

Welcome Baby Universal Home Visiting Proposal Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating toll on families—lapses in healthcare, declines in mental health, financial strain, parental stress, parental and child resilience, and social isolation. Adverse effects have been pronounced in more vulnerable populations, exposing the need for greater community supports. Women, people of color, and children have been disproportionately affected. While crisis response has been necessarily prioritized during the COVID-19 pandemic, prevention has suffered, creating downstream consequences for children and more intractable and expensive problems moving forward. Of great concern are the proven long-term impacts of early childhood adversity on physical and mental health, brain development, and school readiness and the real risk that shorter-term pandemic impacts will deepen disparities for those disproportionately impacted.

Early experiences have a profound impact on a child's life. During pregnancy and the first year of life, children are the most sensitive to experiences and need a healthy environment for optimal brain development. Parents are critical to buffering their children from the impacts of adversity (ACEs), but when parents are themselves stressed, suffering economically, or experiencing crisis, the capacity this role is compromised. Early childhood exposure to stress has life-long consequences (e.g., learning difficulties in school, physical health problems, and higher probabilities of substance use). Investing in this critical time is one of the most effective and efficient ways to reduce poverty, increase self-sufficiency, promote economic prosperity, and to protect the entire community into the future.

The pandemic has negatively impacted pregnant women and parents of infants:

Stress and maternal mental health issues—mental health issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic with recent studies showing significantly increased rates of mental health problems among pregnant and postpartum women compared to pre-pandemic rates. The deterioration of maternal mental health has toxic and enduring effects on both mother and baby, as increased mental health problems in pregnancy are associated with adverse birth outcomes. Additionally, greater prenatal and postpartum mental health issues are associated with declines in parenting, increased risk of child abuse and neglect, substance use, and cognitive impairment.

Disruptions in prenatal care—In Yolo County, pregnant women have been significantly delaying their prenatal care. Data collected by Communicare in 2020 revealed that only 47% of pregnant women in Yolo county received on-time prenatal care, in stark contrast to the overall Yolo county rate of 84% on-time prenatal care in 2018.

Decline in pediatric well-child visits and immunization rates—In CA, pediatric well-child visits are down an estimated 24% from pre-pandemic baselines and the number of childhood vaccination doses administered to California children dropped by more than

40% at the start of the pandemic. This has especially impacted children covered by MediCal and disrupts critical preventive care and early identification of developmental and social-emotional issues.

Prolonged community stress and adverse childhood experience—Many Californians suffered economically, but household with children fared worse in 2020. Specifically, 50% of households with children had difficulty paying bills compared to 30% of households without children. Latino children were more likely to have a caregiver in a sector highly impacted by COVID-19 shutdowns. This financial strain deteriorates children’s wellbeing. Nationally, 52% of children in families with financial hardship are facing emotional distress.

Welcome Baby meets the tremendous responsibility to address pandemic-related needs of vulnerable young children and their families. Designed to mitigate exposure to toxic stress and build resiliency, Welcome Baby is an upstream approach with a clear nexus to ARP Funds.

First 5 Yolo proposes a broad-based prevention strategy, “Welcome Baby” (WB), that intervenes at the earliest point of life, creating lasting impacts for young children and families and the Yolo County community. Welcome Baby is a proactive, universal approach designed to mitigate exposure to toxic stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic and build resiliency as early as the birth of the child to support families, particularly those who are struggling the most, through the next three years of COVID-19 recovery.

WB is family-centric and focused on health equity, designed to reach those who are often invisible, while offering a broad strategy to address the collective trauma and negative effects the community has experienced during the pandemic. It reaches families at the earliest point to strategically coordinate flow into available services and to support medical, mental health, and other care that has lapsed during the pandemic. The “universal” approach de-stigmatizes screening, care, and service access, leverages existing resources, and creates a transformative early identification, home visiting, and early childhood care system in Yolo County.

Welcome Baby provides home visits at critical points for every Yolo County baby born over the duration of ARP. Families enrolled receive up to three “Welcome Baby” home visits, one by registered nurse/medical personnel within the first week of returning home from hospital, and two by community healthcare workers during the following postpartum weeks. Hospitals offer connection to WB at point of labor and delivery.

The nurse visit provides more immediate health screens (including maternal mental health) and clinical assessment for both mother and baby, immediate triage, lactation support, and checks on continuing health care, including vaccine (COVID and other) status. This visit bridges postpartum and newborn care, including checks on women’s postpartum healing that otherwise might not occur for many weeks, and allows for early identification of a variety of health and safety issues.

In the following weeks, families receive 1-2 home visits from community healthcare workers, based on family needs. In these visits, parents receive a First 5 New Parent Kit with culturally and linguistically appropriate “Baby Basics” health literacy materials and other concrete supports, parent education, and referrals to community resources as well as a universal risk screening. Families identified as in-need, will be referred into more intensive existing home visiting services within the county and/or offered a Newborn Observation (NBO) Home Visit which provides in-depth parenting support. Connected to the existing Help Me Grow system, NBO is aimed at strengthening the bond between parents and their newborn through neurobehavioral observations.

All community healthcare workers receive training in evidence-based Baby Basics program, designed to serve the population with culturally sensitive and trauma-informed care. These community healthcare workers engage vulnerable populations to address barriers to timely care, attending to children’s developmental milestones, ACEs screening, and linkages to services. Community Healthcare home visitors support families in accessing existing services, such as health insurance, health and mental health services, perinatal care, WIC, and concrete supports, and channel families—many of whom would otherwise not be identified early—to programs and services.

CommuniCare Health Care Centers will hire and train the WB nurses, including postpartum mental health training and lactation counseling training. Yolo County Children’s Alliance will hire WB community health workers. Culturally and linguistically appropriate outreach workers from a variety of community-based organizations will engage women and families in timely prenatal care and to communicate the opportunities available in Welcome Baby. Hospital birthing centers would facilitate connection to WB at birth.

All families experience challenges associated with pregnancy and childbirth, but these stressors have been heightened due to the pandemic. F5Y’s Welcome Baby program would ensure all families receive support during this critical time. Importantly, by providing temporary, limited home visiting services, we can help mitigate the trauma of the pandemic’s unprecedented impact on families and prevent lasting effects on children. The early outcomes could transform the system of care in Yolo County and the future of The Yolo County community.

Key Outcomes are expected to include, but are not limited to, the following:

1. Reduced maternal mental health issues
2. Increased community connections (e.g., referrals)
3. Greater rates of well-child visits and immunization rates
4. Lower rates of entry into Child Welfare Services
5. Timeliness to care and identification of child development or maternal health issues

6. Reduction in per capita costs in Yolo County of prenatal/postpartum care, infant hospitalizations, emergency department utilization, and urgent care utilization

UC Davis Health Equity Across the Lifespan (HEAL) Lab will provide, in-kind, data collection and evaluation. The HEAL Lab has expertise is designing, implementing, and evaluating clinical interventions to promote health equity in pregnant and postpartum people.