

STRATEGIC PLAN

DRAFT

FIRST 5 MERCED COUNTY

2009/10 – 2011/12

Version: June 8, 2009

[TABLE OF CONTENTS]

LETTER FROM THE COMMISSION

BACKGROUND & PHILOSOPHY

HISTORY

VISION AND MISSION

LEADERSHIP AND GUIDANCE

MERCED COUNTY PROFILE

OUR APPROACH TO COMMUNITY CHANGE

SHARPENING OUR FOCUS – FIRST 5'S PRIORITIES

KEY DECISIONS

REFINING OUR PRIORITIES

CRITICAL FACTORS FOR OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT

FIRST 5 MERCED COUNTY *DESIRED OUTCOMES*

INTERVENTION APPROACHES & FUNDING PROCESSES

INTERVENTION APPROACHES

FUNDING PROCESSES

EVOLVING ROLES FOR A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN

EVALUATION

APPROACHES TO EVALUATION

CONCLUSION

NEXT STEPS

APPENDICES

BACKGROUND & PHILOSOPHY

HISTORY

On November 12, 1998, California voters passed Proposition 10, the “California Children and Families First Act of 1998.” The intention of Proposition 10 is to utilize funds generated by taxing tobacco products to provide increased support for the optimal development of children from conception through age five. The importance of early childhood development is increasingly recognized as key to future success in school and other aspects of a child’s physical, emotional, social, behavioral, and cognitive development.

Following the passage of Proposition 10, the Merced County Board of Supervisors adopted an ordinance establishing First 5 Merced County and a Trust Fund through which to receive and disburse the County’s allocation of the tobacco tax revenue. Additionally, First 5 Merced County adopted its initial strategic plan to identify how it would utilize available funds to enhance the well-being of children birth through age 5.

The First 5 Merced County Commission has since updated its Strategic Plan several times, and funded scores of programs over the last eight years. This current Strategic Plan update is for the three-year period of 2009/10 through 2011/12.

VISION STATEMENT

First 5 Merced County has adopted the following vision to guide its overarching aims:

First 5 Merced County Vision Statement:

All children in Merced County will thrive in supportive, loving and nurturing environments, enter school healthy and ready to learn and become productive, well-adjusted members of society.

All children in Merced County will live in an environment that:

is emotionally and physically safe;

has adequate food, clothing and shelter;

is intellectually stimulating and challenging;

provides adequate health care in sickness and in health;

promotes the development of productive, well-adjusted members of society.

MISSION STATEMENT

In addition to its Vision Statement, First 5 Merced County has identified the following Mission Statement to define its role in achieving its defined vision:

First 5 Merced County Mission Statement:

To provide for the optimal physical, emotional and intellectual growth of the young children of Merced County, the Commission will:

- identify the issues and service needs relating to the early development of children from the prenatal stage through age five;
- develop a comprehensive plan of how those issues and needs can be addressed while acknowledging and supporting the strength of families and the cultural diversity of the community; and
- facilitate, through funding priorities and disbursement of Proposition 10 funds, the creation, implementation, or enhancement of integrated and collaborative preventive services and programs which will result, in measurable terms, in the optimal early development and future potential of our children.

LEADERSHIP AND GUIDANCE

To provide leadership and guidance in achieving its vision and mission, First 5 Merced County is led by its 9-member Commission. Additionally, a multidisciplinary Technical Professional Advisory Committee supports First 5's efforts. Both groups will continue activities into the new Strategic Plan period with ongoing meetings.

The Commission meets on a monthly basis and is comprised of:

Supervisor Jerry O'Banion, Chairperson	
Patrick Bowman	Timothy Livermore, M.D.
Shirley Brown, R.N.	Ana Pagan
Eva de Long	Iantha Thompson
Dorlie Goodger	Manuel Jimenez

The Technical Professional Advisory Committee (TPAC) of First 5 Merced County is an integral part of the Commission's planned activities. Established early in First 5's existence, TPAC exists for the following purpose:

"To provide technical and professional expertise and support that will be beneficial to the Children and Families Commission of Merced County in accomplishing the purposes of the Children and Families Act; to advise and inform the Children and Families Commission of Merced County on specific issues and areas of interest; to increase community participation in, and awareness of, Commission-supported endeavors; and to assist in the annual update of the Strategic Plan."

