be reduced.

**How:**

- Develop method for early identification and assessment of families with limited networks of support.
- Enhance CFT practices—communication, engagement, planning, evaluation—to include natural supports.
- Integrate development of individualized networks of support for each family from case entry to dismissal.
- Strengthen resource parent capacity as family allies through peer support groups, coaching & respite.

### Promote Family Connections

**WHAT:** Strengthen community & family support networks to promote permanency for probation youth.

**WHY:** National research shows that family engagement and relational permanency significantly improve outcomes for youth in juvenile justice and child welfare systems. Many probation youth struggle with instability and delayed permanency. Facilitating stronger connections with biological family, extended kin, and trusted adults helps youth create a more stable and supportive social network. This strategy targets family engagement and community support to increase pro-social relationships and accelerate reunification or permanent placement.

**How:**

- Structured identification and engagement of natural supports during the case lifespan.
- Resource guides and connection plans to link youth & families to ongoing community supports.
- Coordination with FCS and community providers for high-fidelity wraparound support.
- Structured CFT meetings focused on transition and aftercare planning.