



Key Learnings from First 5 Contra Costa Listening Tour | Report

Continuous Improvement Rapid Cycle Learning &
Evaluation (CIRCLE) Team, Stanford Center on
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Executive Summary

First 5 Contra Costa is a public entity that works to support every child in Contra Costa county in reaching their full potential by focusing on their most critical years of development—prenatal to age 5.

From March to July 2025, First 5 Contra Costa partnered with the Continuous Improvement Rapid Cycle Learning and Evaluation (CIRCLE) team of the Stanford Center on Early Childhood (SCEC) to co-develop and implement a strategic planning data collection project. Our primary objective for this Listening Tour was to collect and analyze qualitative data from Contra Costa County residents who are parents of children under age 6 to understand two categories of met and unmet needs: family support needs and out-of-school early learning needs. We conducted 8 discussion groups and 6 interviews, and a total of 53 parents participated in the Listening Tour. Overall, 83% of parents participated in English, 67.9% participated virtually, just over half (50.9%) reported an annual household income below \$60,000, and slightly more than half (56.6%) had engaged with First 5 Contra Costa before participating in this project.

Analyses of all discussion group and interview data revealed these themes:

Resources, programs, and services:

Parents reported connections to various programs and services across Contra Costa County, both within and outside First 5 Contra Costa. While some families shared feeling well connected to a variety of offerings, others described feeling isolated and learned about supports for the first time during the discussion group.

Communication:

Parents became aware of offerings through flyers, social media, and word-of-mouth referrals. Word-of-mouth referrals from trusted sources, such as pediatricians and libraries, were particularly effective; however, there were gaps in outreach that acted as a barrier. Some parents reported having no communication or access point.

Navigating access:

Parents reported both positive and negative experiences with navigating services. These experiences included receiving support from dedicated case workers to overcome eligibility, enrollment, and administrative challenges.

Barriers to participation:

Scheduling conflicts, eligibility requirements, limited availability of seats, and fear of judgement discouraged parents from participating or led to missed opportunities for support.

Unmet needs and gaps:

Parents voiced the lack of affordable child care options as a major unmet need. Participants also reported gaps in offerings for fathers and the Latinx population. The latter was more prominent in Central & South and West Contra Costa.

Basic needs:

Parents reported challenges with paying for necessities (e.g., food and diapers). This theme was related to eligibility criteria with one parent left asking, *"How do I qualify for low-income housing, but not food stamps, cause, right now, everything's really expensive."* Availability of basic needs differed by region; for example, one parent reported a lack of grocery stores in San Pablo, West Contra Costa.

Perceived disparities:

Parents perceived that there were disparities in the levels of support and resources available for families with young children in different regions of the county. Discrepancies in access and engagement may be partly due to geographic location and immigration status. Greater transparency in what supports are available and addressing existing disparities may help achieve a more equitable distribution.

Suggestions:

Parents shared ideas for how First 5 Contra Costa and other organizations in Contra Costa County can improve their offerings to better address their needs.

Many themes had important cross-cutting elements, such as translating awareness to access. While some participants were aware of supports, they faced barriers in engaging, which led to unmet needs. Being connected to one organization seemed to open up access to other supports, which reduced barriers and supported resource navigation.

Based on our findings, we outline opportunities below for First 5 Contra Costa, and other local organizations, to explore in order to reach and serve more families with children under 6 in the county.



Programs and classes:

- Increase the number of classes and spaces available in West Contra Costa.
- Expand the range of classes available in East Contra Costa.
- Train staff and provide support to families with children with additional needs.
- Provide classes in Spanish in Central & South and West Contra Costa.
- Consider allowing parents to drop into sessions.
- While these primarily refer to classes offered by First 5 Contra Costa, other organizations can also help address these unmet needs.



Communication:

- Leverage word-of-mouth referrals with trusted community members, such as pediatricians and librarians.
- Provide targeted outreach to stay-at-home parents and newcomers to the county.



Navigation:

- Support early and timely referrals to the Regional Center.
- Where possible, provide one-on-one support for families navigating services.
- Reduce the administrative burden on families.
- Provide clarity on eligibility requirements.
- Share curated guides outlining supports available in the county (e.g., the 211 database) more broadly to reach a wider audience.



Unmet needs:

- Create a hub or community center for Latinx residents.
- Provide child care options for job interviews, parent classes, and all children (including siblings of the children participating in the early childhood programs).
- Continue to provide resources that cover basic needs, particularly food and diapers.

Introduction



First 5 Contra Costa works to support every child in Contra Costa County in reaching their full potential by focusing on their most critical years of development—prenatal to age 5. They focus on prevention, center their work around equity, and play many roles to reach their vision: funder, convener, and advocate. First 5 Contra Costa by law is charged with facilitating the creation and implementation of an integrated, comprehensive, and collaborative system of services and resources to support families with young children.

First 5 Contra Costa works in three key areas: early intervention and healthy development, early care and education, and strengthening families. To understand met and unmet parent- and child-focused needs of residents—and whether and how these needs may differ across intersecting demographic categories (such as household income and geography)—First 5 Contra Costa partnered with the Continuous Improvement Rapid Cycle Learning and Evaluation (CIRCLE) team at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood (SCEC) to co-develop and implement a strategic planning data collection project. SCEC leverages the current moment of revolutionary science and deep, omnidirectional collaboration across sectors to change the way that research in early childhood is conducted, communicated, and utilized, with the overarching goal of ensuring that each and every child thrives from the start.

This report outlines the background of the First 5 Contra Costa Listening Tour, the main findings from our assessment of qualitative data from 8 discussion groups and 6 interviews with 53 parents of young children under age 6, cross-cutting themes, and participant suggestions to improve support and address needs for young families across Contra Costa County.

Background of the Organization and Listening Tour

First 5 in California is a state-level initiative focused on ensuring healthy development for children under age 6. It provides funding, advocates for policies, and supports programs that promote children's well-being. **First 5 Contra Costa is a local commission within the First 5 California network serving Contra Costa County**, a county located in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area. According to the Bay Area Equity Atlas's analysis of 2020 data, in Contra Costa County:



61%

61% of residents identify as non-White (27% Hispanic/Latinx, 18.4% Asian American, 8.4% Black/African American, 6.4% other or multiple races, and 0.5% Pacific Islander). **This racial/ethnic distribution is similar to that of the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area** (64% of residents identify as non-White: 24.4% Hispanic/Latinx, 27.7% Asian American, 5.6% Black/African American, 5.7% other or multiple races, and 0.6% Pacific Islander) **and to that of California** (65% of residents identify as non-White: 39.4% Hispanic/Latinx, 15.1% Asian American, 5.4% Black/African American, 4.7% other or multiple races, and 0.4% Pacific Islander).

\$71,400

The median annual earnings of full-time workers are \$71,400. This is lower than the median annual earnings of full-time workers in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area and higher than that of full-time workers in California (\$74,900 and \$53,500, respectively).

60.7%

60.7% of workers earn enough to meet their families' basic needs. This rate is slightly lower than that of the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area and higher than that of California (61.6% and 58.4%, respectively).

25.2%

25.2% of residents are immigrants. This rate is slightly lower than that of the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area and California (31.4% and 26.8%, respectively).

5.7%

5.7% of households speak limited English. This rate is lower than that of the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area and California (8% and 8.7%, respectively).

90%

90% of residents aged 25 or older have a high school diploma or higher educational attainment.



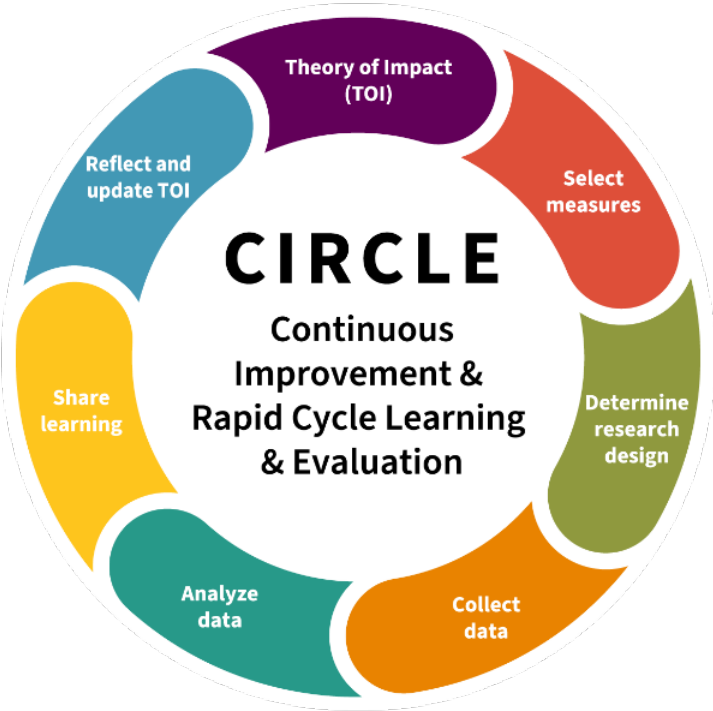
From March to July 2025, First 5 Contra Costa partnered with the CIRCLE team to co-develop and implement a data collection project focused on First 5 Contra Costa’s efforts to help families access the information and services needed to help their children thrive. To support this workstream, First 5 Contra Costa leverages family resource centers that offer classes, playgroups, school readiness activities, support groups, one-on-one assistance, and resources at no cost for families.

