

→ Creating pathways to stability for immigrating children and families



How ICF combines expertise in child welfare, workforce optimization, and data science and technology to support immigrating children and families



Every child who immigrates to the United States arrives with a story that is all their own. They may be entering with refugee status or crossing the border without immigration documents and/or legal status. They may be with loved ones or unaccompanied. They may have a medical condition that requires immediate treatment. They may be frightened, in poor health, and unable to communicate their needs.

Surrounding and supporting every child is an invisible safety net of support. Federal agencies such as the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) must coordinate with each other, and with a web of nonprofit, faith-based, and community networks to ensure that each child, youth, and family that enters the country is cared for appropriately—even as they transition from initial to long-term resettlement, or from shelters or foster care to safe sponsor families in search of a stable home.

If you're part of this safety net, you know there's a lot at play behind the scenes: Complex and siloed systems, vast amounts of data, and a large network of care providers who need support and resources to do the work on the ground—not to mention varied policies and laws across state borders.

What is the most compassionate and effective way to assist immigrating children and families from the moment they enter the United States?

Through our 30+ years of supporting clients such as the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and

several of its offices, including the Office on Trafficking in Persons (OTIP), the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the Office of Head Start (OHS), the Office of Child Care (OCC), the Children's Bureau (CB), and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), we understand that effective care hinges on having child welfare experts involved in every step of the process. We also know that delivering training and technical assistance (T/TA) in the service of high-impact missions is not a copy/paste exercise—while there are some best practices that apply across programs and environments, a key ingredient for success is anchoring your approach in a deep understanding of the individual needs of the people you're supporting.

In the case of immigrating children and families, what are the immediate needs that must be addressed, and what's on the horizon? How can providers make data-driven decisions, factor in cultural considerations, and communicate effectively to care for vulnerable populations? We pair our expertise in the U.S. child welfare space with a nuanced understanding of the unique and ever-changing needs of immigrating children and families to help these individuals find a safe and permanent home.

To achieve this vital goal, federal agencies and their external partners should focus in three areas:

- **Intra- and inter-agency collaboration**
- **Data management solutions**
- **Workforce training and optimization**

Creating pathways to stability through intra- and interagency communication and collaboration

DHS. DOS. OTIP. FBI. Immigration court. ICE. Local law enforcement. Local medical providers. Educational systems. Child protection. Trauma-informed resources.

Supporting immigrating children, youth, and families is a team effort. The entire network of providers at the federal, state, territory, and local levels must work together to ensure that each child and family is cared for from the moment they enter the country until they are either on a path to self-sufficiency or placed in a sponsor's home. For unaccompanied children, this extends even beyond, as care providers continue to monitor the home conditions post-release for safety and ensure children receive proper schooling, childcare, housing, nutrition, and medical care.

This safety net, while comprised of individual threads of support, must learn to function as a unit. It's important to understand the full complement of agencies and providers in the net—accounting for their different specialty areas and knowing how to leverage them at just the right time to meet the needs of the government and the children in their care.

When an unaccompanied child first enters the U.S., how can the system provide support at every step of the journey, from a federally managed group care setting to a safe sponsor home? Communication and collaboration are key—and both must be anchored in a sensitive understanding of the immigrating child/family.

To provide continuous support to immigrating children and families throughout their journey to stability, federal agencies and their external partners should follow best practices such as:

- **Establish shared decision-making models with community leaders** to guide decisions and support prioritization. Tradeoff matrices, for example, chart the level of anticipated effort against the impact the decision will have on the unit or organization. Together, the group works through the prioritization of different recommended strategies and identifies which initiatives should be tackled based on their placement within the matrix.
- **Leverage cultural brokers to engage local immigrant and refugee communities** and build trust. To engage effectively, partner with religious, non-profit, and community-based organizations serving the immigrant communities.
- **Engage early with the full network of agencies** that provide post-release services to immigrating children and families. Once the child has been placed in a safe and stable home, will they have enough healthy food to eat? Will they require before- or after-school care, and do they have access to medical services? By taking a holistic view of the child's needs beyond placement, programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and Head Start can be brought into the fold to provide continuous support.
- **Embrace cross-collaborative processes** such as panel presentations, focus groups, and community town halls to make learning and sharing more dynamic while encouraging stakeholders to use their voices to help shape solutions.

