

A Path Forward, Together

How First 5 LA's Responses to the Pandemic Are Guided by Our 2020-28 Strategic Plan

April 20, 2020

First 5 LA is embracing the strength of the 2020-28 Strategic Plan to help young children and their families in urgent and meaningful ways during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The framework below is intended to serve as our line of sight to the results we continue to seek. We want to build on our work through this shared set of guidelines grounded in our Strategic Plan. We want to consistently drive systems change through our actions and the thoughtful use of our resources – from safeguarding staff, to supporting our grantees and partners, to criteria for funding new projects.

Our Context

The COVID-19 pandemic brings to light the very real systems barriers that contribute to and hold inequities in place. A person's ZIP code is highly associated with whether they experience disruption, dislocation or disaster as a result of the pandemic.

Containing the spread of COVID-19 has made plain the critical need for systems and services to be family-focused and child-centered to start addressing these inequities. Making things work better – that is, for young children and families to get the help they need, when they need it – is the core of our collective work.

While we may now sit in different places, we all stand for young children and their families. We are unified in solidarity to the health of our communities, families, young children and selves; to the imperative to support and sustain First 5 LA-funded contractors and grantees; and to the critical systems partners within the County and State which are so vital to supporting children and families in need to access critical services and supports.

Just as we personally follow critical public health guidance, such as physical distancing, hand washing, and no hands-to-face contact, we also are following First 5 LA's 2020-28 Strategic Plan for guidance in our approach to making systems work for families in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Our Focus

First 5 LA's response to COVID-19 has focused on three primary objectives:

1. Protecting and supporting the health of our staff
2. Supporting our contracted partners (grantees, vendors, contractors)
3. Supporting LA County's young children and their families, with a particular focus on those most vulnerable during this pandemic

Our Guiding Principles

In the context of the unprecedented challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, First 5 LA has established four overarching goals for its response:

- Minimize the impact on First 5 LA-funded grantees, contractors and vendors by providing the maximum flexibility possible to support continuation of the work we have funded them to complete.

- Sustain the workforce of our grantees and contractors and stabilize infrastructure. We recognize that most of what First 5 LA funds are the staff employed by grantees and contractors, and we will work to support agencies to retain their staff. This will respond to immediate needs and provide the capacity for their teams to reengage on our important shared work when they are able.
- Protect against any “gifts of public funds.” As a public agency, First 5 LA needs to ensure we use taxpayer resources appropriately, consistent with actions approved by our Board, and we must document how our funding is being used.
- Minimize administrative burden. As we develop and implement emergency policies and authorities, we are looking to minimize the administrative contract processing requirements on our own staff and our partners’ staff, recognizing that we are all juggling high demands on our time and want to prioritize our partners’ abilities to continue to support children and families, especially given the state of emergency.

Our 2020-28 Strategic Plan Is Our Guide

We are operating in an environment that is unpredictable and rapidly changing. There are many unknowns. **What is known is that our response to COVID-19 and the role First 5 LA plays in a COVID-19 response, is grounded in our refined strategic plan.** We continue to:

- focus on achieving our North Star by focusing on our four results and four long-term systems outcomes;
- be focused on improving the lives of LA’s young children through systems change; grounded in our strategic plan system change approaches: policy change, practice change, and will-building;
- be guided by our values of collaboration, integrity, learning, and diversity, equity, and inclusion;
- invest our time and resources through the lens of our investment guidelines, which focus on equity, sustainability, partnership, prevention, systems change, and evidence and innovation; and,
- focus on First 5 LA’s four strategic priorities: strengthening public and community systems, advancing and building on community experience, expanding our influence and impact with data, and optimizing our own organizational effectiveness.

Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic is not a new, additive piece to our work; it is the new context in which we are doing work, and our strategic plan will guide our response.

From Plan to Action: What We Have Done So Far

We have moved with planning and purpose. We are actively using our Strategic Plan’s systems change approaches and focus on results areas in responding to the pandemic to help young children and their families. Here are examples of the work we are building on:

- Changing Practices: We are facilitating and coordinating work across multiple home visiting partners, funders and contractors to support members of the 750 home visiting workforce to change practices that enable home visiting to be conducted through tele-visits; and, advocating for policy to make such virtual visits allowable for reimbursement.
- Changing Policies: We are working closely with advocacy partners, advancing a set of child care policies, such as prioritizing the use of federal funds and previously appropriated funds to expand child care for essential workers on the front lines of COVID-19 response, including grocery, restaurant and other hourly wage retail workers who were previously wait listed for subsidized care, and advocating that child care be incorporated as a critical support for the economic recovery efforts that will need to follow our state of emergency and shelter-in-place.