The primary objective for this project (i.e., the Listening Tour) was to collect and analyze qualitative data from residents of Contra Costa County who are parents of children under age 6. We (the CIRCLE team) aimed to hear about the met and unmet parent- and child-focused needs of these residents, and to understand whether and how these needs may differ across intersecting demographic categories (such as household income and geography).

CIRCLE Framework

The CIRCLE team uses a robust approach to evidence building that is rooted in equity-centered and community-engaged principles. The CIRCLE Framework (Figure 1) helps organizations understand their implementation and impact and effectively drives improvements at the program and systems level. We move beyond asking whether programs “work” and instead identify “how” and “for whom” programs are working. Rather than acting as rubber stampers, we aim to empower communities to tell their stories of impact and advocate for their needs. We supported First 5 Contra Costa with the following stages of the CIRCLE Framework: 1) selecting measures, 2) determining the research design, 3) data collection, 4) data analysis, and 5) sharing learnings.

Figure 1



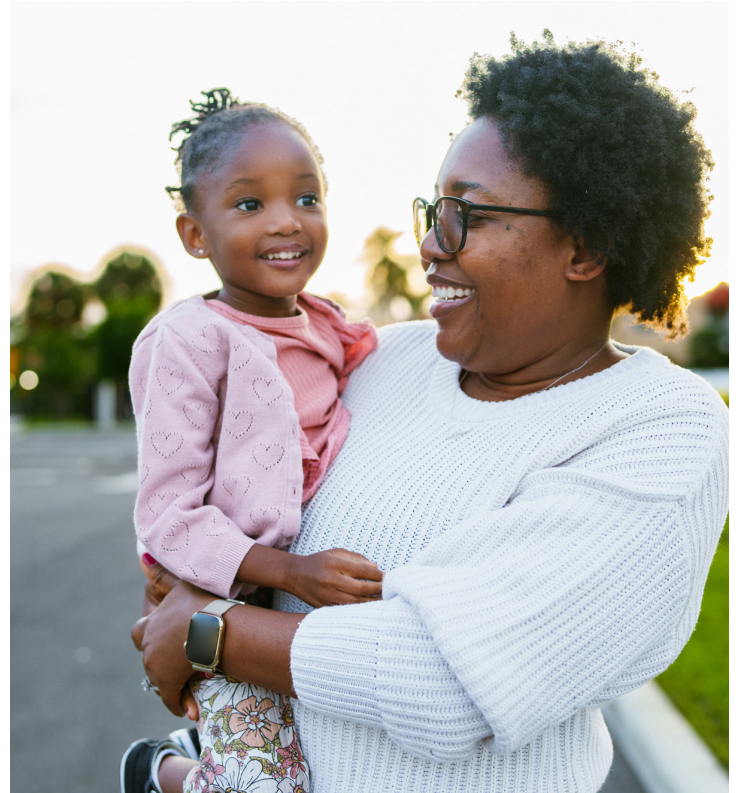
Methodology

The research design was rooted in qualitative data collection, including discussion groups and interviews. We utilized a combination of virtual and in-person data collection activities to adequately meet the diverse needs of the communities that First 5 Contra Costa aims to serve. Furthermore, we conducted discussion groups and interviews in both English and Spanish to ensure meaningful engagement of English- and Spanish-speaking residents in this project. In addition to the format and language of our data collection activities, we also prioritized regional representation in the recruitment process to ensure that differences in family support and early learning needs that may exist across diverse geographic locations in Contra Costa County—including urban, suburban, and rural areas—were captured.

We began the discussion group and interview protocol development process by first reviewing questions that First 5 Contra Costa formulated in collaboration with the Parent Advisory Group. These pre-existing questions focused on identifying two categories of met and unmet needs, including:

Family support needs (e.g., basic needs, social service navigation, community connections and referrals, parent education, and parent support groups); and

Out-of-school early learning needs (e.g., developmental screenings, place-based literacy initiatives, parent-child playgroups, and classes on school readiness, literacy, and numeracy).



To ensure that the discussion group and interview protocols met First 5 Contra Costa’s goals for the Listening Tour, we gathered and incorporated feedback from First 5 Contra Costa’s Data and Policy team and the Parent Advisory Group. The final discussion group and interview protocols intentionally used accessible language that aligned with what parents of children under age 6 would recognize and use in daily conversation, as guided by the collaboration with the Parent Advisory Group.

First 5 Contra Costa created a flyer to advertise the discussion group and interview opportunities among their networks. Community members who were interested could scan a QR code to fill out an interest form, which included screener questions asking prospective participants if they have previously engaged with First 5 Contra Costa (such as attending the First 5 Centers), if they have a child/children under age 6, their household income, which part of Contra Costa County they live in (East, West, or Central & South), and their preferred language. Capturing these details enabled us to form discussion groups that were representative of a diverse population.



Data Collection Activities

In May 2025, we held 8 total semi-structured discussion groups, including 3 in-person (all in English) and 5 on Zoom. The geographic and language breakdown of these discussion groups was as follows:

 East County 2 discussion groups • 1 in-person in English • 1 virtual in English	 West County 3 discussion groups • 1 in-person in English • 2 virtual (1 in Spanish and 1 in English)	 Central & South County 3 discussion groups • 1 in-person in English • 2 virtual (1 in Spanish and 1 in English)
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In the West and Central & South parts of the county, we held discussion groups in both English and Spanish. In East County, we only offered discussion groups in English because no Spanish-speaking residents from this part of the county indicated interest in Spanish-language discussion groups. Because there was one less discussion group in East County compared to West and Central & South, we prioritized East County residents for the individual interviews.

From May to June 2025, we conducted 6 semi-structured interviews, all on Zoom. Interviews allowed us to capture a sufficient variety of demographic characteristics, collect more in-depth qualitative responses, and triangulate discussion group findings. The geographic and language breakdown of these interviews was as follows:

 East County 4 interviews • 2 in Spanish • 2 in English	 West County 1 interview • 1 in English	 Central & South County 1 interview • 1 in English
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The activities were semi-structured in that we both followed the protocol (which had probing questions built-in) and also generated follow-up questions in real time during the discussion groups and interviews to be responsive to what participants shared, ask for further explanation or clarification, and redirect the conversation to the topics of interest when needed. Each discussion group and interview participant received a \$50 electronic gift card, consistent with the SCEC’s standard participant compensation rate for 60-minute qualitative research activities.

Analysis Plan

We conducted qualitative thematic analyses of all data from the discussion groups and interviews, the process for which is outlined below. We recorded all discussion groups and interviews with participants' permission. We translated the Spanish discussion group and interview transcripts to English. We completed quality control checks (e.g., fixing errors and ensuring accuracy) of all transcripts. Zoom auto-generated the transcripts for the virtual discussion groups and interviews, and we used Reduct.Video to create transcripts for in-person discussion groups from recordings.

After we cleaned the transcripts, we uploaded them to Dedoose, an online qualitative coding software program. We used both deductive (using pre-existing theories to guide the identification of themes) and inductive (letting the data guide the formation of themes) thematic analysis techniques (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). We developed a codebook based on questions in the discussion group and interview protocols (e.g., "playgroup experiences") and added new codes after completing a first pass read of each transcript. We refined the codebooks during initial stages of coding to incorporate further examples and clarity. To ensure consistency and rigor in our process, all coders achieved inter-rater reliability testing scores of 0.78 or above prior to beginning coding. We identified themes by grouping codes together. We discuss these themes in the findings section of this report.

Overview of Participants

When selecting participants, we considered when they submitted the interest form, which activity/activities they indicated availability for, and their responses to the screener questions we outlined above. For example, for each discussion group, we prioritized inviting the first few participants who indicated that they had not engaged with First 5 Contra Costa, the first few participants from different cities within each region, and the first few participants who reported different household income ranges. We initially invited



a maximum of 10 participants for each discussion group and, when over 10 participants indicated availability for the group, we created a waitlist that we used to invite additional participants if anyone from our priority list of 10 did not RSVP or was no longer able to attend. It is important to note that for some groups, such as the in-person discussion group in East County, we did not have 10 sign-ups and, therefore, did not need to create a waitlist.

We summarize the characteristics of the 53 parents of children under age 6 who took part in the Listening Tour in Table 1. The table breaks down demographics by region, with the overall totals shown in the last column.

