



FIRST 5 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY



REPORT TO THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS OF SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

Reporting periods:

JULY 1, 2022 - JUNE 30, 2023

JULY 1, 2023 - JUNE 30, 2024



January 2025

Report to the Board of Supervisors

January, 2025

Role of the Commission

Proposition 10 and the resulting California Children and Families Act of 1998, directs monies from sales tax on tobacco products to support local initiatives that promote the well being of children ages 0 to 5. The act requires each county to institute a commission to administer and manage the funds at the local level.

Meetings and Attendance

**Commissioners Attendance Log
January-December 2023**

First 5 Santa Cruz County Commissioners	1/18/23 (Cancelled)	3/15/23	7/19/2023	9/20/23 (Cancelled)	10/25/2023
Toni Campbell		Present	Present		Absent
Jennifer Herrera		Present	Present		Present
Lisa Hindman Holbert ¹		Present	Open	Open	Open
Bruce McPherson		Present	Present ²		Present
Diane Munoz		Present	Present		Present
Kimberly Petersen		Present	Present		Present
Faris Sabbah		Present	Present		Present
Johanna Schonfield		Present	Present		Present
Dr. Raelene Walker		Present	Present		Absent

**Commissioners Attendance Log
January-December 2024**

First 5 Santa Cruz County Commissioners	1/24/24	3/20/24 (Cancelled)	6/12/24	9/25/24	10/30/24
Toni Campbell ³	Present		Present	Open	
Jennifer Herrera ⁴	Present		Present		
Bruce McPherson	Present		Present	Present	Present
Diane Munoz ⁵			Present	Present	Present
Kimberly Petersen	Present		Absent	Present	Present
Faris Sabbah	Absent		Present	Present	Present
Johanna Schonfield	Absent		Absent	Absent	Excused
Dr. Raelene Walker	Absent		Present	Present	Present
Sheree Storm ⁶					Present ⁷
Open (Supervisor Cummings)	Open		Open	Open	Open

¹ Term expired April 2023. Not re-appointed.

² Attended remotely under Emergency Circumstances

³ Retired from Commission effective June 30, 2024

⁴ Began maternity leave August 20, 2024

⁵ Commissioner Munuz resigned from the Commission on November 16, 2023 and was re-appointed on May 14, 2024

⁶ Appointed September 24, 2024, but not sworn in until after 09/25/24 Commission meeting

⁷ Attended remotely under just cause circumstances

Commission Structure

First 5 Santa Cruz County was established by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors on December 8, 1998 by urgency ordinance to ensure that family-friendly services and education are available so that each child reaches the fifth year of life healthy, ready and able to learn, and emotionally well developed.

The Board appoints nine Commission members to implement strategic planning and administer tobacco tax revenues. Proposition 10 requires the Health Services Agency Director, Human Resources Agency Director and one representative from the Board of Supervisors to be members of the Commission. Additionally, each Supervisor appoints one Commissioner from his/her district and one Commissioner is an at large representative.

Commission Staff

The Commission is a public entity legally separate and apart from the County. First 5 Santa Cruz County utilizes the County Counsel and a private CPA firm for audit services. Thirteen staff members conduct the business of the Commission. The Commission has an administrative contractual relationship with United Way of Santa Cruz County.

Commission Priorities

The First 5 Santa Cruz County Commission adopted the following priorities: Healthy Children, Thriving Families, Early Care and Education, and Equitable and Sustainable Early Childhood Systems. Specific strategic results were chosen within each of these goal areas to receive Commission investment.

GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

First 5 Santa Cruz County's Strategic Framework

When Proposition 10 passed in 1998, California made a definitive and enduring commitment to promote the health and well-being of young children (prenatal through age five) and their families. For over 20 years, First 5 Santa Cruz County has had the great privilege and responsibility to serve as the steward of Prop 10 revenue, ensuring these public funds benefit young children and their families throughout Santa Cruz County.

First 5 is dedicated to giving children ages 0-5 the opportunities they need to be healthy, able to learn, emotionally well developed, and ultimately reach their full potential. Since its inception, First 5 Santa Cruz County has invested in many innovative, effective programs and initiatives that help:

- Ensure all children ages birth through age 5 have access to health insurance and preventive care
- Increase protective factors and decrease child abuse and neglect
- Improve access to affordable, quality early care and education
- Build early language and literacy skills that are the foundation for future learning

To continue realizing this vision, First 5 Santa Cruz County established four priorities for the current 2020 – 2025 strategic plan:



First 5 Santa Cruz County's Vision of Success

*Healthy, happy, and well-prepared children.
Thriving Families.
Connected communities.
Equitable systems.*



First 5 Santa Cruz County's Mission



To ensure early childhood systems and supports foster equitable health, development, and well-being for all young children and their families in Santa Cruz County.



- Increased access to affordable quality health care for children 0-5
- Increased use of preventive health care
- Improved maternal, infant, and child health



- Increased resilience of young children and their families
- Improved parenting practices and parent-child relationships
- Increased “social capital” (relationships and connections) of young children and their families
- Decreased child abuse and neglect

 <p>Early Care and Education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increased access to affordable, high quality early care and education ➤ Increased early learning and school readiness skills (developmental, social-emotional, cognitive) ➤ Increased stability and sustainability of the early care and education system
 <p>Equitable, Sustainable Early Childhood System</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Increased coordination and integration among organizations and sectors serving young children and families ➤ Increase in local, state, and federal policies and legislation that prioritize prevention, early intervention, and equity for young children and their families ➤ Increase in local, state, and federal funding to sustain and institutionalize investments in the early childhood system of care

This report summarizes findings of the First 5 Santa Cruz County evaluations from both the **July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023** fiscal year, and the **July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024** fiscal year. Many programs are multi-year investments, and therefore some information presented reflects multiple years of data.

Reporting period: July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023

Overall Well-Being of Children in the County

First 5 Santa Cruz County invests in efforts that support its vision of Healthy, Happy, and Well-Prepared Children, Thriving Families, Access to Affordable, Quality Early Care and Education, and Connected and Equitable Community Systems. To help guide its investments and partnerships, First 5 monitors county-wide trends that affect child well-being. The fiscal year 2022-23 marks the third year of the 2020-2025 strategic plan, and the following data reflect the status of young children and their families in the County (the most recent data available are reported).

- **Santa Cruz County has a diverse population of young children which is decreasing in number.** In 2023, there were over 13,800 children ages 0-5 in Santa Cruz County, continuing a decreasing trend since a high of almost 19,600 in 2012. The majority of these children were either Hispanic or Latine⁸ (48%) or White (42%). This diversity is also evident in kindergarten, where in 2023 almost 33% of children had a primary language other than English.
- **Unemployment varies greatly across the County.** In 2022-23, the average unemployment rate in the County was 5.2%, similar to the previous year. Within the County, the percent of unemployed residents differs greatly by area; the average unemployment rate ranges from 2.5% in the city of Capitola to 11.7% in Corralitos.
- **Gender inequalities are affecting family income.** The U.S. Census Bureau provides estimates of median incomes for households and families of various types, and this analysis examined the median incomes of families where there was at least one child under age 18. In 2022, for families with a female householder and no spouse present, the median family income was \$45,356, compared to \$104,875 for families with a male householder and no spouse present.
- **Salaries are rising, but many are still living in poverty.** Although the 2022 median family income (where there was at least one child under age 18) was higher than the previous year, it was still not enough for many in this County to make ends meet.
 - According to the U.S. Census Bureau (using 5-year averages), in 2021 almost **11%** of all people in the County were earning less than the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), and almost **9%** of all children ages 0-5 were living in poverty.

"Poverty can impede children's ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Poverty also can contribute to poor health and mental health."

Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and/or experience deep and persistent poverty.

Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children's well-being."

- National Center for Children in Poverty
< <http://www.nccp.org> >

⁸ "Latine" (pronounced lah-teen) is a gender-neutral term used when referring to people of Latin American heritage without assuming their gender identity. See *Hispanic Executive* for more information about the use of this term (<http://hispanicexecutive.com/latinx-latine-explainer/>).

However, there are other measures that are considered more comprehensive measures of income adequacy that suggest that an even higher percentage of families are living in poverty:

- The California Poverty Measure data for 2021 estimated that **12%** of all people in the County were in poverty.
 - The Self-Sufficiency Standard for 2021 estimated that in Santa Cruz County a family of five (comprised of 2 adults and 3 children, where at least one child is age 5 or younger) needed to earn at least \$171,395 a year, in order to meet their basic needs. Analyses of county incomes in 2021 indicate that approximately **67%** of families (of any size, where there was at least one child under age 18) earned less than this self-sufficiency standard.
- **There is varying enrollment in public assistance programs.** Over the past year there has been an increase in enrollment in CalWORKs and CalFresh. The number of students receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals, and enrollment in the Women, Infants, & Children program have stayed relatively level since the previous year.
 - **Children have health insurance.** In 2021 (using 5-year averages), the vast majority of County children ages 0-5 had health insurance (98%). First 5 Santa Cruz County continues to provide assistance to families to enroll in public health insurance programs, to help every child aged 0-5 get insured.
 - **Children have access to a provider for routine preventive care.** In 2022, 80% of toddlers with Medi-Cal insurance (ages 15-30 months) received a well-child check-up. An additional measure of preventive care showed that in 2022, over 67% of all infants with Medi-Cal insurance had received at least six well-child visits with a provider within the first 15 months of life.
 - **The percentage of young children getting dental care is increasing.** Data indicate that the percentage of children enrolled in Medi-Cal who had been to a dentist in the past year has been increasing over time. In 2021, 52% of children ages 1-2 saw a dentist in the last year, which is an increase of almost 15 percentage points over the past five years. Approximately 61% of children ages 3-5 saw a dentist in the last year, with a smaller but steady increase of almost 2 percentage points over the past five years.
 - **The number of mothers receiving prenatal care in the first trimester is fluctuating.** Data regarding early prenatal care in 2021 show improvements over the past five years, with a slight downturn during the past year.
 - In 2021, 84% of mothers received prenatal care in their first trimester, which exceeds the Healthy People 2030⁹ target rate of 80.5% for a related objective (*“Increase the proportion of pregnant women who receive early and adequate prenatal care”*).

⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Healthy People 2030 portal, 2023.

- Among younger mothers (ages 24 and younger), a lower percentage received first trimester care (75%).
- Additionally, there were differences in receipt of early prenatal care based upon the mother's source of payment for the care. In 2021, 78% of mothers with Medi-Cal insurance began receiving prenatal care during the first trimester, compared to 93% of mothers with private insurance.
- **The percentage of preterm births and babies with low birthweights is staying relatively level.** In 2021, approximately 7.5% of all mothers had preterm births and 5.4% had babies with low birthweights, percentages that have stayed relatively level over the past five years.
- **The percentage of births to teen mothers in the County is staying low.** In 2021, the percentage of births to teen mothers represented 2.8% of all births in Santa Cruz County, and there was a teen birth rate of 5.9 per 1,000 (ages 15-19). Both of these measures are showing a slow, continuing decrease over the past five years.
- **Over half of the births in the County were paid for by Medi-Cal.** In 2023, 55% of births, across all age groups, were paid for by Medi-Cal.
- **A small percentage of income-eligible children are enrolling in subsidized child care.** In 2023, only 15% of income-eligible infants and toddlers ages 0-2, and 59% of income-eligible preschool children ages 3-4 were enrolled in subsidized child care.
- **Young children with developmental challenges are getting support.** In 2018-19 (the most recent data available), 7% of kindergarten students in Santa Cruz County received special education services, demonstrating the importance of having services available to address the developmental issues of these very young children.
- **Third graders are struggling with their reading skills.** In 2022, only 37% of Santa Cruz County 3rd grade students met or exceeded standards in English language arts/literacy. Although the county-wide 3rd grade English language arts/literacy scores increased slightly over the previous five years, there are still significant disparities by students' English-language fluency, ethnicity, and economic status.
- **Foster care "Point-in-Time" in-care rates are slowly decreasing.** In 2020, the foster care "Point-in-Time" in-care rates were highest for infants under age 1 (4.6 per 1,000) and for children ages 1-2 (4.4 per 1,000), compared to toddlers ages 3-5 (2.2 per 1,000). However, the foster care rates for all age groups have been decreasing slowly over the past five years.
- **There are decreasing rates of child maltreatment.** In Santa Cruz County, the rates of child maltreatment have been decreasing.
 - Rates of **allegations** of abuse and neglect in Santa Cruz County show a steady decrease over time, and between 2012 and 2013, Santa Cruz County moved from being above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them.

- Similarly, rates of **substantiated allegations** of child maltreatment have also been steadily decreasing. In 2010, the rates of substantiated allegations in Santa Cruz County moved from being substantially above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them.
- However, data are revealing that infants still have substantially higher rates of abuse than toddlers and preschoolers. In 2022, the rate of substantiated allegations of child maltreatment was highest for infants under age 1 (**10.4** per 1,000), compared to children ages 1-2 (**2.9** per 1,000) and children ages 3-5 (**2.1** per 1,000).
- **Many children are experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).** The extreme stress and adversities that children experience can have lifelong impacts on health, well-being, and economic opportunities. Results from 2019 (the most recent year of data available) showed that approximately 16% of children ages 0-17 in the County experienced two or more adverse experiences (as reported by their parents), which was a slight increase from the year before.

A Profile of First 5 Participants

First 5 Santa Cruz County reaches children who can make great gains with early and smart investments

First 5's goal is to serve children ages 0-5 and their families who have the most challenges in Santa Cruz County, including English language learners, and families with fewer resources.

- **First 5-supported programs are wide-reaching.** In 2022-23, First 5 partners served **5,444** unique children ages 0-5, representing 39% of all children these ages in Santa Cruz County. Approximately **3,631 additional services** were provided to children who participated in programs where no client ID was available to track their participation, or who were indirectly supported by a First 5 funded program.
- **First 5 serves a high number of dual language learners.** Of the children served by First 5, 71% were Hispanic or Latine, and approximately 56% of children lived in households that primarily spoke a language other than English (Spanish, bilingual Spanish/English, a Mesoamerican language, or another non-English language). Of all Hispanic or Latine children ages 0-5 in Santa Cruz County, it's estimated that at least 55% participated in services funded by First 5.
- **First 5 is serving children in the highest risk zones of the County.** The new "California Strong Start Index" uses information collected at birth to understand the conditions under which California's babies are born at a very local level, and measures resources that are tied to good outcomes and resilience throughout a person's lifespan, such as healthy birth weight, timely prenatal care, parental education level, and parents' ability to afford and access health care. Of the children served by First 5 in 2022-23 who had known ZIP codes, the vast majority (86%) lived in the areas of the County with the fewest Strong Start assets (the Live Oak area of Santa Cruz, the city of Santa Cruz, Freedom, and Watsonville), showing that First 5

partners are reaching children and families who typically experience the greatest barriers to good health and well-being.

First 5 strengthens systems by enhancing the capacity of service providers

In addition to supporting direct services to children and families, First 5 aims to boost the capacity of local systems in order to extend the reach of critical early education, family support, and health services to a larger number of children and families. Systems enhancements help ensure better services for years to come. Examples of First 5's capacity-building work in 2022-23 include:

- **Skill development and coaching for early childhood educators.** In 2022-23, **35** early childhood educators from state and federally-subsidized preschools, child care centers, Transitional Kindergarten classrooms, and licensed family child care homes received training and coaching from the SEEDS of Learning® program, **5** SEEDS Quality Coaches provided literacy coaching to early educators receiving SEEDS of Learning® instruction during the year, **35** family child care providers participated in the local Quality Rating and Improvement System (Quality Counts Santa Cruz County) and were rated, and **25** received technical assistance and training, for a total of **89 unique early childhood educators**.
- **Development of a population-based system of parent education.** In 2022-23, **23** new parent education practitioners received training to deliver the Triple P –Positive Parenting Program, an evidence-based curriculum shown to improve parental efficacy, parent-child interaction, and child behaviors.

Healthy Children

For the past several years, First 5 Santa Cruz County has invested in strategies to help ensure that all children have health insurance and access to care.

First 5 Santa Cruz County insures children

- **Santa Cruz County's newborns are getting connected to medical care.** During 2022-23, the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program provided 99% of all mothers with a newborn visit while in the hospital (or via phone), and 98% of these mothers received a First 5 California *Kit for New Parents*. Of all mothers with births paid by Medi-Cal, nearly all were assisted to complete a Medi-Cal Newborn Referral application for their new baby, and 99.9% of these mothers (all but one) identified a preferred primary care provider (PCP) or clinic for their child before discharge from the hospital.
- **Children are receiving routine preventive care.** Central California Alliance for Health (the Alliance) discusses the importance of infants getting all of their well-child visits during the first several months of their life, in order to be able to assess their growth and development. Results provided by the Alliance show that in 2022, over 67% of all infants with Medi-Cal insurance in Santa Cruz County had received at least six well-child visits with a provider

within the first 15 months of life. This success was likely assisted by the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program's efforts to connect all newborns with a primary care provider.

▪ **Newborns are getting connected with County programs.**

First 5 has continued assisting with two new programs that were implemented in Santa Cruz County, which the Newborn Enrollment Coordinators have incorporated into their newborn visits:

- The **State-wide Student Identification number (SSID)** is created for newborns by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education and is used to support the social, emotional, and academic development of children from birth through 12th grade.

- The Ventures¹⁰ **Semillitas college savings account program** for newborns creates a savings account for college or vocational education after high school for every child born in Santa Cruz County. With county partners like Dientes and Salud Para La Gente, the program also incentivizes healthy behaviors by making additional payments into these savings accounts for accomplishing important health milestones (such as a baby going to the dentist by the emergence of their first tooth or their first birthday, whichever comes first).

▪ **Newborns and their families have access to food.** The Newborn Enrollment Coordinators (NECs) also provide families at hospitals with resources to apply for the CalFresh program and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.

▪ **Fewer children are using the emergency department (ED).** Ideally, children and their families who have insurance and who have a medical home will be more likely to access their provider for routine preventive care, and will be less likely to use the emergency department (ED) for non-urgent medical care.