To fulfill this purpose, TPAC meets regularly, as needed, to support the efforts of the Commission in implementing its array of planned activities throughout the year. The roles and functions of the committee are continually revisited to ensure the committee is optimally aligned with supporting First 5 efforts, particularly in achieving the First 5 Desired Outcomes.

Any and all individuals are welcomed participants at the TPAC meetings. The Committee is comprised of representatives from various educational/professional backgrounds, with efforts made to strive for

committee participation that reflects the rich diversity of interests, geographic regions, economic backgrounds and cultural and ethnic diversity of our County. TPAC is a dynamic group, adjusting over time to best support the evolving roles and activities of the Commission.

MERCED COUNTY PROFILE

Merced County is a medium-sized county in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, the agricultural hub of the state. While the population is distributed in rural and urban areas, most people live along the Highway 99 central corridor that bisects the County. Interstate 5 also crosses the County through the growing Westside. The growing total population of Merced County is approaching a quarter million residents.

Merced County has become more racially and ethnically diverse in recent decades, and is diversifying at a faster rate than the state of California as a whole. The principal sources of diversity in Merced County have been Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander populations. High immigration percentages have often led to a description of Merced County as one of the most diverse counties in the state, given the large number of residents who were born outside the United States. In more strict terms, diversity, within these recent immigrant populations is somewhat limited. Within the category of immigrants described as Hispanic, individuals and families are predominantly from the western and border states of Mexico. Within the broad and ethnically diverse category described as Asian/Pacific Islander, local families are primarily from India's Punjab State and the Hmong people group of Laos and Vietnam.

Lack of English language proficiency and low literacy levels impact parental ability to obtain and use available information and services that support parenting efforts and healthy family functioning. Fifty-eight percent (58%) of adults in Merced County have low literacy levels, compared with the State average of 46%. Student achievement/proficiency rates for economically disadvantaged students are approximately half of those not economically disadvantaged. A lack of English proficiency and low levels of literacy also hamper a significant number of immigrant families in their search for work. The annual unemployment rate from 1997-1999 in Merced County was more than double the State unemployment rates.

According to the California County Databook 2001, approximately 38% of children under age 5 in Merced County were living in poverty in 1997. Poverty particularly affects pregnant women and young children. Poverty

leads to poor access to healthcare and is tied to the lack of a diverse economic base in Merced County, high unemployment rates (especially tied to seasonal work opportunities), lack of job skills, low literacy levels, lack of English-language competency, lack of legal immigration status, and teen parenthood. Less than half or less of African Americans and Asian Americans received early, prenatal care.

As of 2006, there were 26,000 children under 5 years of age in Merced County. This is a 27% increase from the 2000 census, making Merced County the youngest population in the state and it is not aging as fast as the rest of the region, state, and nation.

Only 28% of children, ages 3-4 years old attend preschool, compared to the state average of 42%, ranking Merced County 49th out of 58 counties. Hispanics have the lowest percentage of children (23%) enrolled in preschool, compared to white (31%), Asian (51%) and African American (100%).

The socioeconomic, demographic and ethnic characteristics of Merced County make service delivery—whether in the area of health care, early childhood development or family preservation—particularly challenging. The need for strategic planning around the issues related to optimal child development in Merced County is evident.

There are a wide variety of conditions impacting family functioning and the optimal development of young children in Merced County. Many of these conditions were documented in the original Strategic Plan and continue to be challenges for local service providers, children 0-5 and their families.

OUR APPROACH TO COMMUNITY CHANGE

First 5 Merced County is committed to fulfilling its role as good steward of Proposition 10 funds, and in so doing, believes an absolute imperative is to not only support effective programs, but to support those programs that strive for particular goals that, when achieved, will have the greatest overall impact on children's (0-5) optimal development.

Within a climate of declining resources, federal and state budget crises, and ever-increasing needs of a growing population, to do otherwise is

simply unwise and would run counter to the best interests of our youngest children and their families.

Toward this end, First 5 anchors its strategic plan – that is, its Plan for Community Change – with the premise that we must be highly discerning with regard to selecting the goals that we will set out to achieve.

We cannot possibly meet all prevailing needs that exist. Nor should we try. While a valiant effort it would be, such an endeavor would lack sufficient funding and focus to substantially overcome the multitude of factors behind the complex challenges preventing kids from being most prepared to succeed in school.

Instead, available resources must be directed toward those goals – we call them our Desired Outcomes – that we most need and want to accomplish, that once we have succeeded, will have the most meaningful impact on the entire community’s children and families, present and future.

