



## **Impact Brief: Foster Care Bridge**

An Emergency Child Care Program



***"I had used almost all my savings to pay for child care. Just when I was losing hope, I was able to connect with the Emergency Child Care Bridge program for foster children, run by YMCA Childcare Resource Service" – relative caregiver in San Diego County***



## **Background**

California has 51,866 youth in foster care, per 2017 data, and one-third of that population (16,920) is composed of children under the age of 5.<sup>i</sup> The scope of this issue, coupled with the fact that most of the youth are in foster care during the most important years of brain growth, has significant implications for youth development, family well-being, and outcomes among youth in foster care.

The circumstances that led to placing a child in foster care, such as child abuse/neglect, absence of one or both biological parents, and exposure to substance abuse, are considered adverse experiences that can have a traumatic effect on children and impact their development. Families who face chronic stress, financial struggles, isolation, substance use disorders, and mental health or ongoing physical health concerns may struggle to engage with their children in a way that promotes optimal development during early childhood. As a result, the child misses opportunities to build and strengthen the neurological connections that lead to optimal development of communication and social skills.

When a child experiences adversity and the trauma that results from those circumstances, especially when it occurs early in life and is chronic or severe, their stress response system over-activates and exhausts the body and brain over time. Chronic stress impacts the young brain and is the primary way in which adversity impairs development.<sup>ii</sup> The resulting trauma has been linked in numerous studies to a variety of high-risk behaviors, chronic diseases, and negative health outcomes in adulthood.<sup>iii</sup>

However, exposure to adversity does not doom children to poor outcomes, and proper support — particularly the consistent presence of a warm, responsive caregiver — mitigates the impacts of trauma.<sup>iv</sup> When resource families have access to resources and sufficient financial funds, they can properly support the child in their care and provide the stability that helps children in foster care heal and build resilience to future adversity. Quality child care is paramount to achieving that stability.

### **Child care and foster care placement**

The needs of resource families, defined by the State of California as caregivers who provide out-of-home care for children in foster care, are dynamic and diverse. They must be able to access child care at the frequency and schedule that best suits their needs to remain employed and fulfill the requirements necessary to becoming a resource family. Child care is essential to stabilize placements and ensure that resource families can maintain a stable environment for the children in their care. Anecdotal evidence from the field and YMCA CRS' experience in the past year reveal that access to child care is a significant barrier for families seeking to become resource families.<sup>v</sup>

Access to quality child care settings allows resource families to continue working while their children are given the best foundation to succeed in school and life. Quality in early learning requires a keen understanding of a young child's brain, effective interactions to nurture developmental relationships, healthy eating and physical activity, and screenings to identify any

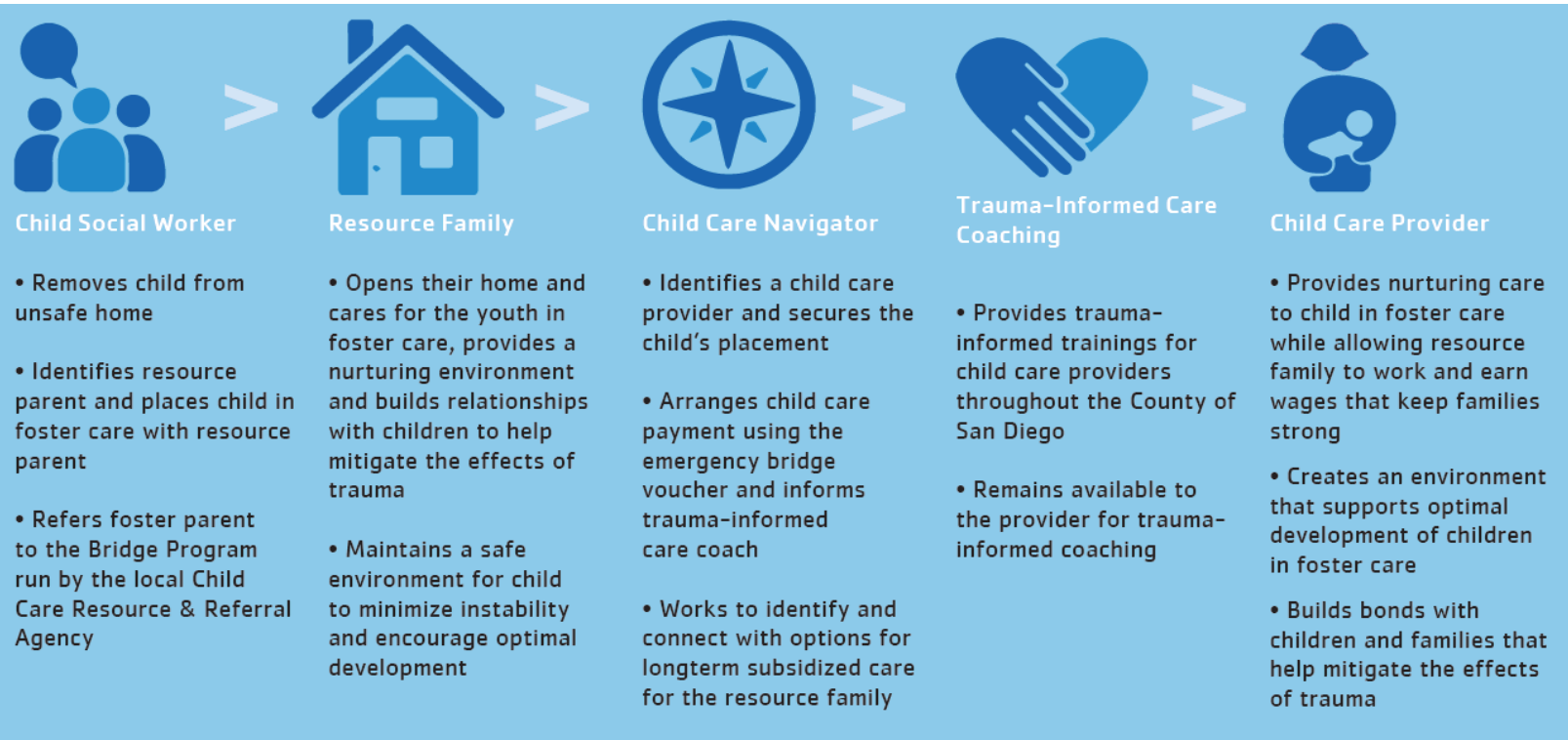
developmental challenges in early stages. Child care should not only provide a supervised environment for children; it must foster optimal development so young children enter Kindergarten ready to thrive.