- The services provided by the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program may have had an effect on the use of the ED for very young infants, and particularly those who were covered by Medi-Cal. Since the launch of this program at Watsonville Community Hospital in 2009, the number of infants (under age 1) on Medi-Cal who visited the Emergency Department dropped by 49% by 2022.
- There were two major shifts in this trend that may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) A dramatic decrease in ED visits between 2019 and 2020 that may have been due to parents choosing not to use the hospital ED during the COVID-19

Uninsured children are:

- Over 13 times more likely to lack a usual source of care;
- Nearly 5 times more likely to have delayed or unmet medical needs;
- Over 3 times more likely to have unmet mental health service needs;
- 5 times more likely to have unmet dental and vision care needs;
- Nearly 4 times more likely to have an unmet need for prescription drugs.

- Children Now

<<http://www.childrennow.org>>

¹⁰ Ventures was formerly known as Santa Cruz Community Ventures.

pandemic for low risk symptoms, and 2) A sharp increase in ED visits between 2021 and 2022 that suggests that these numbers are returning to pre-pandemic values.

- **Children are getting vision screening.** The VisionFirst program provides children as young as 6 months old with a simple instrument-based vision screening right in their child care and transitional kindergarten settings. In 2022-23, 355 children were screened, and 51 had possible vision problems identified (14% of all children screened). At the time of this report, 29 of those children were able to get an appointment and receive a full vision exam at an optometrist. Of these 29 children, 28 have been prescribed eye glasses or are being monitored, and 1 child did not need eye glasses. Due to the success of the VisionFirst program, some local partners have purchased their own Spot Vision Screeners to provide on-going screening.
- **Children are getting support to reach developmental milestones.** Foster children with neurodevelopmental needs are getting referred to supportive services through a coordinated and multidisciplinary system called the *Neurodevelopmental Foster Care Clinic*.

Thriving Families

One indicator of child safety are the County measurements of child abuse and neglect. Fortunately, the rates of child maltreatment are decreasing.

- Rates of **allegations** of abuse and neglect in Santa Cruz County show a steady decrease over time, and between 2012 and 2013, Santa Cruz County moved from being above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them.
- Similarly, rates of **substantiated allegations** of child maltreatment have also been steadily decreasing. In 2010, the rates of substantiated allegations in Santa Cruz County also moved from being substantially above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them.

These improvements may have been assisted by the efforts of the county-wide Triple P – Positive Parenting Program and the Families Together program, which launched in late 2009 and 2006, respectively.

First 5 Santa Cruz County helps strengthen parent-child relationships and reduce risk for child abuse and neglect

Through innovative programs, First 5 and its partners are helping to decrease the risk and incidence of child abuse and neglect.

- First 5 continued to implement and scale up the Positive Parenting Program, or **Triple P**. The program consists of five levels of intervention, from broad-based, universal efforts in the community to more intensive, focused efforts with individual parents. The Triple P model is an evidence-based program shown in numerous randomized studies to increase parental

confidence and efficacy, promote positive parent-child interactions and child behaviors, and reduce rates of child maltreatment.

Highlights of Triple P include:

- **Evidence-based parenting support is available.** First 5 has implemented all five levels of Triple P in Santa Cruz County, ranging from a media campaign to intensive and focused individual services. Between 2010-2023, over 16,800 parents with almost 32,400 children have participated in the program.
- **Parents are engaged and seeking more opportunities.** Over the past several years, analyses have consistently shown that brief services are an effective way of getting parents initially engaged in the program, and gives them an opportunity to participate in further services. Parents who attend Seminars and Workshops frequently request follow-up services, and parents who participate in one or two brief consultations for specific parenting concerns often return later for in-depth consultations and multi-session programs.
- **Parenting skills and knowledge are improving along several domains.** Parents who completed assessments that measured their levels of parenting skills and knowledge along several domains showed substantial improvements in all domains, including:
 - Improvements in child behavior and emotional regulation
 - Increased use of positive parenting styles
 - Improvements in parental emotional well-being and family relationships
 - Increased parental confidence
- **Parents with more serious parenting issues are making the greatest improvements.** There was also evidence that parents who began the program experiencing more serious parenting issues demonstrated the greatest improvements as a result of receiving in-depth services (8 or more sessions).
- **Parents are satisfied with services.** Parents have rated the quality of services very high, noting that the program helped them deal more effectively with their child's behavior, and with problems in their family.
- **Parents are continuing to use the skills they learned.** On average, parents who participated in the Seminars and Workshops felt that they would continue to use the strategies they learned, and parents who received more in-depth training felt that the program helped them develop skills that could be applied to other family members.
- **Participants at local correctional facilities are benefitting from Triple P.** Triple P practitioners from Community Bridges continued to provide 12-week workshop series in English at local correctional facilities, with very high participation and satisfaction rates. Since this program began in 2018, 439 participants have attended at least one

workshop. Results indicate that participants are demonstrating knowledge of effective parenting and have more confidence in being a parent.

- In partnership with the Human Services Department’s Family and Children’s Services Division and Encompass Community Services, First 5 supports a program called **Families Together**. Families Together is Santa Cruz County’s differential response program, a strategy used to intervene early with families in which there has been an allegation of abuse. This home visiting program includes comprehensive intake and risk assessments, development of a tailored case plan, parent support and education, child development activities, and periodic assessments.

Results of the program have been very encouraging:

- **Reduction of risk.** Parents/primary caregivers receiving services from Families Together had their levels of risk assessed while they were in the program. Pre and post risk assessments for several years combined indicated that families reduced their level of risk for future maltreatment.
- **Reduced rates of child maltreatment.** Results from 2022 show that no families who received services from the Families Together program had a substantiated allegation of maltreatment in the six months after their cases closed. This suggests that even though some families are still experiencing high risk factors that lead to a child welfare report, they may have gained skills and resources during their participation in Families Together that prevent court-mandated involvement with child welfare.

At-risk parents have improved parenting styles and reduced risk of maltreatment.

Cumulative assessment results show that 75% of families were assessed as being “high risk” or “very high risk” upon program intake, but this dropped to just 16% of families who stayed in the program a full year.

Early Care and Education

First 5 is helping to improve the quality of early learning programs in Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County is one of 58 counties participating in Quality Counts California, a “statewide, locally implemented quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that funds and provides guidance to local and regional agencies, and other quality partners, in their support of early learning and care providers.”¹¹

In 2012, First 5 Santa Cruz County launched a local QRIS, partnering with family child care and child care center providers to improve the quality of early learning for children ages birth through 5 in Santa Cruz County. First 5 established this initiative as a result of receiving funding through California’s Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge federal grant, and First 5 California’s Child Signature Program.

¹¹ Quality Counts California, <https://qualitycountscalifornia.net>, 2019.

Drawing on resources from both grants, the Quality Early Learning Initiative Consortium was created, bringing together public and private center-based program leaders, family child care providers, higher education faculty, home visiting program partners, and other early learning stakeholders. Together, this Consortium—now called Quality Counts Santa Cruz County—worked to develop and pilot a local Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), aligning with the California Quality Continuum Framework, as a way to foster on-going quality improvement that is proven to help children thrive.

Since 2015, a statewide QRIS has been established in all 58 counties. Renamed Quality Counts California (QCC) in FY 2017-18, QCC helps to ensure that children ages 0 to 5—particularly those who are low-income, English learners, or children with disabilities or developmental delays—have access to high quality early learning programs so that they thrive in their early learning settings and succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

In 2020, The California Department of Education (CDE), California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and First 5 California (F5CA) created the Quality Counts California (QCC) Local Consortia and Partnership Grants program unifying funds from several sources.

“A QRIS helps improve the quality of participating programs so they are better prepared to help all children grow socially, emotionally, and physically in a healthy environment, with knowledgeable and caring providers who engage children in a range of enriching activities.”

- Quality Counts California
<<https://qualitycountscalifornia.net>>

The QCC Local Consortia and Partnership Grant program is designed to achieve a common purpose — funding a system of continuous quality improvement support and an infrastructure for assessing, coordinating delivery of professional development, and promoting quality across the spectrum of early learning and care providers and programs in California, including family, friend, or neighbor care, family child care, center-based, and alternative settings.

This three-year grant (FY 2020-2023) asks counties to build stronger and more diverse partnerships, set more specific engagement and quality improvement goals, and move toward a more holistic vision of quality improvement.

Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) - Local Quality Rating and Improvement System. The QCSCC Consortium adopted the Quality Counts California Framework which includes the Quality Counts California Rating Matrix and the Quality Counts California Continuous Quality Improvement Pathways as the foundation of their local QRIS. This framework encompasses 15 elements of quality, including seven rated elements and eight elements in the CQI Pathways. The elements that are rated include teacher-child ratios, teacher qualifications, and teacher-child interactions.

- **Site ratings.** Full ratings of all participating Quality Counts sites in Santa Cruz County were conducted in December 2019 and are valid for 3-5 years (5 years for sites rated at Tiers 4 or 5, and 3 years for sites rated at Tier 3 or below). Sites were rated on a 5-tier scale (1=lowest tier; 5=highest tier), and as of the most recent rating in 2019:
 - 0 sites received a Tier 2 rating
 - 11 sites received a Tier 3 rating

- 62 sites received a Tier 4 rating
- 6 sites received a Tier 5 rating
- **Growing number of Family Child Care providers.** Throughout the pandemic, many centers participating in QCSCC closed and met with children and families virtually. Most reopened in FY 2021-22, and while a few remain closed, there are new centers that have joined: four in FY 2021-22 and two in FY 2022-23. The total number of sites currently participating and active in QCSCC as of FY 2022-23 are as follows:
 - **48** Child Care Centers are participating in QCSCC, with 40 rated sites, and 8 participating at the Quality Improvement (QI) level.
 - **60** Family Child Care Sites are participating in QCSCC, with 35 sites that have been rated, and 25 participating at the Quality Improvement (QI) level.