With this understanding, First 5 Merced County identifies the following Desired Outcomes as the target priorities of this 3-year strategic plan:

Desired Outcome #1: Improve parents’ (especially new/early parents’) capability to spend time with their children through nurturing and engaging relationships.

Desired Outcome #2: Improve the quality of care provided in out-of-home environments through:

Non-licensed / Family, Friend & Neighbor (FFN) settings: Focusing on quality environments and caregiver skills, particularly with infant toddler care.

Family child care provider settings: Focusing on quality environments and caregiver skills, particularly with infant toddler care.

Preschool / Childcare center-based services: Focusing on teacher skills in providing critical elements of quality.

Desired Outcome #3: Improve the system for early screening, referral, assessment, and services for children with developmental, health, social, emotional, behavioral, and other special needs.

Desired Outcome #4: Improve community level awareness and acknowledgement of the critical need to prioritize care benefiting our youngest kids (0-5) across a broad spectrum of areas critical to optimal development.

Desired Outcome #5: Improve the availability of affordable, broad-scale center-based child care and preschool services for children 0-5 years, through advocacy and local preparation, planning, and development necessary for local implementation

These Desired Outcomes provide focus and clear direction for First 5's activities. They communicate with specificity the goals we intend to achieve, and set forth measurable benchmarks that will tell us the degree to which we will have succeeded over time.

They aim to reflect a balance of optimism and reality, and an awareness of how the macro level, bird's eye view of our county can reveal key 'pressure points' that when attended to with concerted efforts, can shift community well-being in measurable ways.

First 5 Merced County understands that achieving our Desired Outcomes will come neither quickly nor easily. Efforts of great merit take time. Thus, our duration of commitment to them, three years initially, is intended to reflect a starting point only.

And, our Desired Outcomes will not be pursued by a single agency or limited set of services, but instead will be met with integrated, multi-level interventions working in concert. Primary intervention approaches for each of the Desired Outcomes have been identified – based on what we know to work best in affecting change in Merced County and in communities across the nation.

Instead of vying in a competitive manner for a 'piece of the funding pie', community agencies and organizations will work in partnership with First 5 and each other, to build coordinated initiatives. First 5 will support these initiatives not only with funding, but through expanded roles of First 5 staff that will include technical assistance, fund development, and advocacy, to name but a few.

In this way, planned synergy across implemented interventions will assist us in overcoming resource-deficits that would otherwise hinder projects working in isolation, and optimize our chances for success.

Our Desired Outcomes also reflect that there are systems level improvements and enhancements that once made, can have broad-scale 'downstream' benefits for children and families. These benefits can long outlast the more immediate impacts of direct services that, while meeting important needs, often fail to address underlying root causes.

The Desired Outcomes have been selected within the financial parameters of the funding amounts we expect to have available. Setting strategic plan goals that are beyond our reach fiscally would only set us up for failure, despite our best intentions and ambition. However, the instability of the broader economic and political environment, and the uncertainty of the Proposition 10 revenue stream itself, makes financial planning an inexact science at best.

With this ever-changing fiscal climate in mind, First 5 will take proactive steps to build its financial sustainability over time – while balancing its ongoing support of funded interventions -- in order to maximize its ability to bring about benefits long into the future.

The remainder of this document specifies our approach to community change in more detail.

SHARPENING OUR FOCUS – FIRST 5’S PRIORITIES

KEY DECISIONS

Acknowledging that insufficient funds exist to meet all of the prevailing needs in Merced County, First 5 Merced County believes it to be critical to be thoughtful and intentional with how available funds are put to use for the optimal benefit of children (0-5 years).

As part of its planning for this Strategic Plan, the First 5 Commission identified and endorsed the following decisions:

1. First 5 will select a specific & focused set of priorities to pursue;
2. First 5 will define ‘success’ in as specific terms as possible, thereby enabling the development of more measurable objectives, and assist in determining the degree of successfulness of First 5’s efforts over time.
3. First 5 acknowledges that a combination of high order (upstream) outcomes AND lower (downstream) outcomes may be best selected to achieve durable, widespread success.
4. First 5 acknowledges that best practice interventions, when available/known, are ideally supported to assure that priorities will be achieved if interventions are carried out as intended.
5. First 5 acknowledges that interventions may be optimal when pursued across multiple levels, such as direct services to children and families, capacity support of organizations, and inter-organizational and systems enhancements.
6. First 5 acknowledges that interventions, when planned proactively to complement one another, within an intended framework for change have the best chances of success.