Creating pathways to stability through data management solutions

Effective mission delivery is built on a foundation of accessible and optimized data that powers informed decision-making. But federal agencies struggle to get the right data in the right hands, with **2 in 3 federal leaders** reporting that decision-makers are disconnected from the data they need to guide their organization.

The amount of data collected through today's information systems, while impressive, can be complex and overwhelming, making it difficult for government institutions to manage, analyze, and effectively use it. Yet taking a data-driven approach to decision-making can inform program design, funding decisions, program monitoring, customer experience (CX), and employee experience (EX). It can also reduce or remove unconscious biases, and mitigate risk for children, families, and agencies.

To create pathways to stability, safety, and permanency for immigrating children and families, agencies and their partners should follow best practices in data collection and analysis such as:

- **Select the right set of metrics—and keep them small and focused.** Performance measurement is a cornerstone of effective program management. In most federal programs, particularly those involving human services, there can be an extensive array of practices and outcomes considered important. Selecting too many measures will dilute the return on investment and risk creating information overload, confusion regarding which are the priority measures, and an unmanageable performance measurement process. We have found that it's critical to start with a small set of priority measures; ideally 5 to 7 core aggregate measures and 5 to 10 qualitative measures.
- **Analyze data needs and gaps across systems.** Once you have defined your measures, conduct a comprehensive analysis of data needs and gaps across multiple systems. Providing hands-on support to refine data collection and data quality processes can help produce a core set of quality data that can be used to drive decisions.

Improving child welfare through dynamic information

Our nation's child welfare professionals—social workers specializing in child abuse and neglect prevention, adoption, and foster care—work tirelessly and with limited resources to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families. And they need support. ICF manages the nation's largest library dedicated solely to child welfare, putting essential research into the hands of social workers to help achieve this mission.

[Learn more about ICF's Child Welfare Information Gateway work in this client story.](#)



- **Separate evaluation from the delivery of training and technical assistance (T/TA).** Data analysis is a critical component of grantee performance evaluation and continuous quality improvement efforts. To maintain independence and objectivity from the delivery of T/TA, the evaluation team should ideally operate outside the internal team structure—but be integrated enough to have the full context needed to produce meaningful findings. This outside but trusted partner can appropriately collect, analyze, and interpret feedback and use the findings to revise and improve the scope, content, and delivery of T/TA services in real time.
- **Make data understandable and actionable with user-friendly dashboards.** Data dashboards deliver insights to system users and provide a snapshot of recipient activities, surfacing barriers, sharing lessons learned from T/TA engagement, and revealing T/TA participation trends. The trick is in serving up the right data to the right people and making it easy to interpret. To get to this user-friendly outcome, agencies and their external partners should apply human-centered design and product management best practices from the start to make sure they understand data needs and preferences throughout the system. But surfacing the right data is only half of the story—it's imperative to bring dashboard insights into standing meetings and check-ins to get an accurate view of performance, illuminate any gaps in program delivery, and direct decisions and actions. For example, we developed an interactive dashboard for CDC's Division of Overdose Prevention (DOP) to disseminate the results of the Capacity Assessment of TA Supports (CATS), which has greatly improved CDC DOP's ability to quickly access assessment data and use those data to inform T/TA efforts.

Preventing human trafficking with centralized training hub

The National Human Trafficking Training and Technical Assistance Center (NHTTAC) aims to reduce the vulnerabilities of those most at risk, better identify victims, increase access to trauma-informed services for survivors, and enhance their overall health and well-being. To enhance the public health response to human trafficking, we used a survivor-informed approach and built a centralized training and technical assistance hub.

[Learn more about ICF's National Human Trafficking T/TA work in this client story.](#)



"When it's managed and used effectively, data tells the story of what works or doesn't work for children and families. It's the cornerstone of building better outcomes."

—Sherri Levesque, Project Director, Child Welfare




Creating pathways to stability through workforce training and optimization

The T/TA arm of a program is where the mission is brought to life for grantees. Effective training and technical assistance and capacity building programs supply state, territory, and local jurisdictions with the tools they need to address the needs of immigrating children and families. These solutions must be evidence-informed and supported by state-of-the-art technology to help agencies understand and respond to recipient needs. Accountability is the watchword here—because the lives of children are at stake, it's critical to hold care providers accountable and have a high degree of visibility and adherence to policy at every turn.

