

CHILD WELFARE IN A CHANGING LANDSCAPE: NATIONAL POLICY AND LOCAL IMPACT

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ISPCAN RISE UP POLICY FORUM
MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

SESSION OBJECTIVES

Participants will learn about key federal changes to child welfare related policies since the change in presidential administration in January 2025, and the impact on families and children at the local level.



- 01 Using a public health lens
 - 02 Policy Shifts and Retrenchment of Safety Nets
 - 03 Mitigation Strategies
 - 04 Local Impact and Lessons Learned
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PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH



This presentation presents strategies that strengthen two public health pillars:

- Funding, a national action plan, capacity building, and scaled solutions
- Strong legislation and policy

Together, these pillars connect national policy advocacy to the local practice innovations that sustain child safety under a strained system.

2025 NATIONAL POLICY SHIFT

Federal changes include:

- Executive Orders rolling back equity advancements
- Changes affecting LGBTQIA+ families, immigrants, and marginalized groups
- Restrictive policy direction across major safety-net programs
 - Includes arbitrary pauses on federal grant funds and delayed reimbursements
 - Increased scrutiny and delays on federal reimbursements to social and safety-net programs
 - Impact on government and community-based programs

RETRENCHMENT OF SAFETY-NET SUPPORTS

Medicaid



- National health care program for low-income families, pregnant women, and expanded populations such as individuals below 138% of poverty line (~\$22,000/year)
- New policy narrows those covered to certain immigration statuses effective October 2026
- Imposes new work/community engagement requirements for expanded Medicaid population and increases eligibility reviews from once per year to twice per year. Effective January 2027.
- Anticipated loss of coverage due to increased paperwork burden
- Will lead to lack of medical and behavioral care for parents

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)



- Expands the age range of work requirements for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) to ages 18-64 (previously age 18-54)
- Imposes new penalties on states for eligibility errors; imposes fiscal penalties for state error rates above 4% beginning in 2028
- Imposes new administrative cost sharing requirements on states
- Has already resulted in 700,000 fewer children enrolled in SNAP

POVERTY AND CHILD WELFARE RISK

Research Shows:

- Material hardship is the most consistent predictor of neglect
- Stagnant wages and increased cost of living intensifies hardships
- Families are often reported for unmet needs – not maltreatment
- The expiration of child tax credits has resulted in a rise in poverty from 5%-13%



IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT PRESSURES

- Has a traumatic effect on children
- Correlated with drops in school attendance
- Proposed cuts to Unaccompanied Alien Child Programs
- Creates and exacerbates children being separated from a parent
 - 205,000 children separated from a parent
 - 22,000 children living without either parent
- These changes have a chilling effect on families applying for public assistance and other critical safety net supports



UNEVEN IMPACT ON STATES AND WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

- **State laws and local resources help protect families and children but varies from state to state**
- **Workforce shortages and increasing caseloads create stress**
- **Growth in protective services referrals are driven by material need**
- **States with stronger safety nets can better mitigate these changes**