7. First 5 acknowledges that funding over longer periods, in synchronization with a systematic plan for community change, is needed in order to affect change in the significant challenges our children and families face.

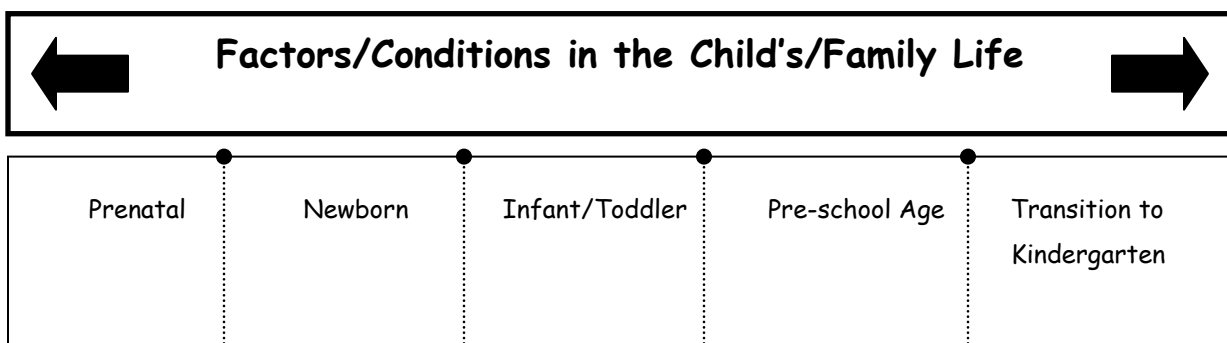
Using these decisions and acknowledgements as a foundation for achieving community enhancement, First 5 Merced County initiated a comprehensive, participatory process for defining the priorities that would constitute the core of this Strategic Plan.

REFINING OUR PRIORITIES

To define the Strategic Plan priorities for First 5 Merced County, the Commission acknowledged the inadequacy of a solely needs-based planning model, which often tends toward emphasizing a community's or family's deficits rather than strengths.

Instead, the planning process focused on identifying the key conditions in a child or family's life that are most consequential in leading to the optimal development of young children and their eventual readiness to succeed in school.

Thus, the following conceptual model of a growing child from birth to the transition to kindergarten was used to review and consider, and ultimately select, the priority conditions most conducive to supporting optimal development.



Using this framework, First 5 Commissioners, staff, contracted consultants, and the Technical Professional Advisory Committee, worked together to carry out a comprehensive planning process to identify its priorities.

This process included:

1. Review of Available Secondary Data on Merced County

First 5 Staff utilized multiple sources of data to assist in guiding the strategic plan process, including but not limited to: First 5 internal evaluation documents, needs assessments from a variety of local entities, census data, reports / profiles / studies with childhood well-being data, and updated community survey information.

2. Review of Scientific Literature / Reports / White Papers

First 5 Merced County acknowledged the importance of learning from existing scientific research and thus subcontracted with a consulting firm to review existing published literature on two levels. First, to identify those outcomes that exert the most influence on childhood well-being, and second, to identify the best and most promising interventions to accomplish these outcomes.

3. Community Dialogues with Merced County Residents and Service Providers

Recognizing that secondary data and scientific research must be informed by the voices of our local communities, First 5 facilitated the completion of thirty seven (37) Community Dialogues, which were small group discussions aimed at assuring our priorities were grounded with the local challenges, resources, and realities of our county.

In coordination with representatives of First 5's Technical Professional Advisory Committee (TPAC), dialogues were completed throughout Merced County from August through September, 2008. Dialogue groups were charged with providing input to help answer the question:

What are the most important goals First 5 should be striving for? And, once achieved, which goals will most improve the well-being of our youngest children (0-5 years) so they are best prepared to succeed in school?

These dialogues were completed in multiple languages (English, Spanish, Hmong) with community representatives and service providers.

By analyzing the collected information from the various sources (secondary data review, review of scientific literature, and Community Dialogues), First 5 identified the following ten (10) critical factors for Merced County described below.

CRITICAL FACTORS FOR OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT:

From the primary planning 'inputs', the Commission identified the following categories of *critical factors* necessary for children's optimal development (from which the specific Desired Outcomes were prioritized and then selected).

All factors are listed in this document in order to recognize the breadth of important factors needed to optimally support children.