### Emergency Child Care Bridge Program

Multiple publicly funded programs have been enacted in an effort to support the needs of resource families. The latest initiative to support resource families is The Emergency Child Care Bridge Program for Foster Children, signed into law in California in 2017, which allocates \$31 million in funding annually for implementation in 46 counties in the state. In San Diego County, children ages 0-5 and ages 6-12 with special needs or medical disabilities are eligible.

In San Diego County, the program is run by YMCA Childcare Resource Service (YMCA CRS), the only State-funded child care resource and referral agency for San Diego County. The program follows the pilot model of providing child care navigation, processing vouchers for child care, and offering trauma-informed care trainings and coaching for child care providers. The components are highlighted in the graphic that follows and explained in further detail below.

*The Components of Foster Care Bridge Program Support Children*



- Navigation – child care navigation is a resource family’s entry point to the program. The process begins when the County social worker refers the child to YMCA CRS, and a YMCA Child Care Navigator contacts the resource family to learn their child care needs and educate the family on how to identify a quality child care program. Based on that conversation, the YMCA

Child Care Navigator searches the database of licensed child care facilities in San Diego and selects the child care providers that best meet the family’s criteria for location, operating hours, languages spoken, and other factors the family noted. The YMCA Child Care Navigator reaches out to those child care providers, ensuring they have the capacity and willingness to care for the child. This can range from a YMCA Child Care Navigator calling an average of 30 or more child care providers on behalf of a family. The referrals that have been curated are then shared with the resource family along with other materials on how to choose quality child care. It can range anywhere from one to 10 phone calls or email touchpoints between a YMCA Child Care Navigator and resource family until they feel comfortable enough to identify a child care provider. The average time a parent spends in the navigation process is three to seven days.

The child care supply in San Diego is impacted as studies show a significant lack of supply compared to the demand for child care.<sup>vi</sup> This lack of available child care spots can make a family’s search seem endless and futile, so YMCA Child Care Bridge Navigators are a crucial support in preventing the child from leaving the family’s care because of a lack of child care and mitigating some of the stress the resource family experiences.

Impact: Navigation is a short-term service, but its impact endures after services are completed. By connecting resource families with possible child care options, a YMCA Child Care Bridge Navigator helps improve family stability and reduces family stress by leading resource families through the impacted child care market in San Diego County. With this support, resource families in the Bridge program can avoid complications in the workplace due to lack of child care, focus on stabilizing the child’s placement, and more easily manage this period of transition. A total of 257 families received navigation services in the first year of the program, fiscal year 2018-2019.

- Vouchers – once the resource family has confirmed care with a provider, they move on to the program’s voucher component, which confirms eligibility for subsidized care based on the child’s age and family’s status as a resource family. YMCA voucher staff then processes the paperwork and logistics to ensure the provider receives payment. Vouchers are initially valid for 6 months, and YMCA voucher staff conducts 3- and 5-month check-ins to assess family needs and timeline for moving to long-term care. If the family has not been transitioned to a long-term subsidized care arrangement by the 6-month mark, vouchers can be extended to an additional 6 months with County approval.