As of FY 2022-23, this brings the total number of actively participating providers/sites to **108**.

- **Quality Improvement Activities.** During this past year,
 - Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) has provided online technical assistance to program directors, teachers and providers; maintained the QCSCC database; facilitated an online Directors' Professional Learning Community; and collaborated with partners to provide system-wide trainings.
 - In addition, First 5 contracted with Go Kids, Inc. to continue to lead the QCSCC Consortium's quality improvement activities for family child care (FCC) programs. The Go Kids Quality Improvement Coordinator supported all 60 FCC providers in updating their annual Quality Improvement Plans, and applying for small Quality grants to enhance their home learning environment.
 - New for FY 2022-23 was the creation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for participating FCC's, which was facilitated by the Go Kids Quality Improvement Coordinator.
- **Local Quality Counts Santa Cruz County resources are leveraged through participation in regional partnerships.** Santa Cruz County has joined with Santa Clara, San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, San Benito, and Monterey counties to form the Quality Counts California Region 4 Hub. Regional Hubs are funded by First 5 California and were developed so that neighboring counties could strategize together, share resources, leverage funds, and align practices.

First 5 Santa Cruz County builds early literacy foundations by training early childhood educators to enhance language-rich practices in the classroom

One of the most powerful indicators of later success is a child's reading proficiency at the end of 3rd grade,¹² and data show that Santa Cruz County children are struggling with their reading skills. First 5 Santa Cruz County is working to improve these long-term trends by encouraging families to read together, providing language and literacy skill development for early childhood educators, and encouraging child assessments in order to individualize instruction.

703 early childhood educators, Reading Corps Literacy Tutors, and informal family child care providers throughout the county have been trained to promote strong language and literacy foundations for children.

- **The SEEDS of Learning® framework is being used throughout Santa Cruz County child care programs.** Since the founding of the Early Literacy Foundations Initiative in 2006-07, 703 unique educators have been trained in the SEEDS of Learning® framework. This includes 265 educators in state- and federally-subsidized classrooms, 23 educators in public school transitional kindergarten classrooms, 332 educators in licensed family child care homes and private/non-profit centers, and 83 Santa Cruz Reading Corps Literacy Tutors.
- **Classrooms and home-based settings of SEEDS-trained early educators are being transformed into literacy-rich environments.** SEEDS-trained early childhood educators are working to ensure their children are on target for kindergarten readiness by using evidence-based early literacy strategies, and integrating materials into their learning environments.
 - **Preschool and transitional kindergarten (TK) classrooms.**
 - Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no assessments using the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre-K Tool (ELLCO Pre-K)* were completed during those three fiscal years (2019-22). While classrooms are still not yet comfortable with on-site coaching visits, in FY 2022-23 Coaches were able to “observe” and evaluate classrooms via an online “Coaching Companion” platform.
 - In these classrooms taught by SEEDS-trained early childhood educators, results from this FY 2022-23 showed that classrooms demonstrated improvements across seven elements of language and literacy. The classroom element where the most change occurred was in “Approaches to Book Reading,” where the percentage of classrooms rated as having High-Quality Support increased from 29% at the beginning of the semester to 79% by the end of the semester.

“The seeds of literacy are planted before children enter school.

Important literacy skills do not develop spontaneously, instruction shapes them.”

- Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998

¹² The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning! Why Reading By The End Of Third Grade Matters. A KIDS COUNT Special Report On The Importance Of Reading By 3rd Grade*, retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/>, 2021.

- **Family child care settings.**

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic there were no evaluations for fiscal years 2020-22, and in FY 2022-23 there were no coaching or assessment visits to Family Child Care sites.
- However, during the years that the *Child/Home Early Language and Literacy Observation* assessment was utilized between 2007-2020, the cumulative results show that overall, the percentage of family child care settings that were rated as having high quality support for early literacy increased from 45% to 90%.
- **Parents are getting involved in their children’s reading.** SEEDS classrooms and family child care homes also implemented Raising A Reader (RAR), a weekly rotating book bag program for families, to boost shared reading practices and impact children’s early literacy skills. In the 2022-23 fiscal year, 2,910 children and their families participated in the program throughout the county, and almost 31,000 children have participated since the beginning of this program in 2006.

Equitable and sustainable early childhood systems

First 5 continues to focus on increasing coordination and integration among County organizations and sectors serving young children and families, prioritizing efforts that are responsive to the needs of the County’s diverse community, and increasing local, state, and federal funding to sustain County investments in the early childhood system of care.

Over the last 20 years, these service integration and systems building functions have become a cornerstone of First 5’s strategy to promote and create an equitable and sustainable early childhood system of care in Santa Cruz County. Central to that strategy is the role that First 5 plays leading the coordination and evaluation of the county-wide Thrive by 5 Early Childhood Fund in partnership with the Human Services Department and the Health Services Agency, with guidance from an Advisory Committee established by the First 5 Santa Cruz County Commission.

- **Thrive by 5.** In January 2017, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors originally established the Thrive by Three (TbT) Early Childhood Fund as a dedicated funding source and a comprehensive local initiative to improve the outcomes for the County’s youngest children (prenatal – 3) and their families. In May 2022, the Board of Supervisors approved a proposal to expand the scope and purpose of the TbT Fund to **Thrive by 5 (Tb5)**. This created greater consistency and opportunities for alignment with other early childhood initiatives and funding streams. Since that time First 5 and its Thrive by 5 partners have:
 - Adopted a Thrive by 5 theory of change that articulates a shared vision of thriving children and families in a resilient, just community and acknowledges that achieving this requires addressing the root causes of Adverse Childhood Experiences that occur in Adverse Community Environments (see Appendix C).

- Expanded the Thrive by 5 Advisory Committee's membership to include people or agencies representing CORE Conditions for Health and Well-Being not previously represented on the committee. During FY 2022-23, this Committee:
 - Convened four meetings focusing on key topics, including updates on the Nurse Family Partnership program, and implementation of the HealthySteps program.
 - Provided oversight and guidance to a multi-year effort to develop a Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis of early childhood systems in Santa Cruz County focused on home visiting and early care and education.
- Expanded the Thrive by 5 Community-Level outcomes and indicators and aligned them with the CORE Conditions for Health and Well-being to provide a more cohesive strategic framework for the Thrive by 5 initiative.
- Convened three meetings of the Home Visiting Learning Collaborative (HVLC) focused on a range of topics including Trauma Informed Practice, Motivational Interviewing, and HealthySteps.
- Convened an ad hoc Coordinated Entry Workgroup focused on supporting and enhancing the process of referring CalWORKs participants to the four home visiting programs in Santa Cruz County, and enrolled over 340 families in one of these four programs.
- Continued to support integration, growth, and improvement of the HealthySteps program within the Thrive by 5 system of care.
- Delivered Early Learning Scholarships (ELS) to 112 infant and toddler care providers serving families who are eligible for state child care subsidies.

In the coming year First 5 will continue to coordinate and evaluate the Thrive by 5 initiative with a focus on completion of a Comprehensive Fiscal Analysis of early childhood systems in Santa Cruz County that is focused on home visiting and early care and education.

- **Communications and Community Engagement.** In FY 2022-23, First 5 Santa Cruz County continued to develop and implement its communications plan that focused on increasing awareness of early childhood development, offering resources for families and early care and education providers, and promoting the agency's programs and partnerships both locally and state-wide. To address equity and access, First 5 continued to engage Spanish language translation and interpretation services for its website, newsletter and additional outreach materials. Other communication and engagement activities provided during FY 2022-23 include:
 - During National Immunization Awareness month in August of 2022, First 5 partnered with Santa Cruz County Public Health to print and mail 6,200 informational flyers on the importance of childhood immunizations.
 - In the late spring of 2023, First 5, in partnership with CORE Investments Santa Cruz County, Cradle to Career Santa Cruz County, the Santa Cruz County Office of Education,

and the Child Development Resource Center, coordinated and hosted the 2nd annual “Learn About Transitional Kindergarten: A Bilingual Town Hall Led By and For Families.”

- First 5 continued to expand information about its programs and partnerships on its website, and built out additional community resources for families, as well as educational resources for early care and education providers.
- First 5 also continued publishing its monthly bilingual e-newsletter, and increased its social media presence on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram to further engage with families and community members.

In addition to the Thrive by 5 and communications and community engagement activities just described, First 5 continues to play an active role on the following systems-building efforts led by First 5’s partners.