Table 1. Demographics of Listening Tour Participants by Region

Demographic Variable	East County (N = 16)	West County (N = 15)	Central & South County (N = 22)	Total (N = 53)
Region of Residence	30.20%	28.30%	41.50%	100%
Language of Participation				
English	87.50%	80%	81.80%	83%
Spanish	12.50%	20%	18.20%	17%
Format of Participation				
Virtual	62.50%	80%	63.60%	67.90%
In-person	37.50%	20%	36.40%	32.10%
Annual Household Income				
Less than \$15,000	12.50%	20%	13.60%	15.10%
\$15,000 – \$29,999	0%	20%	18.20%	13.20%
\$30,000 – \$59,999	31.30%	20%	18.20%	22.60%
\$60,000 – \$89,999	12.50%	13.30%	18.20%	15.10%
\$90,000 – \$124,999	18.80%	0%	13.60%	11.30%
\$125,000 – \$174,999	6.30%	0%	0%	1.90%
\$175,000 or more	6.30%	0%	4.50%	3.80%
Don't know / Prefer not to say	12.50%	20%	13.60%	15.10%
Unemployed	0%	6.70%	0%	1.90%
Previous Engagement with First 5 Contra Costa				
Previous engagement with First 5 Contra Costa	43.80%	60%	63.60%	56.60%
No previous engagement with First 5 Contra Costa	56.30%	40%	36.40%	43.40%

Overall, 67.9% of parents participated virtually (Figure 2) and 83% participated in English (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Percentage Participating by Format

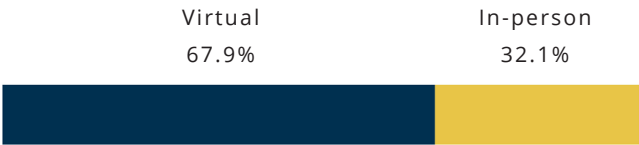
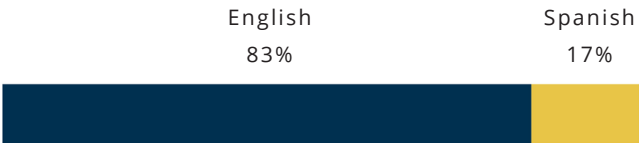
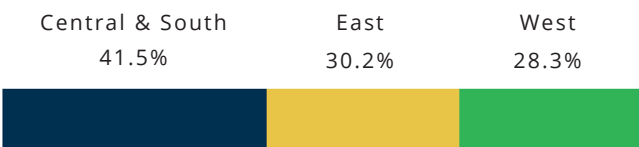


Figure 3. Percentage Participating by Language



We engaged with participants from the East, West, and Central & South regions of Contra Costa County. The majority of participants were from Central & South (Figure 4).

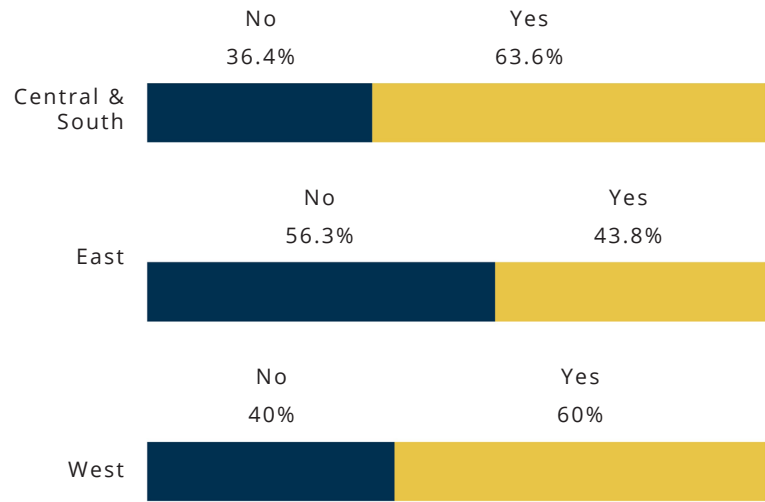
Figure 4. Percentage Participating by Region



Just over half of participants (56.6%) had engaged with First 5 Contra Costa before participating in this project (Figure 5).

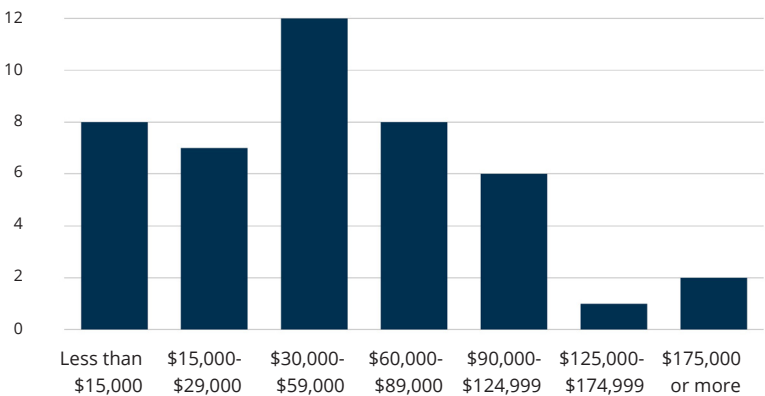
We engaged with a sufficient number of participants who were not already connected to First 5 Contra Costa, which was an important goal of this Listening Tour.

Figure 5. Percentage Engaged with First 5 Contra Costa, by Region



Half of participants (50.9%) reported an annual household income below \$60,000 (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Income Distribution



Findings

Through analysis of 8 discussion groups and 6 interviews, 8 themes emerged. We describe each theme in the table below. Overall, participants reported a high demand for programs and services across the county. While some were well connected to First 5 Contra Costa, others lacked awareness of what was available; even those who were already connected sought more opportunities to support their children’s well-being and development. We discuss each theme in more detail next.

Table 2. Overview of Themes from Analyses

Resources, Programs, and Services		
Description	Encompassed Codes	Illustrative Quote
This theme captures the extent to which participants are aware of and connected to various programs and services across Contra Costa County, both within and outside First 5 Contra Costa. This overarching theme is connected to all others; through our discussion of specific programs and services, the other themes emerged.	Playgroups, kindergarten readiness, parent groups, developmental screenings, basic needs	“So I've done the playgroups at... the libraries... when they have events and stuff like that.”
Communication		
Description	Encompassed Codes	Illustrative Quote
This theme focuses on the ways programs and services were, or were not, effectively communicated to participants. This theme includes their experiences with outreach methods, such as flyers, social media, and word-of-mouth referrals. Effective communication was a key enabler of access, while gaps in outreach acted as a barrier.	Word of mouth referrals, service awareness, lack of awareness, communication	“I've heard a lot about like the food banks and resources ... and stuff. I've been to this group on Facebook that is called the Helping Hands in Contra Costa and they have a lot of information about things like that on there.”
Navigation		
Description	Encompassed Codes	Illustrative Quote
This theme captures the extent to which participants were able to navigate and access services. Positive and negative experiences emerged, which provide key learning opportunities.	Positive and negative experiences, navigation, trusted staff	“I don't know. It was really stressful for me like taking kids, you know, being back and forth, calling, getting... no help calling... The caseworker that supposedly was mine [was] not reaching out. I reach[ed] out. And now they're saying that they're not my caseworker...”
Barriers		
Description	Encompassed Codes	Illustrative Quote
Barriers to participation is a major theme with several sub themes that reflect the various challenges participants faced when trying to engage with programs and services. These barriers are grounded in participants' experiences (e.g., with schedules) and participants' perceptions (e.g., of eligibility). These obstacles often discouraged participation or led to missed opportunities for support. Communication and navigation are cross-cutting themes here.	Awareness, fear / judgement, schedules, cost, immigration status, eligibility, navigation challenges, transport	“How do I qualify for low-income housing, but not food stamps, cause like, right now, everything's really expensive.”

Table 2. Overview of Themes from Analyses (continued)

Unmet Needs		
<i>Description</i>	<i>Encompassed Codes</i>	<i>Illustrative Quote</i>
This theme reflects the unmet needs that participants in Contra Costa have. This includes a lack of child care options across the county. Unmet needs emerge across discussion groups and interviews and reflect both individual and shared community needs.	Child care, cost of living, connections to resources, regional disparities	<i>"... the fatherhood group, I think that would be a good one because... I've had... experience with other mothers but their dad doesn't really have that."</i>
Basic Needs		
<i>Description</i>	<i>Encompassed Codes</i>	<i>Illustrative Quote</i>
A cross-cutting theme tied to unmet needs, affordability of basic needs was prominent. This theme explores the challenges participants faced in paying for basic needs, such as food and diapers, and accessing resources.	Child essentials / basic needs, food and nutrition, cost of goods / services, service awareness, navigation	<i>"The cost of living has increased, and now it doesn't really add up. And lately now with having another child into the family... it's even harder to... be able to afford food and diapers and everything essential that you need."</i>
Perceived Disparities		
<i>Description</i>	<i>Encompassed Codes</i>	<i>Illustrative Quote</i>
Perceived disparities emerged as a cross-cutting theme. This describes the perception among participants that other regions of Contra Costa County were receiving different levels of support and resources. Participants often described their region as receiving less.	Perceived disparities, unmet needs, playgroups, kindergarten readiness, parent groups, developmental screenings, basic needs	<i>"Antioch [has] a lot less going on, or if they do have things going on, you really have to look into it, or it's like once a month versus in other areas where it's like 4 or 5, 6 times a month."</i>
Suggestions		
<i>Description</i>	<i>Encompassed Codes</i>	<i>Illustrative Quote</i>
This theme captures the ideas participants shared about better supporting their needs. These ideas are also often presented as unmet needs, though some suggestions stand alone.	We utilized a standalone "suggestions" code, though many suggestions are also captured by other codes (e.g., in relation to playgroups, communication, navigation, screenings, etc.)	<i>"I think the session that I did it, they didn't provide the Spanish group, but they only did... English groups, so maybe [providing] it [in] different languages... can also be good because some parents don't necessarily speak English."</i>

Resources, Programs, and Services - An Overview

This theme provides an overview of the resources, programs, and services that participants accessed, both within and outside of First 5 Contra Costa. While many participants described strong engagement and positive experiences, others reported confusion, missing opportunities, and unmet needs. This section summarizes the range of services that arose during the Listening Tour and introduces patterns in access and experience that we discuss further in the sections on communication, navigation, and barriers.