To improve performance and maximize the impact of T/TA programs, federal agencies should follow best practices such as:

- **Standardize training content across the network** and update/add to it in response to current events, new information, and changing immigration patterns. A comprehensive, network-wide approach to T/TA that consists of live, virtual, and on-demand service delivery is the most effective way to support your network of providers. This includes development of training materials and supplemental resources, delivery of training, and deployment of technical assistance—all housed within an intuitive website that connects learners with the content they need and supported by regular newsletters and standardized communications to provide training updates and promote upcoming live events.
- **Incorporate trauma-informed perspectives and lived expertise** into your workforce and resources. To provide effective support to immigrating children and families, it's essential to build a team of experts with real-world understanding—employing a model that recruits, trains, and supports individuals whose experience and expertise in child welfare helps inform policy, practice, training, and outreach services. For example, individuals who have moved through the foster care system as children, youth, or family members bring a unique viewpoint to identify barriers to engagement, inflammatory language, absence of power sharing, cultural insensitivity, and poor collaboration practices.
- **Embrace peer/mutual learning programs** to open the door to a wider pool of experience and knowledge. They can be a valuable way for T/TA participants to find effective solutions to complex child welfare challenges. Through facilitated activities, tools, and techniques, common stakeholders share knowledge and best practices on a peer-to-peer basis, generating positive change through improved decision-making, service delivery, or enhanced outcomes. Encourage peer-to-peer problem solving and peer-to-peer creativity to tackle thorny problems that many care providers share; structure these interactions to pull out first promising practices, then best practices, and eventually evidence-informed practices.
- **Bring child welfare experts and technologists together** through technology. Technology can improve efficiencies in communication, building awareness, increasing knowledge, and making information accessible. Sometimes, training and technical assistance tools and resources will need to be introduced in the context of an IT modernization initiative, as T/TA websites that are running on legacy systems often fail to meet the needs of grantees and require security updates based on the latest requirements and federal guidance. The right partner will know when (and what, and how) to update the IT infrastructure. It's the staff's passion for the mission that will fuel these efforts and, in doing so, elevate the program in the eyes of the communities it serves.
- **Support your workforce with change management services** that are human-focused. Agencies partner with a diverse network of providers to care for immigrating children and families—in an ever-shifting environment of high-stakes decisions. The tone must be set at the top, with federal agencies engaging the workforce in a structured change management process that prioritizes creating a culture of continuous quality improvement.



"I appreciated that this was not just a lecture with statistics and graphs. These were real people, telling their stories with real people adding their voices to show how working together as a collaborative team can change lives."

—Knowledge and skills event participant

Transforming how agencies support children and families

Public child welfare agencies face the challenging and vital task of partnering with diverse and complex communities to keep children and families safe and thriving at the state and local levels. How do you bring these stakeholders together to solve problems and navigate change effectively? Through the Capacity Building Center for States, ICF serves as the Children's Bureau's principal vehicle for delivering centralized, coordinated, and high-quality services to states and territories.

Learn more about ICF's Capacity Building Center for States work in this client story.



Conclusion

They say it takes a village, and this is true. But it also takes so much more to support immigrating children and families who are vulnerable and in urgent need of a range of services. Creating pathways to stability is about collaborating across agencies, embracing data management best practices, and optimizing your workforce to deliver effective services. It is anchored in child welfare expertise, fueled by a strong passion for the mission, and infused with data to support evidence-informed decision-making.





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ICF is a global consulting services company, but we are not your typical consultants. We help clients navigate change and better prepare for the future.

We've played a central role in advancing public health around the world for nearly 50 years. As close collaborators and seasoned experts, we bring both leading-edge skills and a powerful drive to improve public health outcomes for all populations. We provide advisory services and project implementation to government agencies and top science organizations. From conducting surveys and managing sensitive data to motivating behavior change and assessing program performance, we combine our domain expertise with cutting edge technology solutions to maximize the impact of our clients' programs.

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HPHS-EBOOK-0424-RR-01