CORE PRINCIPLES FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION

PROTECT SAFETY NET SUPPORTS



- Food
- Housing
- Healthcare
- Child care

INTEGRATE ECONOMIC ASSISTANCE



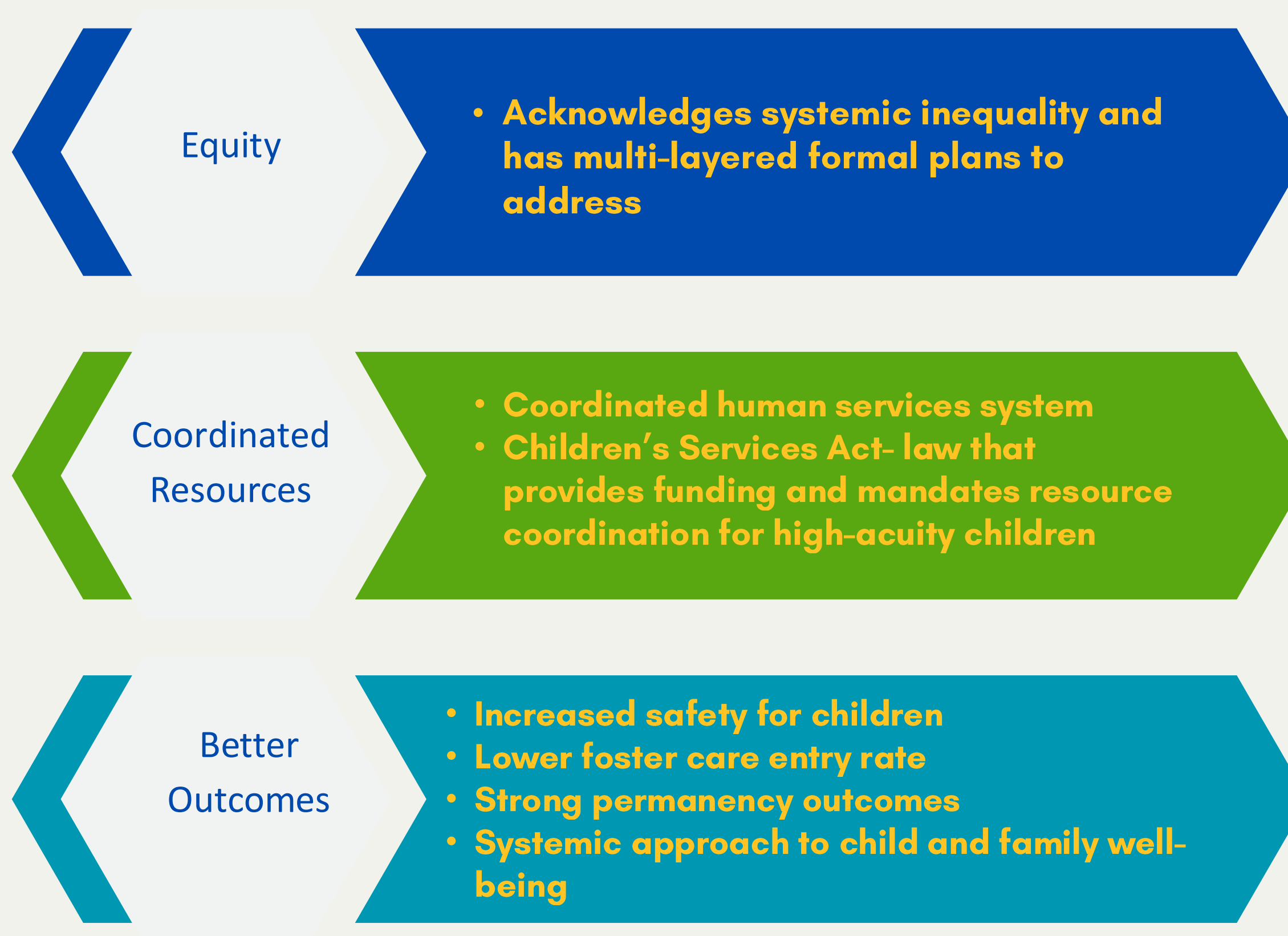
- Public assistance
- Economic Mobility
- Livable wages

INVEST IN FAMILIES



- Build equity into service systems
- Invest in Kinship Care
- Track disparities

CASE STUDY: FAIRFAX COUNTY VIRGINIA



TRANSFERRABLE LESSONS

Coordinated System

- Easy referrals to system partners
- Laws, policies, and funding in alignment
- Connection to public and workforce assistance

Economic Wellness

- Support livable wages
- Economic mobility pilot
- Investments in affordable housing

Equity- Driven Decision Making

- Who benefits and who is burdened?
- Equity-informed data tracking
- Systemwide shared beliefs

Investment in Families and Staff

- Local and grant funded prevention services
- Grant and local funded Kinship supports
- Professional development and training for staff

Community Outreach — 25
neighborhood programs launched this
quarter



POLICY ADVOCACY



Coalition Building

- Expansive 2026 Legislative Agenda
- 110 Hill Day mtgs w/250 attendees
- New Policy Note Policy Platform
- Child Welfare Mental Health Coalition
- Key Working Groups include SSBG, LGBTQ+ Youth, and FFPSA Reform



National Policy Agenda

- National Policy Commission
- Federal Administrative Initiatives
 - AI support
 - Savings Accounts for Foster Youth
 - Home for Every Child
- Near Term Policy Work – Budget Impacts, Finance Reform, Older Youth, AI
- CWLA Connect Calls
 - 80-125 weekly attendees
 - 1800+ total participants

Questions

- 01 What Similar Policy and Resource Shifts Are You Experiencing in Your State/Country?
 - 02 How Are These Shifts Impacting Your Ability to Prevent & Address Child Abuse and Neglect?
 - 03 What Collaborative Strategies Are You Using?
 - 04 What Lessons Can You Share from Your Community?
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Our Take Aways

- We are experiencing disruption in a safety net that has been built over 75 years or more.
- We have learned a great deal about what children, families and communities need through knowledge we did not have then.
- While the safety net helped to mitigate inequities, it had not effectively addressed the structural inequities in our social and economic sectors.
- We have a new opportunity to "build back better".

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THANK YOU!