- **Collective of Results and Evidence-based (CORE) Investments.** Beginning in 2015 and initially focused on the transition of the City and County of Santa Cruz’s Community Programs funding model, CORE Investments is both a funding model and a broader movement to create the conditions for equitable health and well-being across the life span – prenatal through end of life. While not limited to the well-being of young children and families, CORE has emerged as a substantial and critical initiative designed to help create the type of equitable, integrated services and systems originally envisioned by the authors of Prop 10. First 5 serves on the CORE Steering Committee, helping guide the project through a multi-phase, collaborative planning process, which has resulted in defining eight interdependent “CORE Conditions for Health and Well being.”
- **DataShare Santa Cruz County.** DataShare is a county-wide data sharing system designed to share data on a variety of factors that affect the well-being of residents in the county. DataShare’s mission is to provide an accessible, comprehensive, and reliable resource for local, regional, and national data available to everyone. DataShare Santa Cruz County envisions an equitable, thriving, and resilient community where everyone shares responsibility for creating the social, economic, and environmental conditions necessary for health and well-being at every stage of life. The website, www.datasharescc.org, is an interactive data platform with local, state, and national data that allows users to explore and understand information about our local community. The site holds robust data and indicators in the areas of health, economy, education, environment, government and politics, public safety, transportation, and social environment.
- **Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network.** Building on a series of successful legislative visits and policy wins for early childhood in 2017, First 5 Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz Counties joined forces in FY 2017-18 to help form the tri-county Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network (CCECAN). Representing over 94,000 children ages 0-8, CCECAN is a collaboration of organizations and individuals in the tri-county area committed to strengthening and advocating for policies and systems change at the state and local level that will support thriving children and families.

- **Cradle to Career.** Building on the success of the Live Oak Cradle to Career place-based initiative, the effort has now expanded county-wide and is simply known as “Cradle to Career” (C2C). Grown from a nascent idea in 2013 championed by former Supervisor John Leopold, to a vibrant results-based collaboration between parents and local education, health, and social service leaders in four school districts across the county, C2C’s mission is to work collectively to empower families, deliver resources, and advocate for equitable and inclusive support systems to eliminate disparities and ensure all Santa Cruz County children thrive in their education, health, and character.
- **Oral Health Access.** Oral Health Access Santa Cruz was created in 2016 as a steering committee made up of community leaders and organizations, dental and medical clinics, and educators to address the oral health needs in Santa Cruz County. Led by Dientes Community Dental, the County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency, and numerous community partners the committee’s mission is to improve the oral health of Santa Cruz County residents by uniting stakeholders and advocating sound, measurable strategies that increase access to care and education.

Reporting period: July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024

Overall Well-Being of Children in the County

First 5 Santa Cruz County invests in efforts that support its vision of Healthy, Happy, and Well-Prepared Children, Thriving Families, Access to Affordable, Quality Early Care and Education, and Connected and Equitable Community Systems. To help guide its investments and partnerships, First 5 monitors county-wide trends that affect child well-being. The fiscal year 2023-24 marks the fourth year of the 2020-2025 strategic plan, and the following data reflect the status of young children and their families in the County (the most recent data available are reported).

- **Santa Cruz County has a diverse population of young children which is decreasing in number.** In 2024, there were approximately 13,600 children ages 0-5 in Santa Cruz County, continuing a decreasing trend since a high of almost 19,600 in 2012. The majority of these children were either Hispanic or Latine¹³ (46%) or White (44%). This diversity is also evident in kindergarten, where in 2024 almost 34% of children had a primary language other than English.
- **Unemployment varies greatly across the County.** In 2024, the average unemployment rate in the County was 6.1%, similar to the previous year. Within the County, the percent of unemployed residents differs greatly by area; the average unemployment rate ranges from 3.0% in the city of Capitola to 13.6% in Corralitos.
- **The average family income is not high enough to meet basic needs.** The U.S. Census Bureau reported that in Santa Cruz County, the 2023 median annual family income for families of four (of all configurations of adults and children) was \$141,384. However, the median Self-Sufficiency Standard income (SSS) suggests that this was far below what was actually needed to make ends meet in this County. The SSS is a comprehensive measure of income adequacy and takes into account the actual costs of housing, child care, health care, transportation, food, and taxes in a particular county. According to the 2024 SSS, for a family of four (of all parent/child configurations) the minimum income needed to meet their basic needs was \$177,598; approximately 25% more than the median family income.
- **There is varying enrollment in public assistance programs.** Enrollment in CalFresh has been rising quite a bit over the past five years, with just a small decrease in 2024. Enrollment in

"Poverty can impede children's ability to learn and contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral problems. Poverty also can contribute to poor health and mental health."

Risks are greatest for children who experience poverty when they are young and/or experience deep and persistent poverty.

Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children's well-being."

- National Center for Children in Poverty
<<http://www.nccp.org>>

¹³ "Latine" (pronounced lah-teen) is a gender-neutral term used when referring to people of Latin American heritage without assuming their gender identity. See *Hispanic Executive* for more information about the use of this term (<http://hispanicexecutive.com/latinx-latine-explainer/>).

CalWORKs and the number of students receiving Free and Reduced Price Meals have been decreasing over the past five years, and the 2023 enrollment in the Women, Infants, & Children program has had small fluctuations but has stayed relatively level over the past five years.

- **Children have health insurance.** In 2022 (using 5-year averages), the vast majority of County children ages 0-5 had health insurance (98%). First 5 Santa Cruz County continues to provide assistance to families to enroll in public health insurance programs, to help every child aged 0-5 get insured.
- **Children have access to a provider for routine preventive care.** In 2023, 72% of infants with Medi-Cal insurance (ages 0-15 months) received at least six Well-Child check-ups within the first 15 months of life, following an increasing trend over the previous three years. Almost 80% of toddlers with Medi-Cal insurance (ages 15-30 months) received at least two Well-Child visits in 2023.
- **The percentage of young children getting dental care is increasing.** Data indicate that the percentage of children enrolled in Medi-Cal who had been to a dentist in the past year has been increasing over time. In 2022, 52% of children ages 1-2 saw a dentist in the last year, which is an increase of almost 9 percentage points over the past five years. Approximately 62% of children ages 3-5 saw a dentist in the last year, with a smaller but steady increase over the past five years.
- **The number of mothers receiving prenatal care in the first trimester is fluctuating.** Data regarding early prenatal care in 2022 show improvements over the past five years.
 - In 2022, 88% of all mothers received prenatal care in their first trimester, which exceeds the Healthy People 2030¹⁴ target rate of 80.5% for a related objective (*"Increase the proportion of pregnant women who receive early and adequate prenatal care"*).
 - Among younger mothers (ages 24 and younger), a slightly lower percentage received first trimester care (79%).
 - Additionally, there were differences in receipt of early prenatal care based upon the mother's source of payment for the care. In 2022, 79% of mothers with Medi-Cal insurance began receiving prenatal care during the first trimester, compared to 96% of mothers with private insurance.
- **The percentage of preterm births and babies with low birthweights is rising slowly.** In 2022, 8.7% of all mothers had preterm births and 6.8% had babies with low birthweights, percentages that have been rising slightly over the past five years.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Healthy People 2030 portal, 2023.

- **The percentage of births to teen mothers in the County is staying low.** In 2022, the percentage of births to teen mothers represented 2.9% of all births in Santa Cruz County, and there was a teen birth rate of 6.4 per 1,000 (ages 15-19). Both of these measures have stayed relatively level over the past five years.
- **Over half of the births in the County were paid for by Medi-Cal.** In 2024, 58% of births, across all age groups, were paid for by Medi-Cal.
- **Not all income-eligible children are enrolled in subsidized child care.** In 2023, only 15% of income-eligible infants and toddlers ages 0-2 were enrolled in subsidized child care. A higher percentage of income-eligible preschool children ages 3-4 were enrolled (59%), and has been increasing over the past five years.
- **Young children with developmental challenges are getting support.** In 2024, 7% of children ages 3-5 in Santa Cruz County were receiving special education services, demonstrating the importance of having services available to address the developmental issues of these young children.
- **Third graders are struggling with their reading skills.** One of the most powerful indicators of later success is a child's reading proficiency at the end of 3rd grade.
 - In 2023, only 38% of all Santa Cruz County 3rd grade students met or exceeded standards in English language arts/literacy, and there were significant disparities by students' English-language fluency, race/ethnicity, and economic status.
 - However, when English language learners in 3rd grade were evaluated with an assessment specifically designed to measure English language proficiency (the *English Language Proficiency Assessments for California*), results showed that they were progressing. In 2023, over 15% of Santa Cruz County 3rd grade English Learner students were assessed as having "well-developed" English skills, a substantial increase compared to 10% the previous year.
- **Foster care "Point-in-Time" in-care rates are fluctuating.** In 2023, the foster care "Point-in-Time" in-care rates were highest for infants under age 1 (6.3 per 1,000), and have risen slightly over the past three years. In comparison, the foster care rates for toddlers ages 1-2 (2.9 per 1,000) and preschoolers ages 3-5 (2.0 per 1,000) have been decreasing.
- **There are decreasing rates of child maltreatment.** In Santa Cruz County, the rates of child maltreatment have been decreasing.
 - Rates of **allegations** of abuse and neglect in Santa Cruz County show a steady decrease over time, and between 2011 and 2013, Santa Cruz County moved from being above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them (and have generally stayed below since).
 - Similarly, rates of **substantiated allegations** of child maltreatment have also been steadily decreasing. In 2010, the rates of substantiated allegations in Santa Cruz County

moved from being substantially above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them (and have stayed below since).