Range of Resources Accessed

Many participants were aware of and connected to various resources, programs, and services across Contra Costa County, both within and outside of First 5 Contra Costa. Participants named over 45 initiatives with which they were connected. These included, but were not limited to: emergency child care, legal aid, play spaces, food banks, prenatal support, mental health services, and classes (which primarily referred to classes offered by First 5 Contra Costa). While the majority of connections outside of First 5 Contra Costa were with nonprofit organizations (e.g., Bay Area Crisis Nursery and Fresh Approach), other examples included health programs (e.g., Black Infant Health), private businesses (e.g., Playhouse), faith-based organizations (e.g., Project Gabriel), and federal social safety net programs (e.g., WIC). The broad range of resources that participants accessed highlights the diversity of needs across Contra Costa County.

Positive Experiences

Participants shared more positive than negative experiences across supports. For playgroups and kindergarten readiness programs, most participants were aware of offerings through First 5 Contra Costa or their local libraries. Participants reported seeing the benefits to their children from participating and shared how programs met their families' needs. The positive impact of programs extended beyond the children, too. Participants shared the positive impact that attending both parent-child and parent-only groups had on their own well-being. For example, one participant remarked, *"you do not feel so alone in the process of raising your children."* A sense of community and bonding through the shared experience of raising young children was common across all discussion groups and interviews and across program types. For example, participants made similar comments about parent



“
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”



support groups, in which *“all of the moms start talking about... problems and... other moms give suggestions, we give hugs. You know... for me it's really nice, and it works.”* Findings suggest that even programs intended to serve children have positive impacts on parents as well.

With regard to developmental screenings, parents were primarily aware of the Ages & Stages Questionnaires (ASQ) and reported engaging with these through either their children's pediatrician or First 5 Contra Costa. Participants reported positive experiences navigating the next steps that are necessary after screenings, particularly with support from First 5 Contra Costa. We further describe these experiences in the section on navigation. With regard to resources, participants reported successfully accessing basic needs including strollers, clothes, toiletries, diapers, car seats, and more. Parents also reported positive experiences with individual staff members, including First 5 Contra Costa staff, WIC office employees, and nurses who supported them.

Unmet Needs and Negative Experiences

In contrast to the participant experiences we shared above, some participants reported a lack of awareness and negative experiences across program types. Some participants said that they were not aware of First 5 Contra Costa, as demonstrated by the following participant from West Contra Costa: *“I didn't know there was a First 5 right here in Richmond and apparently it was a few blocks down my house... I never knew about it.”* Others shared a lack of awareness for particular program types. For example, across regions, participants were less familiar with kindergarten readiness programs; however, this may be related to the ages of their children. A lack of awareness was attributed to the notion that *“you can only hear about it if... you're participating in the First 5 or certain daycares, where they kind of tell you that.”* Participants who were not *“in the know”* had no access point.

Beyond awareness, in some cases, participants reported negative experiences. Parents said that playgroups and kindergarten readiness programs required *“a lot of research,”* often had *“no space,”* and had *“limitation and availability issues.”* Negative experiences with developmental screenings included delays; for example, one participant *“didn't get support until [their daughter] was almost aged out of the early intervention program, so [they] kind of missed out.”* Others reported disappointment with not being connected to the Regional Center earlier and having to be very persistent to access services.

This overview offers a snapshot of the supports participants engaged with and the impacts these programs had. Differences in access, awareness, and satisfaction were shaped by how services were communicated, navigated, and experienced; we explore these topics in greater depth through the cross-cutting themes that follow.

Communication

This theme captures how parents learned about resources, programs, and services, or, in some cases, did not. This theme includes experiences with outreach methods, such as word-of-mouth referrals as well as information from health care providers, libraries, social media, and community events. Participants described wide variation in if, how, and when they were informed about available supports. Those who were already connected to trusted messengers like First 5 Contra Costa staff or pediatricians were more likely to receive timely and relevant information. In contrast, participants without those connections, such as newcomers to the county or those with limited community ties, often reported learning about programs too late or not at all. This section explores both communication successes and challenges that shaped participants' ability to access support.

Communication Landscape

Parents who were connected to First 5 Contra Costa were generally very aware of other opportunities both within and outside of First 5 Contra Costa. Participants shared the many ways that they found out about supports in the county. Two prominent methods emerged: word-of-mouth referrals and referrals from pediatricians:

"That's kind of how you find out. We'll just be in casual conversations... like, oh... did you know about WIC? Did you know about White Pony? Did you know about this food bank?" - East participant

Both communication channels involve trusted messengers. Participants acknowledged that, without these individuals, it would have been challenging to know where to start, as exemplified by this quote:



"They [pediatrician and insurance] let me know... Hey, are you part of this? Do you need any resources? But for other moms who... don't have the insurance that I have... they're probably not hearing [about] it or getting calls specifically [about] that..." - East participant

Word-of-mouth referrals from other parents and pediatricians stood out because they were perceived as trustworthy and personal. Our data suggest that verbal communication was more effective in increasing awareness and engagement compared to flyers. Beyond these two communication channels, other successful methods reported by participants included fairs (e.g., the WIC fair and First 5 Contra Costa resource fair), the library, and TV ads. Participants reported initially hearing about First 5 Contra Costa through healthcare providers and the library; engagement with and awareness of libraries was generally high across regions.

Communication Challenges

Parents who were not connected to First 5 Contra Costa or lacked any connections to community resources were often completely removed from any support and had little to no awareness across program types, particularly kindergarten readiness programs. One participant's comment further emphasizes the reality that parents need to be connected to organizations in the first place in order to receive communication about other offerings:

"I think the programs are very... in their own bubble." - Central & South participant

One participant, with insight into the early childhood field, commented, *"If I hadn't been in this space working, how would I have found out about it?"* Others were only hearing about offerings during the discussion group: *"To be honest, this is the first time I'm hearing [about] all the programs... So it's like, if you don't ask, you don't find it... you really have to ask. It's not... open to everybody."* Data suggest that once connected to one organization, participants were able to engage well with support; in contrast, participants who missed an initial touchpoint lacked awareness of many offerings that were available to them.

For some parents, communication came too late or not at all. Many participants benefited from messaging from pediatricians in particular, but not all participants received this messaging, as the following quotes show:

"I didn't even get a chance to get connected to them until my son was already 3, and they were like 'oops too late.'" - Central & South participant

"I wish there was a way to find out about First 5... directly... after you have your kid, you're going for a checkup.... For like seven months, I was like, I don't know what to do with this baby. We were just in the house. When I found out about [First 5 Contra Costa], it was so, so nice." East participant

"It takes us like 2 years... to discover First 5. My question is... why don't they [doctors] mention... that program?" - Central & South participant

Others who likely missed these communication channels reported feeling *"like the information is not out there."* One stay-at-home parent felt particularly disconnected and *"secluded from getting information,"* and an interview participant reported feeling it was *"overwhelming when [information is] kind of scattered around, and the information [is]... piece by piece."* These testimonies indicate that parents feeling connected to the community and supports is important for the overall well-being of children and their families. While participants across the county reported experiencing a lack of communication, a participant from West Contra Costa County expressed feeling particularly *"isolated"* and *"left alone,"* which appeared to resonate with other participants from the region.

These findings suggest that while word-of-mouth communication from trusted sources early on is important, participants do not equally experience this. Without this kind of communication, some parents were left feeling isolated and without a touchpoint. In sum, effective communication was a key enabler of access, while gaps in outreach acted as a barrier. We discuss unmet communication needs and suggestions for improvements as independent themes at the end of this report.

Navigating Access



A core theme that emerged in the data, navigation encompasses both successes and challenges in navigating access to resources, programs, and services for families with children under age 6. Some participants reported being able to navigate different offerings; others faced barriers, including: a lack of support, getting lost in the system, unclear eligibility requirements, multi-step processes, fear of pursuing resources, and administrative burden.

Successful Navigation

Many families in Contra Costa successfully engaged with services, demonstrated by the number of initiatives that participants reported connecting with. This finding indicates that residents do successfully navigate what is offered in the county to some extent. Generally, parents reported that programs and classes were easy to navigate and sign up for. Participants reported successfully signing up for or joining playgroups and parent support or education classes. Participants also successfully engaged with developmental screeners, mainly the ASQ, which was mostly administered by doctors or at First 5 Contra Costa sites. Some participants reported successfully navigating WIC and county offices. A Central & South participant suggested, *“when we hear about the WIC... to do the application, do the paperwork and then you can take [it to] the WIC. It's not very difficult.”* This participant from East Contra Costa *“had a pretty good experience,”* and found it to be *“pretty accessible.”* Support with navigation made a big difference to this participant:

“The best experience that I've had has been through the county through CalWORKs and they've kind of been a central place to direct me to ‘Oh, childcare? Go to this agency. Healthcare? This agency.’ So it's still extra work for me to go to different agencies. But I found a central location where somebody is sort of helping to direct me to where to go for different things, so that has been a positive.” - West participant

The “extra work” previously mentioned was echoed by other participants who also described the administrative burden: *“the eligibility, all of the applications, a lot of different documents that had to be provided.”* While some were able to meet these administrative demands, (*“the paperwork wasn’t challenging. It was just very time intensive, like a lot of paperwork”*) others commented on how they were supported in the process to ease the burden. One commented that their case worker *“did a really great job with helping [them].”*

These comments highlight how access to a dedicated support person can make a family’s experience navigating systems in the county easier. Step-by-step support and clear guidance on where to find each service were critical and linked to the findings outlined above in the section on communication.