- A. Healthy birth outcomes and well-timed births
Children who begin life healthy (prenatally and child birth) and are born to empowered parents have a better chance for optimal development.

- B. Parents/Caregivers have a strong bond and nurturing and engaging relationships with children
A strong, nurturing bond between parents/caregivers and their children is a major factor in supporting optimal development.

- C. Children's health and development is monitored and on track
Early, ongoing, and proactive care from primary care givers is necessary to build a strong foundation for children's healthy development.

- D. Early and ongoing assessments, identification, and intervention of children with special needs.

Children have a greater chance of success if they are in optimal physical health and any special needs are identified as early as possible.

- E. Households are safe, stable, and supportive of the developing child

A healthy home environment and positive routines are an important foundation for children to be prepared to benefit from enriching experiences and to become productive members of society.

- F. Parents are well-connected to needed services and access them in a timely fashion

It is necessary for parents to be aware of and connected to services early on in order for them to comfortably access them, and reap the greatest benefit.

- G. Quality out-of-home environments and experiences

The provision of quality out-of-home environments and experiences is particularly important to Merced County's population, which is made up of a high number of working families and single parent households, resulting in many children regularly utilizing out-of-home care.

- H. Continuity in early childhood experiences

It is necessary to maximize continuity in childhood experiences and to support successful transitions across settings for children and caregivers to the greatest degree possible.

- I. Comprehensive, integrated service systems and infrastructures

Maximum coordination and integration of available services is needed to simplify parents' access and use of services.

- J. Supportive community and civic engagement towards effective child-rearing

A supportive environment and community is important to enabling individuals and families to provide safe and nurturing homes for children and provide optimal support and care.

CRITERIA FOR PRIORITIZING

From among the numerous categories of factors exerting influence over optimal childhood development, First 5 Commissioners used the primary prioritizing criteria listed below to select the specific areas it would pursue.

1. Selected Desired Outcomes will have the most meaningful impact for kids we can have (research-based, validated by local input).
2. Selected Desired Outcomes will be mutually supportive of each other to degree possible (to achieve synergy amongst them).
3. Selected Desired Outcomes and the goals to be developed will be achievable within the general parameters of funds available.
4. Selected Desired Outcomes will be moderately focused, with a limit of 3-4 selected from across the ten “critical factors” categories.
5. Selected Desired Outcomes will cover as large a population as possible, while not diluting the potential success of the impact.

FIRST 5 MERCED COUNTY *DESIRED OUTCOMES*

Five (5) Desired Outcomes were adopted for the current 3-year Strategic Plan using the planning process and prioritization criteria identified.

It is important to note that the selected Desired Outcomes are largely topic-neutral, meaning the outcomes are aligned with critical conditions that we aim to change, not on specific topics like ‘health’ or ‘development’ or ‘education’ or ‘special needs’.

The Desired Outcomes fall *within* First 5’s vision and mission for the county and represent the critical conditions that First 5 believes must exist for children, parents/families, service systems, and the broader community, in order for children 0-5 years to develop optimally and be prepared to succeed in school.

While each of the Desired Outcomes is important, the First 5 Commission has identified the first three outcomes to be *primary* priorities, and the latter two as *secondary* priorities.

The identified Desired Outcomes are:

Desired Outcome 1: Improve parents' (especially new/early parents') capability to spend time with their children through nurturing and engaging relationships.

Many prevailing norms and conditions in Merced County (and beyond) impede optimal relationships between parents/caregivers and their children. And yet, we know with great certainty the influence these relationships have on children's optimal development, especially in the earliest years. Poverty, changes in family structure, parents' focus on the urgency of the challenges of daily living, and various life stressors, too often impede optimal parent-child relationships. This outcome acknowledges the critical nature of the work to be done, as well as the considerable challenges to be faced.

Desired Outcome 2: Improve the quality of care provided in out-of-home environments through:

- **Non-licensed / Family, Friend & Neighbor (FFN) settings:** Focusing on quality environments and caregiver skills, particularly with infant toddler care.
- **Family child care provider settings:** Focusing on quality environments and caregiver skills, particularly with infant toddler care.
- **Preschool / Childcare center-based services:** Focusing on teacher skills in providing critical elements of quality.

Attention to the quality of out-of-home environments is particularly important in Merced County considering the large numbers of children in a variety of care settings outside the home, including family child care, family/friend/neighbor care, and center-based preschool. Quality care is paramount, and is directly linked to

improved child development, school readiness, and a variety of variables throughout a child's life and well into adulthood.