- However, data are revealing that infants still have substantially higher rates of abuse than toddlers and preschoolers. In 2023, the rate of substantiated allegations of child maltreatment was highest for infants under age 1 (**8.6** per 1,000), compared to children ages 1-2 (**4.6** per 1,000), and higher than the 2022 rate for children ages 3-5 (**2.4** per 1,000).
- **Many children are experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).** The extreme stress and adversities that children experience can have lifelong impacts on health, well-being, and economic opportunities. Results from the 2016-19 (4-year average) ACEs report showed that approximately 16% of children ages 0-17 in the County experienced two or more adverse experiences (as reported by their parents).

A Profile of First 5 Participants

First 5 Santa Cruz County reaches children who can make great gains with early and smart investments

First 5's goal is to serve children ages 0-5 and their families who have the most challenges in Santa Cruz County, including English language learners, and families with fewer resources.

- **First 5-supported programs are wide-reaching.** In 2023-24, First 5 partners served **5,043** unique children ages 0-5, representing 37% of all children these ages in Santa Cruz County. **An additional 4,204 services** were provided to children who participated in programs where no client ID was available to track their participation, or who were indirectly supported by a First 5 funded program.
- **First 5 serves a high number of dual language learners.** Of the children served by First 5, 71% were Hispanic or Latine, and approximately 58% of children lived in households that primarily spoke a language other than English (Spanish, bilingual Spanish/English, a Mesoamerican language, or another non-English language). Of all Hispanic or Latine children ages 0-5 in Santa Cruz County, it's estimated that at least 53% participated in services funded by First 5.
- **First 5 is serving children in the highest risk zones of the County.** The new "California Strong Start Index" uses information collected at birth to understand the conditions under which California's babies are born at a very local level, and measures resources that are tied to good outcomes and resilience throughout a person's lifespan, such as healthy birth weight, timely prenatal care, parental education level, and parents' ability to afford and access health care. Of the children served by First 5 in 2023-24 who had known ZIP codes, the vast majority (84%) lived in the areas of the County with the fewest Strong Start assets (the Live Oak area of Santa Cruz, the city of Santa Cruz, Freedom, and Watsonville), showing that First 5 partners are reaching children and families who typically experience the greatest barriers to good health and well-being.

First 5 strengthens systems by enhancing the capacity of service providers

In addition to supporting direct services to children and families, First 5 aims to boost the capacity of local systems in order to extend the reach of critical early education, family support, and health services to a larger number of children and families. Systems enhancements help ensure better services for years to come. Examples of First 5's capacity-building work in 2023-24 include:

- **Skill development and coaching for early childhood educators.** In 2023-24, **36** early childhood educators from state and federally-subsidized preschools, child care centers, Transitional Kindergarten classrooms, and licensed family child care homes received training and coaching from the SEEDS of Learning® program, **9** SEEDS Quality Coaches provided literacy coaching to early educators receiving SEEDS of Learning® instruction during the year, **35** family child care providers participated in the local Quality Rating and Improvement System (Quality Counts Santa Cruz County) and were rated, and **30** received technical assistance and training and were not yet rated. Some child care providers participated in more than one type of training, resulting in a total of **98 unique early childhood educators**.
- **Development of a population-based system of parent education.** In 2023-24, **24** new parent education practitioners received training to deliver the Triple P –Positive Parenting Program, an evidence-based curriculum shown to improve parental efficacy, parent-child interaction, and child behaviors.

Healthy Children

For the past several years, First 5 Santa Cruz County has invested in strategies to help ensure that all children have health insurance and access to care.

First 5 Santa Cruz County insures children

- **Santa Cruz County's newborns are getting connected to medical care.** During 2023-24, the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program provided 99% of all mothers with a newborn visit while in the hospital (or via phone), and 99% of these mothers received a First 5 California *Kit for New Parents*. Of all mothers with births paid by Medi-Cal, 99% were assisted to complete a Medi-Cal Newborn Referral application for their new baby, and 100% of these mothers identified a preferred primary care provider (PCP) or clinic for their child before discharge from the hospital.
- **Children are receiving routine preventive care.** Central California Alliance for Health (the Alliance) discusses the importance of infants getting all of their well-child visits during

Uninsured children are:

- *Over 13 times more likely to lack a usual source of care;*
- *Nearly 5 times more likely to have delayed or unmet medical needs;*
- *Over 3 times more likely to have unmet mental health service needs;*
- *5 times more likely to have unmet dental and vision care needs;*
- *Nearly 4 times more likely to have an unmet need for prescription drugs.*

- Children Now
<<http://www.childrennow.org>>

the first several months of their life, in order to be able to assess their growth and development. Results provided by the Alliance show that in 2023, approximately 72% of all infants with Medi-Cal insurance in Santa Cruz County had received at least six well-child visits with a provider within the first 15 months of life. This success was likely assisted by the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program's efforts to connect all newborns with a primary care provider.

- **Newborns are getting connected with County programs.** First 5 has continued assisting with two programs that were implemented in Santa Cruz County, which the Newborn Enrollment Coordinators have incorporated into their newborn visits:
 - The **State-wide Student Identification number (SSID)** is created for newborns by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education and is used to support the social, emotional, and academic development of children from birth through 12th grade.
 - The Ventures¹⁵ **Semillitas college savings account program** for newborns creates a savings account for college or vocational education after high school for every child born in Santa Cruz County. With county partners like Dientes, Salud Para La Gente, Triple P, and the Central California Alliance for Health, the program also incentivizes healthy behaviors by making additional payments into these savings accounts for accomplishing important health milestones (such as a baby going to the dentist by the emergence of their first tooth or their first birthday, receiving baby immunizations and wellness checks, etc.).
- **Newborns and their families have access to food.** The Newborn Enrollment Coordinators (NECs) also provide families at hospitals with resources to apply for the CalFresh program and Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program.
- **Fewer children are using the emergency department (ED).** Ideally, children and their families who have insurance and who have a medical home will be more likely to access their provider for routine preventive care, and will be less likely to use the emergency department (ED) for non-urgent medical care.
 - The services provided by the Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program may have had an effect on the use of the ED for very young infants, and particularly those who were covered by Medi-Cal. Since the launch of this program at Watsonville Community Hospital in 2009, the number of infants (under age 1) on Medi-Cal who visited the Emergency Department dropped 53% by 2023.
 - There were two major shifts in this trend that may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) A dramatic decrease in ED visits between 2019 and 2020 that may have been due to parents choosing not to use the hospital ED during the COVID-19 pandemic for low risk symptoms, and 2) A sharp increase in ED visits between 2021 and 2022 that suggests that these numbers are returning to pre-pandemic values.

¹⁵ Ventures was formerly known as Santa Cruz Community Ventures.

- **Children are getting vision screening.** The VisionFirst program provides children as young as 6 months old with a simple instrument-based vision screening right in their child care and transitional kindergarten settings. In 2023-24, 402 children were screened, and 68 had possible vision problems identified (17% of all children screened). At the time of this report, 46 of those children were able to get an appointment and receive a full vision exam at an optometrist. Of these 46 children, 40 have been prescribed eyeglasses, 4 are being monitored, and 2 children did not need eyeglasses. Due to the success of the VisionFirst program, some local partners have purchased their own Spot Vision Screeners to provide on-going screening.
- **Children are getting support to reach developmental milestones.** Foster children with neurodevelopmental needs are getting referred to supportive services through a coordinated and multidisciplinary system called the *Neurodevelopmental Foster Care Clinic*.

Thriving Families

One indicator of child safety are the County measurements of child abuse and neglect. Fortunately, the rates of child maltreatment are decreasing.

- Rates of **allegations** of abuse and neglect in Santa Cruz County show a steady decrease over time, and between 2011 and 2013, Santa Cruz County moved from being above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them (and have generally stayed below since).
- Similarly, rates of **substantiated allegations** of child maltreatment have also been steadily decreasing. In 2010, the rates of substantiated allegations in Santa Cruz County moved from being substantially above (or at) the statewide rates, to below them (and have stayed below since).

These improvements may have been assisted by the efforts of the county-wide Triple P – Positive Parenting Program and the Families Together program, which launched in late 2009 and 2006, respectively.

First 5 Santa Cruz County helps strengthen parent-child relationships and reduce risk for child abuse and neglect

Through innovative programs, First 5 and its partners are helping to decrease the risk and incidence of child abuse and neglect.

- First 5 continued to implement and scale up the Positive Parenting Program, or **Triple P**. The program consists of five levels of intervention, from broad-based, universal efforts in the community to more intensive, focused efforts with individual parents. The Triple P model is an evidence-based program shown in numerous randomized studies to increase parental confidence and efficacy, promote positive parent-child interactions and child behaviors, and reduce rates of child maltreatment.