As with CalWORKs, some participants described First 5 Contra Costa as offering a kind of “anchor” to guide them through next steps. One example of this was support for families with next steps after the ASQ:

“I [did the ASQ] at First 5 and had some results but the difference was that my pediatrician didn’t really see like there was much of an issue so they didn’t refer me out, but then First 5 was like ‘we need to like nip in the bud and try to do as much intervention like early intervention as possible’ and it actually really helped...” - Central & South participant

Similarly to the above, these findings speak to the power of person-to-person information sharing and guidance from a trusted source. Successful examples included multiple trusted messengers making a chain of tight referrals to the Regional Center. However, breakdowns in these chains had negative impacts for families which are outlined below.

Navigation Challenges

For many participants with children under 6, engaging in early childhood systems was *“like a whole new world... to navigate...”* that *“almost feels like it’s like a black hole.”* For many, *“navigating social services and knowing where to go for different things [was] a challenge.”*

Participants reported a lack of support, getting lost in the system, unclear eligibility requirements, multi-step processes, fear to pursue resources, and administrative burden.



A common issue amongst participants was navigating eligibility requirements, with participants asking, “*how do I qualify for low income housing, but not food stamps?*” There was confusion around renewal, qualifying for Medi-Cal and WIC, and the administrative burden on residents to prepare different documents for each service. This was captured well by one interview participant:

“I had to provide... birth certificates, driver's license documentation to prove our marriage. Lots of different records for things. And get copies like hard copies of those things. Scan them or bring them into an office... Pulling pay stubs and all of that for different agencies, and then they have different requirements... You may qualify for one thing with one agency and then [not for] another agency... So just navigating that can be a little bit hard and understanding what you qualify for... It's just another thing. You know, a lot of back and forth and navigating those systems” - West participant

The same participant also highlighted how the administrative burden would have been even harder to navigate without a printer or transportation.

While programs and classes were largely accessible, navigating kindergarten programs was challenging for multiple participants. There was a lack of awareness for some, and confusion over eligibility and age cutoffs for others. In addition, while ASQs were often successfully administered, challenges with navigation often arose when additional administrative steps were required or referrals fell through the cracks. The positive experiences with case workers reported by some parents (as we discussed above) were not shared by others who found it stressful trying to connect with their case workers. One Central & South participant was left with “*no time to... figure out a plan... for what's next,*” after their therapist left without notice. While not representative of the sample, one participant did relay:

“I have come across the First 5. But we haven't utilized it yet. I'm not really sure how everything there works. I have reached out to... get them into classes. But I, from what I was understanding, you have to sign up first and... I don't think I've heard back” - East participant





These quotes represent a navigational challenge linked to communication. Participants reached out to programs and services but were not always able to successfully engage.

More specifically, a small number of participants with neurodivergent children require additional support in navigating services, as exemplified below:

"For kiddos that are neurodivergent because it is a difficult arena to navigate... Once you get a diagnosis, you still... have to find the resources to help your kiddo once they have that and that can be really difficult to figure out." - East participant

Of concern, navigating services when in crisis was also challenging for one interview participant:

"I called 211, which is an emergency line you can call when you are in a situation, I mean, when you are going to be evicted or when you are homeless. But there is really a long waiting list. Well, sometimes, because we are Hispanic, I mean, we don't really have papers or are in the process... Well, it seems like there isn't much help." - East participant

This quote also exemplifies the additional challenges that families in Contra Costa who are undocumented face with navigating support. Many Latinx participants struggled to navigate services due to a multitude of barriers, which we discuss in the following section.

Parents faced challenges in navigating supports, highlighting that awareness is not enough. Even when parents were aware of resources, challenges in navigating systems to sign up, join, or enroll made initial communication efforts insufficient. Programs and services that provided navigational support, either through tight referrals or dedicated case workers, transformed awareness into access and uptake. There was less regional variation here, and a greater difference depending on the families' level of need and the agencies they needed to engage with.

Barriers to Participation

As one participant described, *“motherhood is hard but living in this county has made it a little bit harder...”* Participants identified a range of barriers that impacted their ability to engage with programs and services. This theme is divided into several sub-themes to better capture each challenge that participants reported facing.

Eligibility

As we highlighted briefly in our discussion of the navigation theme, perceived eligibility was a significant barrier. Some participants reported thinking they were not eligible for programs that they believed were exclusively for low-income families, that they would not qualify for them, or that were not intended for them. For example:

“A lot of people who might know about it, but they think that [there’s a] specific limit, like income.” - Central & South participant

Participants relayed their frustration with not being eligible for some services despite identifying as low-income. Others who did not qualify as low-income based on eligibility requirements described their catch-22 challenge:

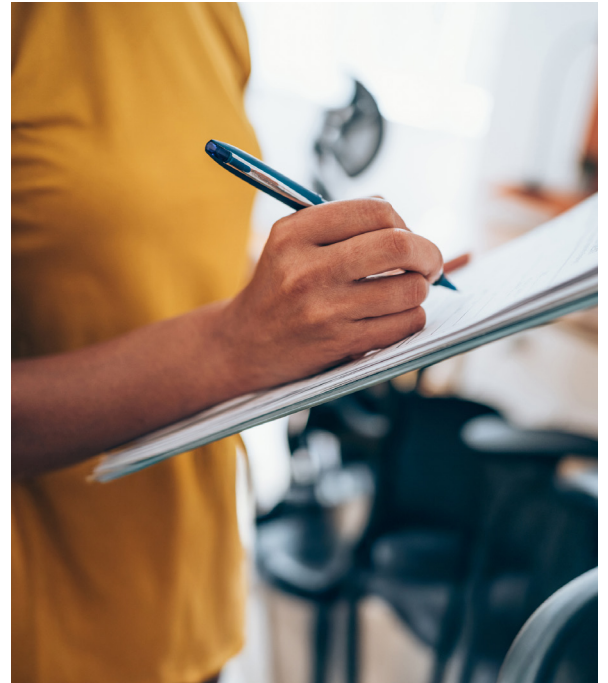
“Barely making it, but you don’t qualify for... anything because you make too much money.” - East participant

Different eligibility criteria across programs and services were unclear and added administrative burden. Qualifying thresholds seemed arbitrary to some parents and prevented them from accessing basic needs.

Schedules and Spaces

For parents who were eligible, barriers to participation existed in accessing classes.

Many reported that classes ran at times that conflicted with either their work schedules or sibling schedules. Parents with other school-aged children struggled to manage school drop-off and pick-up times while attending classes, and parents with more



“
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might know about it,
but they think that
[there’s a] specific
limit, like income.*
”

than one infant or toddler described challenges with age restrictions for classes and not being able to take children of different ages to the same class:

"I know it's been a barrier for me several times... trying to bring my now 2-year-old, and my 6-year-old... so that's kind of always going to be a barrier."
- East participant

Child care was a barrier to parenting classes too, with one East County participant sharing: *"[they] told me that they would love for me to continue coming to the programs, but to leave my kids at home. So, after that, I couldn't attend anymore."* Furthermore, many parents expressed frustration at not being able to get a space in the class they had signed up for, as described below:

"Sometimes when you go on the next day to sign up, it's already filled in. So you have to go to a different class just because of the availability. So that's something that kind of makes it a little hard."
- East participant

Participants in West Contra Costa raised limited availability in classes more frequently than participants in other regions which may indicate regional differences.

Embarrassment

Some participants expressed shame or embarrassment in accessing resources. Participants described:

"... the stigma... there's always that shame when you pull up to the grocery store... here comes the mom with the WIC and the vouchers, she's gonna hold up the line. They give you that look, and... you just don't want to deal with that, you know?" - East participant

This sense of embarrassment and shame was specific to basic needs, not to joining programs or classes. Regardless of the level of comfort in receiving the support, all parents were very appreciative for the support available to access basic needs and some joined opportunities to volunteer with food banks.

Immigration Status

Some participants from West Contra Costa spoke openly about their legal status, and how this prevented them from seeking support, as exemplified below:

"In my case, what still limits me from connecting with any of these services is fear, because I don't have a legal status." - West participant

This is a particularly sensitive finding due to the recent immigration raids in California. Given this context, Hispanic/Latinx communities are likely withdrawn from services and a hard-to-reach population, particularly in West Contra Costa.

Other barriers that were less prominent included transportation and the cost of private programs. However, most of the programs and services that parents named were open to the public and free of charge; therefore, parents did not report cost as a major barrier.

The barriers that parents identified offer insights into what prevents families with children under age 6 from accessing supports. While some barriers are specific to certain communities, others exist across the county. Understanding these barriers provides an opportunity to address them and improve access and engagement.

Unmet Needs and Gaps

This theme reflects the unmet needs that parents in Contra Costa County reported facing. This included a lack of child care options across the county. Unmet needs emerged across discussion groups and interviews and reflected individual needs as well as specific communities' needs.

Child Care

The primary unmet need across regions was a lack of access to affordable child care. Many participants expressed hardships paying for child care; for example, a Central & South region participant shared, *"I can't pay for child care because the cost of living has increased, and now it doesn't really add up."* Many reported needing more support here, with some calling for policy changes (e.g., child care subsidies and longer parental leave):

"I would say for policymakers to... and I guess... this is a whole... country thing... for the first year, provide, like other countries do, this support where you can actually stay home with your baby." - East participant

A lack of affordable child care left many parents, most often mothers, unable to return to work and caused them to, as an East participant shared, *"stay home because [they] can't afford daycare."* A West region interviewee voiced that this was the reality of many parents:

"I'm meeting at least a lot of parents who are having to make decisions about working or not."