When a family starts the Foster Care Bridge voucher process, they are simultaneously enrolled in the county’s Centralized Eligibility List (CEL), which determines when they can begin long-term subsidized care. There is no set amount of time families wait for long-term subsidy payments, so without the Bridge program, families are forced to pay for child care out of pocket or find other means of care for an unknown amount of time until their name is pulled from the list. This expense can cost a two-parent family 17% of their household income with

the price of infant/toddler care in San Diego averaging \$16,542 in a child care center or \$10,609 in a family child care home, annually.<sup>vii</sup>

Impact: A resource family in San Diego who cannot afford child care may have to make the difficult decision to give up the child's placement, at which point the child will be sent to Polinsky Children's Center, a temporary emergency shelter for children. This experience represents another distressing event for a child who has already experienced the instability, separation, and disconnection that adversely impacts development. With the Bridge program, resource families no longer face financial barriers to child care and are simultaneously able to continue working to ensure the economic stability of the family. Sibling sets are also eligible for the Bridge program as long as one of the children is aged 0-5. By keeping siblings together, children in foster care are better able to maintain connections to family, in some cases the only family they know, which are critical for their development and well-being. This translates to a more stable and nurturing home for the child and prevents the child from enduring circumstances that exacerbate the trauma they have already experienced. A total of 155 families received voucher services in the first year of the program, fiscal year 2018-2019.<sup>viii</sup>

- Trauma-informed Care Trainings for Providers – Families do not exist in isolation, and a network of relationships, structures, and systems must join together to foster optimal child development. Second to the resource family, a child care provider plays a key role in ensuring the child develops crucial skills, meets developmental milestones, and is set on a path to a successful life.

Part of this role includes managing any challenging behaviors that manifest as the result of the trauma and crises children in foster care have experienced. This history puts the child at greater risk for experiencing emotional and behavioral issues and may affect how they interact in social settings, like a child care facility. Therefore, implementing trauma-informed trainings can significantly improve an entity or program's capacity to increasing the skills and knowledge of the people who care for our most severely maltreated children.<sup>ix</sup>

The trauma-informed care component of the Foster Care Bridge program builds on this premise, and YMCA CRS offers State-funded trainings and coaching at no cost to all child care providers in the region, regardless of if they are serving a resource family or not. YMCA CRS hosts monthly trainings throughout San Diego County at YMCA facilities or at a child care center, if requested.

Interested providers can supplement their trainings with one-on-one coaching sessions that allow for a more customizable approach to learning the concepts. Providers typically take part in anywhere from one to six coaching sessions that take place at the provider's pace and availability. Training and coaching follow the CSEFEL Teaching Pyramid Model for Early Childhood Education. The evidence-based frame-work takes providers through a tiered approach that focuses on recognizing and reinforcing positive behaviors, directly teaching

social skills and expectations for different environments, monitoring challenging behaviors, and teaching positive replacement behaviors.<sup>x</sup>

Training and coaching ensure child care providers are better prepared to address the needs of resource families and ensure the children in their care are surrounded by caregivers, at home and in child care, that are focused on their healthy development and well-being.

**Impact:** Both parents and child care providers benefit from trauma-informed training and coaching. When a child care provider is fluent in trauma-responsive best practices, they can better meet the unique needs of children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and removal from their home or family. Providers who are trauma-informed increase their understanding of brain science and can better identify the difference between a trauma response and behaviors that are typical as a child develops. When a provider can identify a trauma response, they are less likely to suggest removal from care and are better-equipped to keep the child in a stable care placement. Experts in the early childhood education field champion the need for a highly skilled workforce to foster the developmental relationships that help individuals heal from trauma.<sup>xi</sup>

The program hosted a total of 66 trauma-informed care training sessions for 1,064 providers in the first year of the program, significantly exceeding its goal of training 120 providers. The program conducted a total of 246 one-on-one coaching sessions for 195 child care providers, exceeding its goal of coaching 40 providers in the first year of the program.

### **Valuable Partners**

Implementation of the program in San Diego County began in 2018, and YMCA CRS has seen a consistent increase in referrals, translating to more children in foster care and resource families benefitting from the program.

YMCA Childcare Resource Service acknowledges and appreciates that synergy with San Diego County Child Welfare Services is critical to the program's success. From invitations to monthly county meetings that facilitate communication with stakeholders to regular contact with County social workers, cross-sector collaboration ensures that all resource families know their eligibility for the program and receive the supports they need to thrive.

Findings and experience from YMCA CRS' first year operating the program have also been useful in informing state legislation. Program staff testified at budget hearings in Sacramento on behalf of Bridge Programs throughout the state, which helped secure a \$10 million increase in funding for vouchers.

YMCA CRS has presented its expertise in trauma-informed care at national conferences and generated increased interest in its trainings from child care centers, community organizations, and other counties.

The connections made through the program and across domains support a child-centered approach that strengthens vulnerable families and the community at large.

## Summary

The Foster Care Bridge program is like a three-legged stool that supports resource families at the moment when a child enters into their care. If just one component is missing, the stability of the foster placement is at risk and the child may be placed in a temporary shelter or congregate care setting that can be re-traumatizing and lead to unfortunate outcomes, such as substandard educational performance, delinquency, or further physical and emotional abuse.

The program fills a crucial need in the community by ensuring resource families can support the tangible and emotional needs of the child in their care. Because children in foster care are unintended victims of unstable environments, an aligned system of care and a network of supportive partners and services is the most effective solution to move children in foster care to a place of resilience and healing.

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### **About the YMCA of San Diego County**

The YMCA of San Diego County is dedicated to improving the quality of human life and to helping all people realize their fullest potential as children of God through the development of the spirit, mind and body.

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