Highlights of Triple P include:

- **Evidence-based parenting support is available.** First 5 has implemented all five levels of Triple P in Santa Cruz County, ranging from a media campaign to intensive and focused individual services. Between 2010-2024, almost 18,000 parents and over 34,300 children have participated in the program.
- **Parents are engaged and seeking more opportunities.** Over the past several years, analyses have consistently shown that brief services are an effective way of getting parents initially engaged in the program, and gives them an opportunity to participate in further services. Parents who attend Seminars and Workshops frequently request follow-up services, and parents who participate in one or two brief consultations for specific parenting concerns often return later for in-depth consultations and multi-session programs.
- **Parenting skills and knowledge are improving along several domains.** Parents who completed assessments that measured their levels of parenting skills and knowledge along several domains showed substantial improvements in all domains, including:
 - Improvements in child behavior and emotional regulation
 - Increased use of positive parenting styles
 - Improvements in parental emotional well-being and family relationships
 - Increased parental confidence
- **Parents with more serious parenting issues are making the greatest improvements.** There was also evidence that parents who began the program experiencing more serious parenting issues demonstrated the greatest improvements as a result of receiving in-depth services.
- **Parents are satisfied with services.** Parents have rated the quality of services very high, noting that the program helped them deal more effectively with their child's behavior, and with problems in their family.
- **Parents are continuing to use the skills they learned.** On average, parents who participated in the Seminars and Workshops felt that they would continue to use the strategies they learned, and parents who received more in-depth training felt that the program helped them develop skills that could be applied to other family members.
- **Participants at local correctional facilities are benefiting from Triple P.** Triple P practitioners from Community Bridges continued to provide 12-week workshop series in English at local correctional facilities, with very high participation and satisfaction rates. Since this program began in 2018, 481 participants have attended at least one workshop. Results indicate that participants are demonstrating knowledge of effective parenting and have more confidence in being a parent.

- In partnership with the Human Services Department’s Family and Children’s Services Division and Encompass Community Services, First 5 supports a program called **Families Together**. Families Together is Santa Cruz County’s differential response program, a strategy used to intervene early with families in which there has been an allegation of abuse. This home visiting program includes comprehensive intake and risk assessments, development of a tailored case plan, parent support and education, child development activities, and periodic assessments.

Results of the program have been very encouraging:

- **Reduction of risk.** Parents/primary caregivers receiving services from Families Together had their levels of risk assessed while they were in the program. Pre and post risk assessments for several years combined indicated that families reduced their level of risk for future maltreatment.
- **Reduced rates of child maltreatment.** Results from 2023 show that 98% families who received services from the Families Together program *did not have* a substantiated allegation of maltreatment in the six months after their cases closed.

At-risk parents have improved parenting styles and reduced risk of maltreatment.

Cumulative assessment results show that 74% of families were assessed as being “high risk” or “very high risk” upon program intake, but this dropped to just 17% of families who stayed in the program a full year.

Early Care and Education

First 5 is helping to improve the quality of early learning programs in Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County is one of 58 counties participating in Quality Counts California, a “statewide, locally implemented quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that funds and provides guidance to local and regional agencies, and other quality partners, in their support of early learning and care providers.”¹⁶

In 2012, First 5 Santa Cruz County launched a local QRIS, partnering with family child care and child care center providers to improve the quality of early learning for children ages birth through 5 in Santa Cruz County. First 5 established this initiative as a result of receiving funding through California’s Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge federal grant, and First 5 California’s Child Signature Program.

Drawing on resources from both grants, the Quality Early Learning Initiative Consortium was created, bringing together public and private center-based program leaders, family child care providers, higher education faculty, home visiting program partners, and other early learning

“A QRIS helps improve the quality of participating programs so they are better prepared to help all children grow socially, emotionally, and physically in a healthy environment, with knowledgeable and caring providers who engage children in a range of enriching activities.”

- Quality Counts California
<<https://qualitycountscalifornia.net>>

¹⁶ Quality Counts California, <https://qualitycountscalifornia.net>, 2019.

stakeholders. Together, this Consortium—now called Quality Counts Santa Cruz County—worked to develop and pilot a local QRIS, aligning with the California Quality Continuum Framework, as a way to foster on-going quality improvement that is proven to help children thrive.

Since 2015, a statewide QRIS has been established in all 58 counties. Renamed Quality Counts California (QCC) in FY 2017-18, QCC helps to ensure that children ages 0 to 5—particularly those who are low-income, English learners, or children with disabilities or developmental delays—have access to high quality early learning programs so that they thrive in their early learning settings and succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Beginning in FY 2023-24, QCC has shifted some funding away from formal rating to maximize resources and meet the diverse needs of our early learning and care providers through research, evaluation, and a focus on equity. QCC continues to maintain some funding for public programs to conduct ratings, inform prioritization of quality improvement activities, and increase public accountability.

Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) - Local Quality Rating and Improvement System. The QCSCC Consortium adopted the Quality Counts California Framework as the foundation of their local QRIS. This framework encompasses 15 elements of quality, including 7 rated elements. The elements that are rated include teacher-child ratios, teacher qualifications, and teacher-child interactions.

- **Site ratings.** Full ratings of all participating Quality Counts sites in Santa Cruz County were conducted in December 2019 and are valid for 3-5 years (5 years for sites rated at Tiers 4 or 5, and 3 years for sites rated at Tier 3 or below). Sites were rated on a 5-tier scale (1=lowest tier; 5=highest tier), and as of the most recent rating in 2019:
 - 0 sites received a Tier 2 rating
 - 11 sites received a Tier 3 rating
 - 62 sites received a Tier 4 rating
 - 6 sites received a Tier 5 rating
- **System of Family Child Care providers.** Throughout the pandemic, many centers participating in QCSCC closed and met with children and families virtually. Most reopened in FY 2021-22, and while a few remain closed, there are new centers that have joined: four in FY 2021-22 and two in FY 2022-23. In FY 2023-24, five family child care providers joined QCSCC. The total number of sites currently participating and active in QCSCC as of FY 2023-24 are as follows:
 - **43** Child Care Centers are participating in QCSCC, with 37 rated sites, and 6 not yet rated.
 - **65** Family Child Care Sites are participating in QCSCC, with 35 sites that have been rated, and 30 not yet rated.

As of FY 2023-24, this brings the total number of actively participating providers/sites to **108**.

- **Quality Improvement Activities.** During this past year,
 - Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) has provided online technical assistance to program directors, teachers and providers; maintained the QCSCC database; facilitated a Directors’ Professional Learning Community; and collaborated with partners to provide system-wide trainings.
 - First 5 contracted with Go Kids, Inc. to continue to lead the QCSCC Consortium’s quality improvement activities for family child care (FCC) programs. The Go Kids Quality Improvement Coordinator supported all 65 FCC providers in updating their annual Quality Improvement Plans, and applying for small Quality grants to enhance their home learning environment.
 - In addition, the Santa Cruz County Office of Education oversees the Workforce Professional Development pathway of QCSCC and provides professional development and training to teachers and FCC providers from participating QCSCC sites. In FY 2023-24, it is estimated that an additional 395 teachers and providers attended trainings through this pathway.
- **Quality Counts California Regional Training, Technical Assistance and Coordination Hub – Region 4.** Santa Cruz County has joined with Santa Clara, San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, San Benito, and Monterey counties to form the Quality Counts California Region 4 Hub. While QCC takes place primarily at the County level, Regional Hubs are funded by First 5 California and were developed so that neighboring counties could strategize together, share resources, leverage funds, align practices, and minimize duplication.

First 5 Santa Cruz County builds early literacy foundations by training early childhood educators to enhance language-rich practices in the classroom

One of the most powerful indicators of later success is a child’s reading proficiency at the end of 3rd grade. Unfortunately, data show that Santa Cruz County children are struggling with their reading and writing skills. First 5 Santa Cruz County is working to improve these long-term trends by encouraging families to read together, providing language and literacy skill development for early childhood educators, and encouraging child assessments in order to individualize instruction.

721 early childhood educators, Reading Corps Literacy Tutors, and informal family child care providers throughout the county have been trained to promote strong language and literacy foundations for children.

- **The SEEDS of Learning® framework is being used throughout Santa Cruz County child care programs.** Since the founding of the Early Literacy Foundations Initiative in 2006-07, 721 unique educators have been trained in the SEEDS of Learning® framework. This includes 271 educators in state- and federally-subsidized classrooms, 25 educators in public school transitional kindergarten classrooms, 342 educators in licensed family child care homes and private/non-profit centers, and 83 Santa Cruz Reading Corps Literacy Tutors.

- **Classrooms and home-based settings of SEEDS-trained early educators are being transformed into literacy-rich environments.** SEEDS-trained early childhood educators are working to ensure their children are on target for kindergarten readiness by using evidence-based early literacy strategies, and integrating materials into their learning environments.

- **Preschool and transitional kindergarten (TK) classrooms.**

- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to complete any *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre-K Tool (ELLCO Pre-K)* assessments for three fiscal years (2019-22). Although classrooms were still not yet comfortable with on-site coaching visits in FY 2022-23, Coaches were able to “observe” and evaluate classrooms via the online “Coaching Companion” platform, and this evaluation method has continued to be used since then.
- In these classrooms taught by SEEDS-trained early childhood educators, results from the past two years showed that classrooms demonstrated improvements across seven elements of language and literacy. The classroom element where the most change occurred was in “Approaches to Curriculum,” where the percentage of classrooms rated as having High-Quality Support increased from 24% at the beginning of the semester to 90% by the end of the semester.

“The seeds of literacy are planted before children enter school.