One Central & South participant felt that some child care programs were not as *"transparent as [they] should be... for example, the center or the facility. They wouldn't list out whether they are getting funding from the state or from the federal government. You would only have to reach out and ask explicitly whether they would have funding available. If not, they would just show you... their very expensive private tuition that you have to pay."*

Experiences here were somewhat dependent on family structures and proximity. For example, some parents reported being fortunate enough to have family members living close by to support child care whereas others shared being alone, sometimes in a new country, without any support at all.



“
*I can't pay for
child care because
the cost of living
has increased.*

”

"To be honest, I find it really challenging, because if you do not have family support or family members or friends who are available living nearby, you wouldn't be able to raise a young kid while working." - Central & South participant

These residents felt the brunt of unaffordable child care more acutely as they had no alternative options.

While policies like Transitional Kindergarten (TK) aim to make child care affordable and accessible to families across the state, they are intended for children who will turn four years old by September 1st that year. This means many families with children under 4 cannot access this support and even those who can, report challenges in navigating TK:

"My son and daughter, they're not in kindergarten readiness or anything yet, because my son's 3 and a half, but I found out that he qualifies for pre- K... I don't think it was the easiest thing to get in... I had to really do a lot of research... and like now TK... I felt like it was still kind of tough to get into." - East participant

Findings from the RAPID survey also show that awareness of TK differs widely across California parents (RAPID, 2025*). As a result, gaps in access remain, and child care continues to present challenges.

Underserved groups

Participants identified unmet needs for specific members of the community. These included fathers: for example, one parent in West County wished:

"... there was more of this for fathers because there's a lot of resources for mothers, which is awesome. And I know that usually the mom is kind of more involved, but my husband is really involved with... family and all that. So, he would want more resources on... father's stuff."

Spanish-speaking participants in Central & South also expressed unmet needs:

"... there are not many opportunities since those groups were in English. I feel they should offer more in Spanish for all the non-English speakers."

"We do not speak English very well, and it would be great to have more information about that [programs] in Spanish."

These findings demonstrate that specific populations within Contra Costa County experience unique unmet needs.

More Programs

The barriers outlined above demonstrated issues with available spots in some programs. For example, a Central & South County interviewee shared, *"the childcare facility that I have reached out [to] has been full until like next year or 2 years later, so that part has been pretty frustrating to me."* Not all participants were able to attend the programs they would have liked to, indicating an unmet need around availability and frequency of classes in particular.

Perceived regional differences in programming emerged. West participants expressed *"out in the Richmond area, San Pablo, Rodeo... we don't have too many things for these kids to do to learn."* Participants expressed concern over a lack of programming, or not knowing about programs that others discussed. Participants in East Contra Costa also called for more variety. Regional differences are explored more, below.

In conclusion, the main unmet need for participants with children under 6 in Contra Costa County was affordable child care provision. Other unmet needs were specific to different groups, and generally parents expressed a desire for more programs and classes than are currently available.

[*https://rapidsurveyproject.com/article/interest-in-using-transitional-kindergarten-is-linked-with-california-parents-awareness-of-the-program/](https://rapidsurveyproject.com/article/interest-in-using-transitional-kindergarten-is-linked-with-california-parents-awareness-of-the-program/)

Basic Needs



Tied to unmet needs, but prominent enough to be its own theme, basic needs refers to participants' ability to pay for the essentials, such as food, toiletries, diapers, car seats, and strollers. Many expressed difficulties paying for basic needs, as demonstrated here:

"... the cost of living has increased, and now it doesn't really add up. And lately now with having another child into the family, yeah, it's even harder to like be able to afford food and diapers and everything essential that you need... And I feel like the resources that are being offered aren't really stacking up to like the needs of the community." - Central & South participant

As suggested earlier, food and diapers emerged as the most needed resources. While in many cases this need was attributed to the cost of living and the rising cost of food, others faced a lack of food sources which was region specific. For example, a West County interviewee noted:

"One main concern has been access to food. [Food] is a big big challenge in Contra Costa County, particularly San Pablo. We don't actually have a grocery store in San Pablo."

With a high need for resources shared across the county, particularly food and diapers, it is critical to understand how Contra Costa residents access resources.

Awareness of Support for Basic Needs

Word-of-mouth referrals were particularly strong here, and participants reported sharing and receiving information about where to find specific items in person and online. One participant noted that *“in Contra Costa, the doctors give you a list of where you can go to pick up food.”* Online searches and social media came into play more significantly here and ‘give away’ groups were popular with some participants. For example, an East County interviewee shared:

“From my experience, I think I’ve heard a lot about like the food banks and resources ... I’ve been to this group on Facebook that is called the Helping Hands in Contra Costa. And they have a lot of information about things like that on there.”

Participants accessed support for basic needs across organizations including through WIC, the doctor’s office, First 5 Contra Costa, Monument Crisis Center, faith-based initiatives such as Project Gabriel, nonprofits such as Welcome Home Baby, and through schools where one participant described a designated room in which *“they give out food and... shampoo, pads.”* Participants described First 5 Contra Costa as a *“hub for resources”* which made participants feel more connected to available resources. However, not all participants shared this experience. For example, a West County interviewee reported being told:

“funding was being cut, and they weren’t able to provide as many diapers as they would like.”

Resources were offered through a variety of organizations to cover the diversity of needs. Parents actively shared information about what is being offered and where with others in the community.

Accessing Basic Needs

Basic needs is a cross-cutting theme linked to barriers, and participants reported issues in accessing resources that addressed their basic needs. Topics within this theme include the time slots that resources were available for, the embarrassment or shame outlined above, the way participants were treated, and the first come first served policies that left other participants without. Resources linked to income thresholds were also a source of frustration among participants, either adding to an administrative burden or preventing those in need from accessing resources. As participants described:

“You couldn’t make over a certain amount to qualify for different things, and then for like black infant health for... the diaper assistance, and like formula and things like that, they had a different income requirement.” - West participant

Some parents had positive experiences; for example, one West County interviewee shared, *“I was able to get some like food assistance through the county and ended up getting a really great caseworker that was able to help with food assistance.”* On the other hand, others faced barriers and, according to an East County interviewee, were left asking:

“How do I qualify for low-income housing, but not food stamps, cause... right now, everything’s really expensive.”

Participants described accessing a multitude of resources, from car seats to baby formula. However, some did face challenges, including a lack of communication, perceived unfair distribution, ineligibility, low quantities, and embarrassment. Additionally, the data revealed regional disparities in participants’ access to resources. This emerged as a key theme, which we discuss in more detail next.

Perceived Disparities

Perceived disparities emerged as a cross-cutting theme, describing the perception that different regions of Contra Costa County receive different levels of support and resources. Participants often described their region as receiving less compared to other regions. The table below provides an overview of regional engagement and highlights perceived disparities.

Table 3. Highlights of Perceived Regional Disparities, by Area

East County	
<i>Perceived Disparities</i>	<i>Supporting Quotes</i>
In Antioch (East County), participants reported positive experiences with kindergarten readiness programs and participation in Tandem at the Antioch Library. Participants noted Antioch's Early Head Start Program met specific learning needs and that they had positive experiences with the ASQ at the First 5 Contra Costa center in Antioch. Despite this engagement with First 5 Contra Costa and external programs, Antioch was perceived as having less frequent programming than other regions.	• "His play group... isn't in San Pablo but it's located in Antioch, and you do have to pay for the event." • "I also participated in a First 5 program for kindergarten readiness, and it was at the Antioch location... It was a good program." • "Tandem had also provided a math series. That again was 6 weeks [and] was held at the Antioch Library." • "I had a really good coordinator in [First 5] Antioch, and I would tell her about the concerns I had." • "Antioch [has] a lot less going on, or if they do have things going on, you really have to look into it, or it's like once a month versus in other areas where it's like 4 or 5, 6 times a month."
In Brentwood (East County), while some expressed not having things for the children to do and a lack of awareness, others engaged with First 5 Contra Costa and other organizations. The First 5 Contra Costa here was noted for its cleanliness. Brentwood was described as more affordable than other places and was seen as having more happening than Pittsburg.	• "When my son was, like, two, I used to take him to the Playhouse... in Brentwood. It's not free, and I think it's a little overpriced." • "I've done the walking and nutrition class for the Brentwood First 5." • "And when I look online there's a lot more things going on in Oakley and in Brentwood than there is in Pittsburg."
Parents noted Oakley (East County) for positive TK and Pre-K state preschool programs offered by Oakley Unified School District. As above, some participants described more things "going on" in Oakley and in Brentwood than in Pittsburg and Danville.	• "...there's a lot more things going on in Oakley and in Brentwood than there is in Pittsburg." • "...you know, like the same resources available in Danville as in Oakley as in Pittsburg."
There appeared to be greater awareness of and engagement in programs among Pittsburg (East County) residents, who mentioned several different initiatives. Those outside Pittsburg perceived more happening here than in their own area, while residents within Pittsburg described it as hard.	• "...they're letting us know about a lot of information down here [in Pittsburg]." • "I'm currently in a sister parenting group. And it's held at the First 5 Center in Pittsburg, and also via Zoom." • "I've also [had] experience with the state funded program of the Pre-K through the Pittsburg School District." • "I went to the Pittsburg Health Center, and they actually had this program. I think it was nurse family partnership, or something like that where a nurse came for her first 2 years of life... ." • "Well, here in Pittsburg First 5 has a food bank." • "And down here in Pittsburg. First 5 also has... this new program... of essentials... like pads, shampoo, all that stuff." • "But in Pittsburg it's really hard."



