

# Child Welfare System Improvement Plan



## Steering Committee Meeting Minutes



### Spring SIP Steering Committee Meeting, May 11, 2026

Nearly 60 individuals attended the Spring quarter meeting of the Santa Cruz County System Improvement Plan (SIP) Steering Committee on Monday, May 11, 2026, at Simpkins Family Swim Center. The focus of the meeting was to share progress toward the design and implementation of the strategic initiatives contained in Santa Cruz County's 2026-2030 SIP. Attendees engaged in discussion around key questions related to implementation of the SIP strategies.

These notes summarize the main points covered during the May 11<sup>th</sup> meeting. Together with presentation slides and handouts posted to the Santa Cruz County [SIP website](#), a full account of the Spring SIP Steering Committee meeting can be found.

### Welcome & Opening Remarks

Santa Cruz County (SCC) Supervisor Kim De Serpa, Assistant Director of Family & Children's Services Claudia Herrera-Sandoval, and Juvenile Probation Assistant Director Jimmy Cook welcomed attendees and set the tone for the meeting. Below are highlights from their remarks:

- Recognition of not being able to do this work alone; need to partner & work together.
- Today's focus on strategies for improving our child welfare and probation systems is an opportunity to strengthen the public-private partnerships that help ensure the well-being of children, youth and families throughout our community.
- The SCC SIP Steering Committee members Importance of the role of in helping ensure success.

Leslie Ann Hay, SIP Implementation Consultant, reviewed the agenda and described the goals of the meeting as:

- To learn about the strategic vision and integrated Theory of Change for the 2026-2030 Santa Cruz County System Improvement Plan (SIP).

- To understand relevant child & family outcome data to become more informed about current trends in the service population.
- To explore key issues related to implementation of the SIP strategies.
- To know what activities are on the horizon for the SIP Steering Committee and the SIP Work Group.

## **Role of Child Welfare in Society and Family & Children’s Services in Santa Cruz County**

As background, Leslie Ann described how Santa Cruz County Family and Children’s Services (FCS) conceptualizes its role in practice and in the context of our community. Key points are:

- Child welfare ensures safety, permanency, and family well-being through prevention, investigation, foster care, and adoption.
- When viewed from the family’s perspective, the objectives of FCS becoming involved in families lives are to: Prevent child abuse & neglect, Preserve & strengthen families, Restore the capacity of families to care for their children, Rebuild alternate options to ensure every child has a forever family, and Prepare families and young people for safe, stable, sustainable transitions to life after involvement with CWS.
- At the system level, Family & Children’s Services is focused on accountability for outcomes. The aim is to continually improve outcomes via system-wide practice enhancements, continuum of care interventions, and building organizational & system capacity to meet identified child and family needs.
- Some of FCS’ key evidence-based practices include Structured Decision-Making, Safety Organized Practice, Child and Family Teaming, and CANS—assessment tool to help inform service needs and placement decisions.

Leslie Ann concluded this segment by polling the audience to recognize the wide array of organizations and sectors represented in the room.

## **SIP Strategies and Leads**

Leslie Ann reminded attendees of the four SIP Strategies planned for implementation and evaluation during the 2026-2030 timeframe.

- Aftercare Enhancements: Enhance aftercare planning and support post-case closure, led by Yesenia Salinas.
- Improve Parent Engagement: Increase parents' understanding and participation in court processes, led by Stephanie Vikati.
- Increase Networks of Support: Expand natural and community supports for every family entering the system, led by Melissa Delgadillo.
- Family Connections: Strengthen community and family networks to promote permanency for probation youth, led by Jimmy Cook.

## **Theory of Change**

Leslie Ann defined a "Theory of Change" as "an explanation of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context". In other words, it's simply a hypothesis for why these four strategies will result in reduced re-entry into care and positive permanency outcomes. The logic statement and system level impact are summarized below:

- Engaged families supported by natural networks lead to resilience, stability, safety, and overall well-being.
- System-level change involves early intervention, ongoing support, coordinated transitions, and community connections.

## **Target Population Data and Challenges**

Below is a summary of the data shared by the SIP Implementation Leads in the context of their presentations:

- 2025 case trends: 11 transitioned from reunification, 14 housed with FUP vouchers, 37 dismissed into community, 7 to fathers' as primary caregivers.
- Demographics of 37 dismissals in 2025: 62% Latino, 38% White; 54% under age 5, 46% ages 5-18; 54% female, 46% male; 68% North/Mid County, 32% South County.
- Re-entry challenges include substance use, mental health issues, and lack of support sources.

## **Taking a Deeper Dive into the FCS SIP Strategies**

Each of the SIP Implementation Leads for FCS presented background on their assigned SIP strategy and posed a question to the audience. Each segment is summarized below:

### **Aftercare Enhancements, Yesenia Salinas**

- Focus on linking families to prevention providers from the start.
- Key areas include ongoing support, service partnerships, and pilot testing innovative closure approaches.
- Critical questions address target population, practice changes, provider expectations, and success metrics.
- Key challenges FCS see parents present at time of re-entry are: Difficulty maintaining sobriety / recovery given chronic substance use issues; Difficulty managing chronic, ongoing mental health issues; and Lack of sources of support (both professional and natural) for the family to access during tough times
- Question to audience: What other factors do you see that destabilize families after they've left the child welfare system?

### **Improve Parent Engagement, Claudia Herrera-Sandoval for Stephanie Vikati**

- Aim to improve understanding of dependency court processes.
- Barriers include transportation, delays, language barriers, and understanding legal procedures.
- Success factors include: service participation resulting in behavior change, demonstrating protective capacity, and family-friendly court processes.
- Question to audience: What other factors do you think are important for parents involved in dependency court to be successful?

### **Increase Networks of Support, Melissa Delgadillo**

- Expand natural and community-based supports to reduce re-entry.
- Develop early assessment methods, enhance peer support, and strengthen resource capacity.
- Target population demographics mirror those of dismissed cases, emphasizing ethnic, age, gender, and geographic diversity.
- FCS uses case planning, flex funds and aftercare planning to help families build capacity for safety and stability after exiting the child welfare system.

- Question to audience: *What programs & resources are available in the community to support our families?*

### **Promote Family Connections, Jimmy Cook**

- Strengthen community and family networks to support permanency.
- Activities include identifying natural supports, creating connection plans, and coordinating with providers for wraparound services.

### **Resources and Next Steps**

Bridget Semlek, Senior Human Services Analyst for FCS, wrapped up the meeting with the following information:

- SIP website and data dashboard available for ongoing updates.
- Next SIP Steering Committee meeting scheduled for August 10, 2026. Next meeting of SIP Work Group virtual meetings is June 10, 2026 from 3:30 – 5:00pm. Details to follow.