Important literacy skills do not develop spontaneously, instruction shapes them.”

- Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998

- **Family child care settings.**

- Similar to the Preschool and TK classrooms, post-pandemic requirements changed the coaching methodology for family child care settings. Beginning in FY 2022-23, coaching was no longer done in-home, but rather was conducted as a group in workshops. Coaches were no longer using the entire CHELLO in their evaluation of home-based child care settings, and in FY 2023-24, individual questions from the CHELLO were selected to assess the settings at the beginning and end of the semester.
- Among the five individual Group/Family Observation components that were assessed in FY 2023-24, the component that demonstrated the most improvement was “Writing Activities,” where the percentage of classrooms rated as “Excellent” increased from 38% at the beginning of the semester to 85% by the end of the semester.
- Scores on the Literacy Environment Checklist showed that the percentage of family child care settings that were assessed as having “Excellent Support” increased from 71% to 86%.

- **Parents are getting involved in their children’s reading.** SEEDS classrooms and family child care homes also implemented Raising A Reader (RAR), a weekly rotating book bag program for families, to boost shared reading practices and impact children’s early literacy skills. In the 2023-

24 fiscal year, 2,558 children and their families participated in the program throughout the county, and nearly 32,300 children have participated since the beginning of this program in 2006.

Equitable and sustainable early childhood systems

First 5 continues to focus on increasing coordination and integration among County organizations and sectors serving young children and families, prioritizing efforts that are responsive to the needs of the County's diverse community, and increasing local, state, and federal funding to sustain County investments in the early childhood system of care.

For over 20 years, these service integration and systems building functions have become a cornerstone of First 5's strategy to promote and create an equitable and sustainable early childhood system of care in Santa Cruz County. Central to that strategy is the role that First 5 plays leading the coordination and evaluation of the county-wide Thrive by 5 initiative in partnership with the Human Services Department and the Health Services Agency, with guidance from an Advisory Committee established by the First 5 Santa Cruz County Commission. In addition to Thrive by 5, First 5 has expanded the implementation of its communications plan, supported multiple community engagement activities and continues to play an active role in systems-building efforts led by First 5 partners.

- **Thrive by 5.** In January 2017, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors established the Thrive by Three (TbT) Early Childhood Fund as a dedicated funding source and a comprehensive local initiative to improve outcomes for the County's youngest children (prenatal – 3) and their families. In May 2022, the Board of Supervisors approved a proposal to expand the scope and purpose of the TbT Fund to Thrive by 5 (Tb5). This created greater consistency and opportunities for alignment with other early childhood initiatives and funding streams. Since that time First 5 and its Thrive by 5 partners have:
 - Adopted a Thrive by 5 theory of change that articulates a shared vision of thriving children and families in a resilient, just community and acknowledges that achieving this requires addressing the root causes of Adverse Childhood Experiences that occur in Adverse Community Environments.
 - Expanded the Thrive by 5 Advisory Committee's membership to include people or agencies representing CORE Conditions for Health and Well-Being not previously represented on the committee, and added four seats specifically for Parent Leaders with young children.
 - Expanded the Thrive by 5 Community-Level outcomes and indicators and aligned them with the CORE Conditions for Health and Well-being to provide a more cohesive strategic framework for the Thrive by 5 initiative.
 - Convened four meetings per year of the Thrive by 5 Advisory Committee and continued to provide oversight and guidance to a multi-year effort to develop a Comprehensive

Fiscal Analysis of early childhood systems in Santa Cruz County focused on home visiting and early care and education.

- Continued to convene the Learning Collaborative sessions for Thrive by 5 partners, focused on a range of topics including Motivational Interviewing; oral health and coordinated entry into local housing programs; nutrition for families; support for families with children with disabilities; and intimate partner violence.
 - Continued to convene a Coordinated Entry Workgroup focused on supporting and enhancing the process of referring CalWORKs participants to the four home visiting programs in Santa Cruz County, and enrolled 356 families.
 - Continued to support integration, growth, and improvement of the HealthySteps program within the Thrive by 5 system of care.
 - Delivered Early Learning Scholarships (ELS) to 114 infant and toddler care providers serving families who are eligible for state child care subsidies.
- **Communications and Community Engagement.** During FY 2023-24, First 5 Santa Cruz County continued to expand and implement its communications plan that focused on increasing awareness of early childhood development, offering resources for families and early care and education providers, and promoting the agency's programs and partnerships both locally and state-wide. First 5 has continued to address equity and access by consistently engaging Spanish language translation and interpretation services for its website, newsletter, additional outreach materials, and community engagement.

New in FY 23-24:

- Launched a Community Dashboard page, featuring demographic and strategic impact data from the First 5 Santa Cruz County *Annual Evaluation Report*.
- Launched a LinkedIn account in the fall of 2023 and grew Instagram and X (formerly known as Twitter) and Facebook followers over the fiscal year. On Facebook, First 5 both expanded its content reach by 100% as well as increased its content interactions by 50%.
- Placed a 30-second bilingual Medi-Cal renewal video in rotation at our county's two DMV locations beginning in May of 2024, reaching over 25,000 people at both locations combined.
- Developed bilingual Thrive by 5 collateral materials with localized messaging to increase awareness about where families with young children can go, or who they can contact for assistance with accessing key resources, such as home visiting, child care, and parenting support. The project included the development of a social media toolkit, featuring video testimonials from local parents who had participated in home visiting programs, as well as a resource pocket guide for families.

- In the late spring of 2024, First 5—in partnership with Cradle to Career Santa Cruz County—coordinated a bilingual informational webinar with representatives from each of the resources listed in the Thrive by 5 pocket guide, who provided more in-depth program information to local *promotoras* and parent leaders to encourage utilization and distribution of the guide.
 - Created and launched a new Thrive by 5 website that includes a webpage that mirrors the content and look of the pocket guide.
 - Contributed multiple fiscal sponsorships for community events and endeavors over the year including: the pilot launch of the Santa Cruz Children’s Museum of Discovery’s Museum Month Pass, sponsorship of Ventures’ Semillitas College Savings Account Program, Dientes Community Dental’s Oral Health Summit, County Park Friends’ Treasure Cove Park Universally Accessible Playground project, The Queer Youth Leadership Awards, and United Way Santa Cruz County’s United in Purpose Celebration.
- **Collective of Results and Evidence-based (CORE) Investments.** CORE Investments is both a funding model and a broader movement to create the conditions for equitable health and well-being across the life span – prenatal through end of life. While not limited to the well-being of young children and families, CORE has emerged as a substantial and critical initiative designed to help create the type of equitable, integrated services and systems originally envisioned by the authors of Prop 10. First 5 serves on the CORE Steering Committee, helping guide the project through a multi-phase, collaborative planning process, which has resulted in defining eight interdependent “CORE Conditions for Health and Well being.” To learn more, visit: <https://www.corescc.org/>
 - **DataShare Santa Cruz County.** DataShare is a county-wide data sharing system designed to share data on a variety of factors that affect the well-being of residents in the county. DataShare’s mission is to provide an accessible, comprehensive, and reliable resource for local, regional, and national data available to everyone. DataShare Santa Cruz County envisions an equitable, thriving, and resilient community where everyone shares responsibility for creating the social, economic, and environmental conditions necessary for health and well-being at every stage of life. The website, www.datasharescc.org, is an interactive data platform with local, state, and national data that allows users to explore and understand information about our local community. The site holds robust data and indicators in the areas of health, economy, education, environment, government and politics, public safety, transportation, and social environment. To learn more, visit: <https://www.datasharescc.org/>
 - **Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network.** Building on a series of successful legislative visits and policy wins for early childhood in 2017, First 5 Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz Counties joined forces in FY 2017-18 to help form the tri-county Central Coast Early Childhood Advocacy Network (CCECAN). Representing over 94,000 children ages 0-8,

CCECAN is a collaboration of organizations and individuals in the tri-county area committed to strengthening and advocating for policies and systems change at the state and local level that will support thriving children and families. To learn more, visit: <https://www.ccecan.org/>

- **Cradle to Career.** Building on the success of the Live Oak Cradle to Career place-based initiative, the effort has now expanded county-wide and is simply known as “Cradle to Career” (C2C). Grown from a nascent idea in 2013 championed by former Supervisor John Leopold, to a vibrant results-based collaboration between parents and local education, health, and social service leaders in four school districts across the county, C2C’s mission is to work collectively to empower families, deliver resources, and advocate for equitable and inclusive support systems to eliminate disparities and ensure all Santa Cruz County children thrive in their education, health, and character. To learn more, visit: <https://c2csc.org/>
- **Oral Health Access.** Oral Health Access Santa Cruz County (OHA) was created in 2016 as a steering committee made up of community leaders and organizations, dental and medical clinics, and educators to address oral health needs in Santa Cruz County. Led by Dientes Community Dental, the County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency Public Health Division, and numerous community partners, the committee’s mission is to improve the oral health of Santa Cruz County residents by uniting stakeholders and advocating for sound, measurable strategies that increase access to care and education. In the spring of 2024, First 5’s Executive Director agreed to serve as Co-Chair in overseeing the implementation of OHA’s new 2024-2028 Strategic Plan. To learn more, visit: <https://oralhealthsc.org/>