

Strengthening America's Families Act

Transforming the lives of babies in child welfare



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Challenge: Infants and toddlers are the age group most vulnerable to maltreatment

The stakes couldn't be higher for babies entering the child welfare system. There is a common misconception that very young children are not affected by the events around them. However, because of their rapid brain development, young children who experience maltreatment—and too often the instability of life in foster care—have a high likelihood of significant and detrimental impacts on their emotional and cognitive development, with lasting effects.

Infants and toddlers are an outsized proportion of children in child welfare programs: babies experience abuse or neglect at 200-400% the rate for other age groupsⁱ and a full one-third of children entering foster care—even before the pandemic—were under age three.ⁱⁱ The child welfare system, however, was not devised to support the unique needs of babies or their caretakers. The causes of child abuse and neglect are complex and require multi-faceted solutions. Many states and communities do not have the support structures in place to ensure strong early development and address family trauma through coordinating a broad array of family resources, even where they are available but siloed, to ensure safe and loving environments for young children.

A solution that can change the odds: The Strengthening America's Families Act (SAFA) supports state efforts to transform child welfare policy and practice through community-based Infant-Toddler Court Teams (ITCT), led by judges, that work collaboratively to prevent child abuse and neglect and address the needs of young children experiencing maltreatment and their families, especially during crises such as COVID-19.

How SAFA works: SAFA harnesses the science of child development to drive change. It builds state and local systems that support a range of comprehensive, trauma-informed infant, toddler, and family services for families in the child welfare system, and where possible, those in need of preventative services. Currently, ITCTs are in 98 sites in 29 statesⁱⁱⁱ but only serve a fraction of children and families in need. SAFA will:

- Provide seed money to states to develop, stabilize, and enhance ITCTs;
- Ensure that communities and states have the training and technical assistance they need to develop their programs with integrity and deliver evidence-based services; and
- Expand the reach of a proven approach to transform how communities and the child welfare system support the well-being of infants, toddlers, and families.

Measurable Success:

- Maltreatment reoccurs in **fewer than 1 percent of the cases** served by ITCTs, an astonishingly low rate far below the national standard of 9.1 percent;^{iv}
- The ITCT approach **saves more than \$14,000 per child** versus a traditional child welfare case;^v
- **84 percent** of infants and toddlers in the program achieved permanency within a year **compared with the national standard of 40.5 percent**;^{vi} and
- A **high rate of substance use disorders**, a reason for removal for almost 70 percent of cases, did not hamper outcomes. The vast majority (74 percent) of parents needing treatment started services within a week.^{vii}

"I've been a judge for 30 years, and I've never seen a single program that has more potential for changing the lives of this very vulnerable demographic. The goal is to break the multi-generational cycle of abuse with these kids. We're saving lives." – **Sr. Judge Lee Haworth, Florida 12th Circuit Court**

Endnotes

ⁱ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Child Maltreatment 2018*. Washington, DC: 2020.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ ITCT sites in: AK, AR, AZ, CO, CT, DE, FL, HI, IA, IL, MA, MD, MI, MN, MO, MS, NC, NH, NV, NY, OH, OK, OR, SC, TN, UT, VT, WA, WI

^{iv} Quality Improvement Center for Infant-Toddler Court Teams. *Making a Difference in the Lives of Families: The Safe Babies Court Team™ Approach*. [Infographic]. Washington, DC: 2020.

^v ZERO TO THREE. *Safe Babies Court Teams™ Cost Document*. Washington, DC: 2020.

^{vi} Casanueva, C., Harris, S., Carr, C., Burfend, C., & Smith, K. (2019). Evaluation in multiple sites of the Safe Babies Court Team approach. *Child Welfare*, 97(1), 85-107

^{vii} Ibid.