West County	
Perceived Disparities	Supporting Quotes
Participants shared mixed attitudes towards Richmond (West County). For some, there were not enough resources and residents lacked awareness of supports that were available. For others, Richmond was perceived as having more than what was on offer in their local area.	• <i>"Here, in Richmond, I don't feel like we have a lot of resources for early education for the kids."</i> • <i>"I didn't know there was a First 5 right here in Richmond and apparently it was a few blocks down my house."</i> • <i>"I mean just in the libraries look at the Richmond libraries versus Martinez."</i> • <i>"As I said before, the City of Sobrante does not have any, but I do know that in Richmond and San Pablo they offer more activities."</i> • <i>"I wish that... these... resources were also in Pinole and Hercules area, because it's always Richmond."</i> • <i>"Our community like Richmond, San Pablo, Hercules, and they've all expressed that it's hard to find other moms with babies."</i>
Parents described San Pablo as under-resourced and, as we highlighted in the section on basic needs, it lacks grocery stores. It was reported as more affordable by one resident; however, many expressed feeling neglected. This feeling was more pronounced in West County, more broadly.	• <i>"Living in Contra Costa County, in San Pablo has been pretty good. We moved to this area from Alameda County due to the cost of living there. Contra Costa County was more affordable."</i> • <i>"A major concern is access to food in San Pablo... It's really hard."</i> • <i>"We need the resources for our youth and we're not getting that."</i> • <i>"I feel isolated. I will say... I feel left alone, hard, no resources... no good communication."</i> • <i>"I would say San Pablo Richmond is under resourced when it comes to like kids or toddler activities."</i> • <i>"At this point it seems like the moms need to run a group like West Central Costa."</i> • <i>"Here in Richmond I don't feel like we have a lot of resources for early education for the kids."</i>

Central & South	
Perceived Disparities	Supporting Quotes
Concord (Central & South) residents reported high levels of engagement with First 5 Contra Costa and accessing resources. Other parents viewed this region as having more support and resources, which led some participants to travel to Concord.	“I don’t know what I would do if First 5 wasn’t here in Concord.” “A lot of times we have to drive out to Concord or Walnut Creek just to try to get the same services that we would expect to have in our area.” “So, we’re having to drive out [to] like Walnut Creek, Concord, Berkeley, Albany... places where there’s resources that we want to see in our community but we’re not getting because our money is going to other places that we don’t even want.”
There was limited data on Danville (Central & South), though one participant reported that it had less resources.	“We want to make things more equitable. So I would like for that to really stand out to those who are in charge [of] Contra Costa County to make all... the same resources available in Danville as in Oakley as in Pittsburg.”
In Martinez (Central & South), participants reported engaging in medical services. Some highlighted specific resources that were lacking and residents compared it to Richmond, perceiving their facilities were not as good.	“...they were taking care of my prenatal care at the Planned Parenthood, and they referred... me to Martinez because that’s [where] I was gonna deliver and that’s [where] they offered... those classes.” “I know with Martinez and Walnut Creek; I don’t think they have a diaper bank or car seat. Or even somebody to help you install it.” “I mean just in the libraries look at the Richmond libraries versus Martinez libraries.”
Parents perceived Walnut Creek (Central & South) as having more resources. Participants reported engaging with First 5 Contra Costa, and others reporting traveling to the region to access better supports.	“...before moving to the Walnut Creek, I don’t... know anything like [the] county has this kind of the program, but because of the First 5 I... come to know more resources like [the] county provide us.” “So, we’re having to drive out [to] like Walnut Creek, Concord, Berkeley, Albany... places where there’s resources that we want to see in our community.”

In summary, participants often perceived that other regions of the county received better supports than their own. West Contra Costa was broadly perceived as under-resourced, although Richmond was perceived as having the most to offer families. Concord and Walnut Creek were the perceived hubs in Central & South County, and Brentwood and Oakley were thought to have the most to offer in East County. Parents perceived disparities within Contra Costa County but also outside, as demonstrated by one West participant who shared, “I was looking at that the other day. San Francisco got way more stuff for the people that’s low income and homeless versus out here. We don’t got nothing compared to what they got.” Participants called for greater regional equity.

Suggestions for Improvement from Participants

This final theme is closely linked to unmet needs. Suggestions for improvement emerged across regions and programs and will support First 5 Contra Costa to address specific needs that participants raised during the discussion groups and interviews. We include here a range of suggestions shared by participants, acknowledging that some will be more actionable than others for First 5 Contra Costa. While some suggestions were broad, others related to specific communities. Here is what we found:

Table 4. Suggestions

<i>Suggestion</i>	<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Provide a resource guide outlining all supports in the county	Some participants wanted a physical resource with all the information they needed in one place. We note that this, at least partially, exists, digitally; the 211 database from Contra Costa Crisis Center has a regularly updated list of countywide resources. The solution here might be making parents aware of its existence.	• <i>"...it'll be nice to have... this green book or resource... like a 1 stop shop... I think the catalog would be a good idea, or the binder. And you have like an index and say, okay, I need go to F for food bank, and then you open that up..." - East participant</i> • <i>"More flyers or a resource guide would be nice." - East participant</i>
Offer better support for families with children who have additional needs	While this was raised predominantly in East Contra Costa, it may reflect the needs of the participants in the discussion group as opposed to participants in East Contra Costa more broadly. Participants called for more specialized support across a range of developmental and learning needs.	• <i>"I'd like to try and see about how resources can be given to those to assess for special needs or for kiddos [who] are neurodivergent." - East participant</i> • <i>"If we can get First 5 staff that maybe specialize in working with kids... [who are] autistic. That would be great." - East participant</i> • <i>"...more classes, sort of geared towards children with developmental delays, because I didn't realize how common that was" - East participant</i>
Create a dedicated Latinx community center	Dedicated support for the Latinx community was raised in Central & South and West Contra Costa. Participants expressed the desire for a dedicated space that better supports their needs.	• <i>"I would like to see a Latino Community Center with an office with resources for us, the Latinos... There should also be resources to help us grow as individuals and be able to be somebody in this country." - Central & South participant</i> • <i>"I would have liked to find a group for moms, but more like for the Latino community." - West participant</i>

Table 4. Suggestions (Continued)

<i>Suggestion</i>	<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Increase offerings in Spanish	As above, this was raised by participants in Central & South and West Contra Costa highlighting regional differences in the demand for offerings in Spanish.	• <i>"Since those groups were in English, I feel they should offer more in Spanish...For all the non-English speakers." - Central & South participant</i> • <i>"I think it would also be good to promote a group for Spanish-speaking moms, because there are many who are limited by the fact that they can't speak English and they are not able to connect with other moms." - West participant</i>
Expand information sharing	Participants from Central & South Contra Costa generated ideas about how to expand communication efforts. These are applicable across regions.	• Physical locations: <i>"I think just advertising a program, probably like a doctor's office and even like a pediatric dental office... Advertising the program,... in libraries as well..." - Central & South participant</i> • Word-of-mouth: <i>"More... outreach, but... in person, because I didn't hear about the First 5 until I think somebody told me." - Central & South participant</i> • Social media: <i>"In relation with the Concord community, because I know they have social media, they don't really... mention First 5 or anything... But I wish... since it's in Concord, if... they can also... mention it in their social media..." - Central & South participant</i> • Flyers and TV: <i>"...leaving flyers in the stores or in the schools... Sometimes on TV too, when you watch TV there should be commercials, especially in Spanish." - Central & South participant</i>
Provide free child care during classes or for interviews	Child care was an issue for participants across Contra Costa County. Specific support was requested to enable parents to attend classes with one child, if it was not age appropriate for a sibling to join, and when attending something important like a job interview.	• <i>"...needing childcare, maybe like a 1-time voucher. I don't know. That would be helpful if you're trying to find a job. But you need someone to watch your kids." - West participant</i> • <i>"if they could provide childcare like on site for the littles... because that can be a barrier. I know it's been a barrier for me several times like trying to bring my now 2-year-old, and my 6-year-old, and she obviously is not appropriate for those programs... it can be kind of distracting to the little kids." - East participant</i>

Table 4. Suggestions (Continued)