Desired Outcome 3: Improve the system for early screening, referral, assessment, and services for children with developmental, health, social, emotional, behavioral, and other special needs.

Effective and integrated systems of care that consistently identify and refer children for services that have a variety of needs is an imperative. Strong linkages across community agencies must exist; consistent, quality screenings are essential for all children; and a variety of supportive services are needed along the continuum from screening to treatment, in order to assure that all children have the best opportunities for optimal development.

Desired Outcome 4: Improve community level awareness and acknowledgement of the critical need to prioritize care benefiting our youngest kids (0-5) across a broad spectrum of areas critical to optimal development.

A community that understands and supports the successful development of all children is important to creating an environment supportive of individual and family level changes that foster optimal development. Shaping community-level norms, attitudes, and commitment to helping our kids succeed is the aim of this outcome.

Desired Outcome 5: Improve the availability of affordable, broad-scale center-based child care and preschool services for children 0-5 years, through advocacy and local preparation, planning, and development necessary for local implementation.

While directly increasing the availability of quality, center-based child care and preschool services for all those in need is beyond First 5's financial abilities, this outcome recognizes the importance of advocating for and forwarding planning and development efforts that can lead to the expansion of funding and services at state and/or national levels.

It is important to note that the Desired Outcomes are consistent with and fall within the four legislatively mandated areas First 5 addresses:

- Improved Systems of Care: Healthy Community systems
- Improved Child Health: Healthy Children
- Improved Child Development: Children Ready to Learn
- Improved Family Functioning: Strong Families

By identifying the Desired Outcomes that are most critical to childhood (and family and community) development, and positioning them as the centerpiece of this strategic plan, improvements in community systems will be achieved, children will be healthier, families better supported and stronger, and children most ready to learn.

INTERVENTION APPROACHES & FUNDING PROCESSES

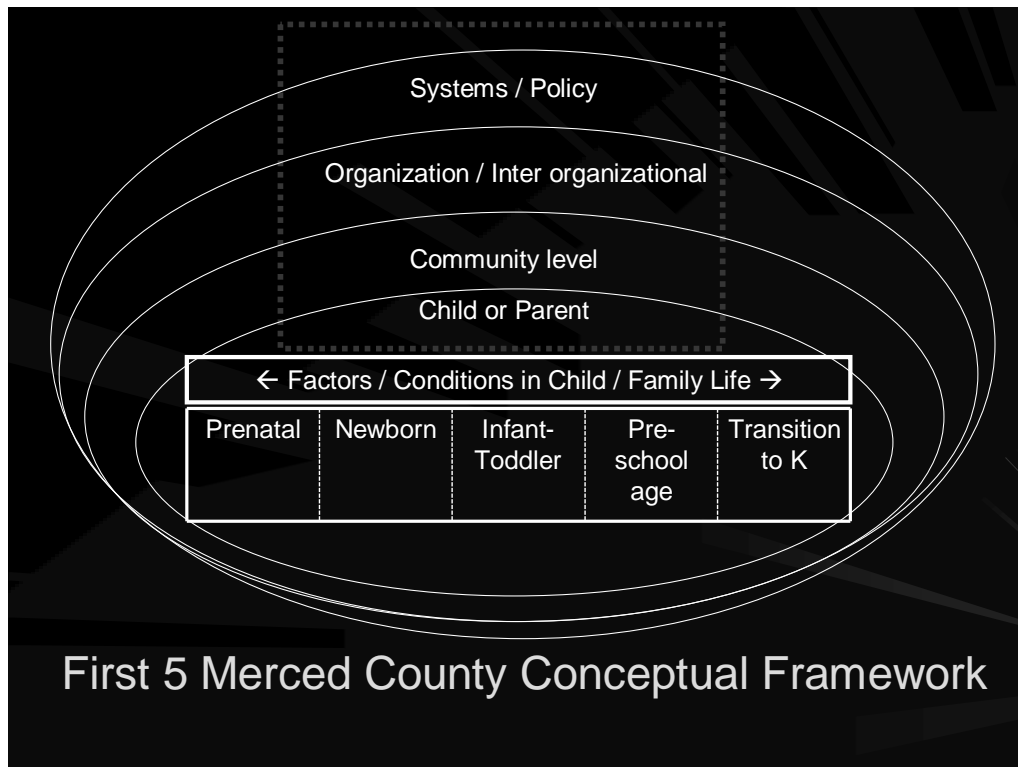
INTERVENTION APPROACHES

With the selection of its Desired Outcomes, the Commission has identified a narrowed scope of priorities to direct the majority of its funding of interventions and services.