- **Building Will:** We are working with our Best Start partners to ensure communities have the tools and capacity to elevate concerns about policy decisions related to the COVID-19 response that create barriers to families receiving services, e.g. addressing the needs of families that are unable to pick up supplies, meals from centers.

Resources, Thoughtfully Applied

First 5 LA has a number of resources to make our work possible. At its core, our organization is rich with human assets. We have a staff who are actively coordinating, connecting and facilitating solutions to the challenges providers, parents and partners are experiencing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. In parallel, First 5 LA also has funding resources and has developed three priorities to define how we will leverage our funding to respond to COVID-19:

1. Sustain existing contractors and grantees, including potential extensions of existing grantees beyond targeted end date of June 30 for an additional 90 days.
2. Target additional funding for existing contractors and grantees to the extent they have unique capabilities and needs related to the COVID-19 response that could merit support beyond existing First 5 LA funding levels.
3. Explore additional ways funding could be deployed in partnership with others, including pooled or aligned funds.

First 5 LA's Investment Guidelines, approved as part of the 2020-28 Refined Strategic Plan, provide a framing and starting point for development of funding criteria:

- **Equity:** Prioritize children, families and communities in our target population that our work has the greatest potential to impact and advance our North Star
- **Sustainability:** Embed sustainability strategies within all of our work
- **Partnership:** Engage partners throughout planning, development, and execution of our work
- **Prevention:** Focus on early intervention and prevention
- **System Change:** Focus on systems change and implementation to impact the most children and families
- **Evidence and Innovation:** Prioritize scaling up evidence-based practices, balanced with investments in innovative and promising approaches to address community needs

Criteria for Targeted New Funding

The expectation is that new funding will be limited in terms of duration and amount, given First 5 LA's fiscal realities. The criteria below will be applied to any proposed new funding for consideration under strategies 2 and 3.

Directors will be responsible for working with their teams to review and advance proposals for consideration, consistent with the process developed by the COVID-19 Strike Team. We recognize that staff's learning from conversations with partners may result in ideas and opportunities and we encourage all staff to work directly with their Directors in assessing these opportunities against the criteria:

- **Alignment with our Strategic Plan and Investment Guidelines** – Our strategic focus is clear: we believe our greatest contribution to achieving our north star and supporting **all** children in LA County to enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life is through systems change. This focus will continue to drive our pandemic response. Investments should be aligned with our priority and approach to systems change to maximize our impact on the most children.

- Capacity to respond with urgency to communities most impacted – Funding should be able to be deployed quickly to respond to demonstrated community needs in communities that are most significantly impacted due to underlying system inequities. Our work should address and ameliorate underlying inequities, to the degree possible (Equity and Prevention)
- Builds on the work of existing partners – We have developed trusted relationships with partners. Our investments should leverage these partnerships, our partners’ expertise and role in improving systems, and strengthen their role in sustaining system change. (Partnership)
- Supports mobilization of other funders and resources – First 5 LA’s approach is grounded in our learning around system change and can provide a model for other funders to sustain important community resources. First 5 LA’s funding has the potential to stimulate and incentivize other funders. (Evidence and Innovation)
- Strengthen systems and capacity – Networks exist to support families – referral networks, data systems, backbone agencies. Our funding resources should be used to strengthen network capacity to respond to the crisis and for the long-term, such as improving infrastructure and building system capacity. (Systems Change)
- Time and/or Scope Limited Investments – Investments must recognize First 5 LA’s fiscal reality and structured consistent with our long-term financial plan. Any new funding must be framed and limited in terms of scope and/or time commitment to First 5 LA’s immediate and long-term funding capacity. Deployment of funds should be cost-effective as well to maximize community impact. (Sustainability).

In Conclusion

The Strategic Priority Areas identified in our strategic plan continue to guide our efforts - strengthening public and community systems, advancing and building on community experience, expanding our influence and impact with data, and optimizing our own organizational effectiveness.

This work requires thought and intention to align and integrate our efforts, both within First 5 LA and with our diverse partners. The early successes of these efforts are the product of the work of every department and division at First 5 LA and our extraordinary grantees and contractors, who partner, lead and inspire us to do all we can to contribute to better outcomes for our children

Using this framework, we will continue to work to minimize the pandemic’s impact on our young children and their families and build towards a stronger, more resilient future in which all children in LA County can enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life.