<i>Suggestion</i>	<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Offer career support	Some participants were seeking support in finding a job.	• <i>"I do wish there was... more programs... of helping us out in the way... to get... jobs." - East participant</i> • <i>"I wish there was more that provide us skills of how to like find a job where we can become successful at the same time of being moms" - West participant</i>
Offer community events for parents	Participants spoke about the benefit of socializing with other parents. A need for feeling more connected to the community and engaging with other parents, outside of holiday events, was expressed.	• <i>"I love if you guys, especially in the summer times, if you can make events for parents to meet." - Central & South participant</i> • <i>"Of course the First Five, which is super helpful like once a week. But I felt like we needed more of like a place where other parents are able to talk with each other." - West participant</i>
Have better connected systems to facilitate earlier and wider awareness of available services	Participants shared a need for systems to be better connected. For example, participants wanted smoother and quicker referrals to the Regional Center to get timely support with developmental concerns.	• <i>"We wish if... there is a connection between First 5 and then the hospital, like most parents go [to] hospitals, dent[ists], as you mentioned, [the] library." - Central & South participant</i> • <i>"I think that if there was a way to connect folks more quickly to the Regional Center. That would be helpful, because, you know, the earlier the intervention, the better." - East participant</i>
Expand program offerings and spaces	Participants in West Contra Costa raised space as an issue, describing it as: <i>"very difficult to find a space in the classes of the First 5 program."</i> Whereas participants in East Contra Costa called for an expansion of programs with more variety.	• <i>"I would say there should be more spaces in the First 5 classes, or otherwise, they should expand it, because many times you can't find a space." - West participant</i> • <i>"I would... hope to see, a little bit more expansion of the program... I haven't seen any extra curricular activities. So, like, even if we can have a session of a little soccer... as a working mom trying to enroll your child in extra curricular activities is really costly." - East participant</i> • <i>"...extracurricular activities... it kind of gets to a point where you're like, okay, what do I pick now? We did this. We did that. So, a bit of a variety, or if they were to alternate it every so often would be good." - East participant</i>

Table 4. Suggestions (Continued)

<i>Suggestion</i>	<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Supporting Quote</i>
Offer programs at different times, run classes for longer, and allow drop ins	Parents suggested different times and arrangements that would better suit their schedules. Not all parents were able to commit to a series of classes due to changing work schedules and suggested drop-in sessions.	• “I do wish that First 5, or even any other organization would allow for some evening sessions.” - East participant • “My only complaint would be that it was a little short. I think, if it went longer, or if it was a series like, there’s a part 1 and maybe a part 2 with the same kiddos, it might have been a little bit more helpful with getting more ready for a kinder classroom.” - East participant • “My work schedule varies every week, so we couldn’t really commit to one class. Registration was a limitation, because my work schedule varies. It would work if we could just drop in when we can. Maybe we can register but have that open registration.” - East participant
Eligibility - raise income limits / thresholds	We acknowledge that this suggestion in particular implies state and even federal policy change and is beyond the scope of First 5 Contra Costa’s direct control; however, it indicates clear unmet needs for families in the county, particularly around access to food. This was reflected across regions.	• “I don’t know if that would be possible, but if they could be... a little bit more lenient with the threshold, because it seems like people still struggle, even though they don’t qualify.” - East participant • “I would say, maybe to raise the income limits because it’s like a catch-22. You have to be really, really low income in order to qualify for certain things. And then when you work hard and you make more money, now you don’t qualify for anything...” - Central & South participant • “I wasn’t able to qualify for WIC, so yeah, the main barrier was just qualifications for things.” - West participant • “Same thing with WIC, we didn’t qualify just based on \$1,000. It would have been really helpful especially when I was pregnant.” - Central & South participant
Longer parental leave	Similarly, this suggestion is also beyond the scope of First 5 Contra Costa’s direct control; however, this was a significant unmet need for participants and may help guide the support and advocacy that First 5 Contra Costa can provide.	• “...subsidizing childcare so that early childhood workers can make a living wage, because... I work in early childhood, and I can’t afford to work and pay for daycare. Like that’s my job, right. So the fact that to pay... because I work in preschool, and infant care is so expensive, it just doesn’t make sense for me to continue to teach, to pay for daycare for my baby. So yeah, subsidized childcare... I would really support that.” - Central & South participant • “Like, why [doesn’t] the government, or like the federal or [the] State of California... approve daycare for all the kids for free [at a] certain age?” - Central & South participant • “I would say for policymakers to... and... this is a whole country thing... for the first year, provide, like other countries do, this support where you can actually stay home with your baby.” - East participant

Conclusion



This Listening Tour aimed to understand how families in Contra Costa County with children under the age of 6 experience supports. Through discussion groups and interviews, parents shared perspectives that reveal diverse needs, available services, and the challenges faced in accessing them. Eight themes emerged including: resources, programs, and services; communication; navigation; barriers; unmet needs; basic needs; perceived disparities; and suggestions. This conclusion draws out insights across themes and identifies opportunities to strengthen systems of support.

Leveraging and Expanding Strong Connections to Supports

Across all discussion groups and interviews, parents consistently noted engaging with the library in some way. Connections and advertisements here could strengthen the uptake of other supports. Parents engaged well with playgroups, both within and outside of the library and First 5 Contra Costa, and parenting programs were popular through First 5 Contra Costa. Fewer participants engaged in kindergarten readiness programs, often because their children were too young. Among those who didn't participate, many were unaware such programs existed, highlighting an opportunity for clearer outreach. With regard to developmental screenings, the ASQ was the only screening that participants were aware of which they completed with either a pediatrician or at their local First 5 Contra Costa. Many appreciated this touchpoint for the insights into development that it provided. Participants found referrals challenging, and direct support from First 5 Contra Costa staff was helpful. Once connected to First 5 Contra Costa, participants were very aware of opportunities in the county with First 5 Contra Costa and beyond.

The data suggests that being connected to an organization opened up access to other supports. In contrast, participants who had not engaged with First 5 Contra Costa generally presented as less connected to all supports. Deliberate efforts to reach all members of the county, including stay-at-home parents and newcomers to the county who may lack a support network, have the potential to increase uptake across supports. Establishing or strengthening communication channels with trusted people in families' lives, such as pediatricians who have in-person communication opportunities at key developmental periods for children, is a potential avenue for earlier, more frequent communication about available support with families. Participants also suggested other channels to reach families including fairs, flyers, mail, social media, and TV advertisements.

Translating Awareness to Access

A cross-cutting theme that emerged across findings was translating awareness of supports into access. Once aware of supports, the transition to accessing these presented many barriers for parents. As one East County participant described, *"I have come across First 5 but we haven't utilized it yet. I'm not really sure how everything there works..."* Communication has been somewhat effective for these participants; they know the support is there, however, further outreach is needed for this group to actively participate.

For many participants, navigating supports was a challenge due to inconsistent eligibility criteria, administrative burden, having no point of contact, and immigration status. While many faced barriers in accessing supports, this was felt more acutely by parents experiencing more complex needs. For example, parents seeking support for neurodivergent children, experiencing housing insecurity, or experiencing severe material hardship had different experiences than parents without specific needs who could readily attend classes in the community. Our data indicate that locating specialized services and the associated additional administrative burden led to logistical challenges; in these cases, a dedicated support person would have been helpful. While far less common, parents facing housing insecurity would benefit from better access to immediate support.

Equity and Disparities

Most participants perceived that regions other than their own received more support, therefore greater transparency in what is available and addressing existing disparities may help achieve a more equitable distribution. Discrepancies in access and engagement may be partly determined by geographic location and immigration status. When accessing supports requires documentation, transportation, or internet access, programs leave behind the very families they intend to serve and those who would benefit the most from their services.

In sum, as one East County participant highlighted, *"there are so many proactive moms in the county,"* who are eager to engage in supports that help their children thrive. However, stronger in-person communication at touch points with professionals, dedicated support to navigate services, and connecting harder-to-reach populations will help to ensure all families can provide for their young children. The findings of this Listening Tour provide a foundation to build on what is working well and address gaps and barriers. For the many things that are going well, participants only ask for more:

"I feel that First 5 has helped me a lot as a woman, as a mother, as a friend, and I am very grateful to First 5 for all that I have learned, for the way I have improved. I don't know what I would do if First 5 wasn't here in Concord, and um... I am very grateful to all the teachers, to all the staff. Everything they have done for me and the programs they have offered us have been very helpful, but I feel that there should be more."



Opportunities for Further Exploration

Based on the findings presented, we have outlined opportunities for First 5 Contra Costa and their community partners to explore in order to reach and serve more families with children under 6.



Programs and classes:

- Increase the number of classes and spaces available in West Contra Costa.
- Expand the range of classes available in East Contra Costa.
- Train staff in developmental needs and learning disabilities and provide classes targeted at supporting families with children who have additional developmental needs.
- Provide classes in Spanish, predominantly in Central & South and West Contra Costa.
- Consider allowing parents to drop into sessions when changing work schedules prevent signing up for a weekly slot.



Communication:

- Leverage word-of-mouth referrals with trusted community members, such as pediatricians, to reach more residents.
- Provide targeted outreach to residents whose connection with the community is limited, for example stay-at-home parents or those new to the county. This could include mail, social media, TV advertisements, and flyers.



Navigation:

- Support early and timely referrals to the Regional Center for families with children who require additional services.
- Where possible, provide one-to-one support for families navigating services and ensure warm hand-offs to other organizations.
- Reduce the administrative burden on families by limiting paper work and the requirement to prove eligibility.
- Provide clarity on who is eligible for what and where possible, make eligibility consistent.
- Provide a one-stop-shop guide to supports in the county. This would require maintenance, which would be easier on a digital platform. Transparency may also reduce perceptions that other regions receive more support.



Unmet needs:

- Create a hub or community center for Latinx residents, predominantly from Central & South and West Contra Costa.
- Provide child care options for job interviews, for parent classes, and for siblings.
- Continue to provide resources that cover basic needs, particularly food and diapers.

For more information:

To learn more about First 5 Contra Costa and their work to ensure young children are healthy, ready to learn, and supported in safe, nurturing families and communities, visit first5coco.org

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