The outcomes represent the critical conditions that First 5 believes must exist for children, parents/families, service systems, and the broader community in order for children to develop optimally and be prepared to succeed in school.

As described earlier in this document, the First 5 Commission acknowledges that its Desired Outcomes, and its efforts to achieve them, are likely to need to occur at varying 'levels of intervention.'

With this understanding, the Desired Outcomes were identified within a conceptual framework developed during the planning process, presented below:



With this framework, First 5 acknowledges that successfully accomplishing its Desired Outcomes will not come easily, and will necessitate a broad array of interventions to address the multiple factors directly underlying each outcome.

To organize and structure its interventions, First 5 has established as part of its Conceptual Framework that services can be provided at different, but inter-related, levels of intervention to impact growing children from birth to Kindergarten transition, which may include the following:

Levels of Intervention
Systems / Policy Level
Organizational / Inter-organizational Level
Community Level
Individual Level (e.g., child, parent)

In essence, First 5 recognizes the need to fund interventions that are integrated and complementary (to the degree possible) from *across multiple levels so that individually funded efforts can benefit from the created synergy, and work within a supportive, collaborative framework.*

Working collectively in this way, funded contractors, all working toward the same set of specific Desired Outcomes, are envisioned to have the best opportunity to impact these outcomes within available funding limits.

Rather than attempt to pre-identify or prescribe the particular levels of intervention First 5 will fund, prospective contractors are encouraged to select the levels at which proposed interventions would occur and the nature of the specific interventions.

Thus, First 5's funding approach solicits and relies upon the creativity and innovation of prospective applicants, as well as their grounded understanding of the needs, opportunities, and assets within the community, in order to propose thoughtfully selected interventions and levels at which to intervene.

FUNDING PROCESSES

The Commission recognizes that the needs of children 0-5 years and their families in Merced County are multifaceted, and thus no single approach to developing and funding programs will suffice. First 5 also understands that competitive procurement processes are, at times, not the optimal method of developing community-responsive and integrated services. Thus, First 5 uses a variety of funding procurement approaches to support local services.

Desired Outcomes Funding: For its Desired Outcomes, First 5 Merced County has earmarked the majority (approximately 85%) of its available program funding.

The bulk of these funds were allocated through a major Request for Proposals for Desired Outcomes 1, 2, and 3, released in January 2009. Seventeen programs were funded under this RFP for multi-year periods during the strategic plan term.

The primary focus of the RFP was to solicit proposed interventions that directly and specifically achieve Desired Outcomes 1-3, as identified by First 5 Merced County as part of its Strategic Plan priorities for a three year period, beginning 2009-2010 through 2011-2012.

The RFP focused squarely on its Desired Outcomes with the intent of facilitating the creation, implementation and enhancement of an effective and integrated set of collaborative services that produce measurable results with regard to the Desired Outcomes. In addition, First 5 Merced County sought proposals for the specific populations of interest to the Commission, utilizing interventions that have been identified as best or promising practices in achieving its Desired Outcomes.

Funding and program development for Desired Outcomes 4 and 5 will occur through First 5 staff working in partnership with local stakeholders in a variety of ways to identify, develop, and bring forth responsive, outcomes-specific interventions for the Commission's consideration throughout the Strategic Plan term. Other interventions for Desired Outcomes 1, 2, and 3, may also be developed on an 'as needed' basis, as needs emerge and opportunities for strategic intervention (to complement contracted services) appear.

Community Responsive Funding: In addition to its identified priorities, First 5 Merced County aims to be responsive to needs in the county outside the scope of its Desired Outcomes. While a lesser amount of funding will be allocated (approximately 15%), the Commission will support a variety of programs to meet a broad array of needs that enhance the well-being of children 0-5 years.

Funding for multi-year, community responsive programs has been allocated through a major procurement (Request for Proposals for General Grants Program), released in January 2009.

The intent of the RFP process was to fund innovative, quality interventions that supplement (not supplant) existing levels of services for the benefit of children 0-5 years in Merced County in alignment with the First 5 vision and mission.

Additionally, First 5 Merced County aims to support a variety of smaller-scale, community responsive grantmaking programs, including but not limited to:

- General Mini-grants Program
First 5 Merced County's General Mini-grants Program supports agencies within Merced County on a smaller scale to support program activities that further support First 5's Desired Outcomes, as well as other community needs.
- Child Care Mini-grants Program
The Child Care Mini-grants Program is a small scale funding program to assist family child care providers to improve the quality of their child care environment and services.
- Event Sponsorship Program
Event Sponsorship funding provides one-time grants to assist in implementing community based special events to help publicize and address the needs of children 0-5 years.
- Joint Funding Program

Working with other funding entities, First 5 aspires to match funding with that of other local funders in order to maximize resources for children 0-5 years, as well as create greater alignment and synergy between local funders' efforts.

- Other Special Commission Partnership Projects

The Commission may identify and pursue other opportunities to develop selected other activities for funding consideration.

EVOLVING ROLES FOR A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN

To implement its funding procurement processes and other efforts to pursue the achievement of this Strategic Plan, First 5 Merced County will continue to support a First 5 staff. With the adoption of the updated Strategic Plan and identification of new priorities, it is only natural to revisit the roles and functions of First 5's staff in contributing to the Strategic Plan's achievement.

Utilizing input gathered from Community Dialogues, service provider convenings, and other First 5 County Commissions, new potential roles have emerged (and will continue to be shaped over the course of the Strategic Plan period).

In addition to continuing its current roles (e.g., contract development & management, data collection & reporting, meeting First 5 California / other statewide requirements), First 5 Merced County staff are envisioned to take a greater, more direct and proactive role in being catalysts for accomplishing the First 5 agenda. Toward this end, staff may conduct efforts in the areas of civic and community engagement, policy advocacy, facilitation of collaborative partnerships, fund development and grant writing, new program design and implementation, and marketing and promotional efforts to forward First 5 Merced County's agenda.

EVALUATION

The Children and Families First Act requires that the California Children and Families Commission (First 5) adopt guidelines for County Commissions to use in developing their strategic plans. These guidelines must include “the results to be achieved by the adopted guidelines” and plans to collect and analyze data “to measure progress toward attaining such results.” (Health and Safety Code Sec. 130125-c).

This state-level commitment to outcomes-based evaluation is embraced by First 5 Merced County, which is taking strides to ensure that programs funded with Proposition 10 revenue are evaluated within a context of results-based accountability.

First 5 Merced County will continue into 2009-10 and beyond, with its commitment to evaluation, particularly guided by the primary aims of its Strategic Plan and identified Desired Outcomes. LTG Associates, Incorporated (LTG), based in Turlock, California, is the evaluation contractor charged with establishing the Commission’s evaluation approach, design, methodologies, data collection and compilation, data analysis, and reporting. Additionally, Persimmony International, Incorporated, is engaged to establish and implement a web-based monitoring, tracking, and reporting data system, which is used as a primary mechanism for the input of program-level service and client data for county and state reporting requirements.

In 2008-09, LTG Associates supported First 5 in the development of First 5’s evaluation design, which was focused largely on assessing First 5’s efforts to achieve its 2006 Strategic Plan.

With the adoption of the Desired Outcomes and the updated Strategic Plan for 2009/10 through 2011/12, First 5 will work with both LTG Associates and Persimmony International to refine its evaluation approach for its Desired Outcomes.

First 5’s ‘narrowed’ focus on the Desired Outcomes, together with greater consistency in the First 5 California evaluation and data collection requirements, will enable First 5’s evaluation to become increasingly streamlined and targeted to produce statements of impact around the particular areas First 5 has set its sights upon.

Only data and information which is specifically valuable to assessing our local success (and which is needed for statewide evaluation requirements) will be gathered. Thus, data collection responsibilities for First 5-funded providers are minimized, while essential information necessary for documenting changes in areas of local and statewide interest are assured.

As First 5 Merced County continues to develop and implement programs, the First 5 evaluation will increasingly provide a clearer understanding of the challenges faced by Merced County families, a deeper sense of the underlying causes of these challenges, and a more informed knowledge base from which the most responsive interventions can be developed and funded with Proposition 10 dollars.

CONCLUSION & NEXT STEPS

This Strategic Plan for the 2009/10 through 2011/12 years marks a definitive point in the history of First 5 Merced County. It aims to build upon the experiences of the past and the wisdom gained from its early and current funding commitments, and refocus the work of First 5 Merced County in a way that is refined, intentional, and reasonably balanced with available resources, in order to accomplish a set of local priorities that will make the greatest difference for our youngest children and families.