

# Strategic Plan

(Update for 2013/14)

2013-2016



# FIRST 5

MERCED COUNTY

# Table of Contents

Message from the Commission

Acknowledgements

About First 5 Merced County .....1

Merced County Profile .....2

Context of Strategic Plan and Approach to Community Change .....3

Desired Outcomes and Current Funding Strategy .....4

The Strategic Planning Process .....6

Mapping of Desired Outcomes and Objectives .....8

Funding Process .....11

Evaluation .....13



# Message from the Commission

To the Citizens of Merced County:

It is the vision of the First 5 Merced County Children and Families Commission that all children thrive in supportive and nurturing environments, enter school healthy and ready to learn, and become productive members of society.

Through this Strategic Plan, the Commission continues efforts to improve the lives of children from the prenatal stage through age five. Since inception in 1998, the Commission has provided over \$50 million in funding to create or enhance community programs for children ages 0-5 and their families through a broad array of local program investments. The Commission is committed to improving positive outcomes for all children, while acknowledging there are limited resources to meet the overwhelming needs of children in Merced County. Therefore, the Commission has established clear objectives within established Desired Outcomes in this Strategic Plan, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the Commission's impact on families and children in our community at a number of strategic levels.

The Commission recognizes the importance of encouraging the sustainability of these supports and have intentionally maintained strategies that improve all organizations who serve families and children in the Desired Outcome areas. These strategies support improved relationships between organizations, and improved service delivery by improving the overarching 'systems' in which work is achieved. There are a number of informal and formal systems of support that contribute to the well-being of families and children ages 0-5 in Merced County.

The Commission continues to be committed to maximizing the effectiveness of existing resources, improving the coordination and responsiveness of existing systems, and increasing the quality of services for children 0-5 in Merced County.

## First 5 Merced County Commission

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# Acknowledgements

The following people and many others made significant contributions to the development of the 2013-2016 Strategic Plan.

## **First 5 Merced County Commission**

### **First 5 Merced County Staff**

Martha Hermosillo, Executive Director  
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## **Technical Professional Advisory Committee**

The Technical Professional Advisory Committee (TPAC) is a multidisciplinary team that provides technical and professional expertise and support that is beneficial to the First 5 Merced County Commission in accomplishing the purposes of the Children and Families Act. TPAC is also responsible for advising and informing the Commission on specific issues and areas of interest; increasing community participation in and awareness of Commission-supported endeavors; and assisting in the annual update of the Strategic Plan.

### **Additional**

Lori Allio, PhD, Senior Associate from Hatchuel Tabernik and Associates provided technical support, planning, and facilitation for this Strategic Plan.

# About First 5 Merced County

## History

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

Following the passage of Proposition 10, the Merced County Board of Supervisors adopted an ordinance establishing First 5 Merced County and a Trust Fund through which to receive and disburse the County’s allocation of the tobacco tax revenue. Additionally, First 5 Merced County adopted an initial Strategic Plan to identify how to best utilize available funds to enhance the well-being of children from birth through age five. The First 5 Merced County Commission has since updated this Strategic Plan several times, and funded many programs over the last fifteen years. These programs have addressed the health and development of children, strengthening of families and continued professional development of providers, all for the benefit of children 0-5 in Merced County.

## Vision Statement

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

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

- ✦ is emotionally and physically safe
- ✦ has adequate food, clothing and shelter
- ✦ is intellectually stimulating and challenging
- ✦ provides adequate health care in sickness and in health
- ✦ promotes the development of productive, well-adjusted members of society

## Mission Statement

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

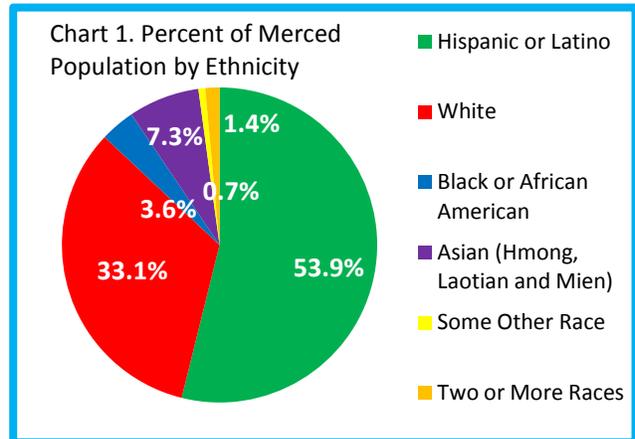
- ✦ identify the issues and service needs relating to the early development of children from the prenatal stage through age five
- ✦ develop a comprehensive plan of how those issues and needs can be addressed while acknowledging and supporting the strength of families and the cultural diversity of the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



# Merced County Profile

Merced County is a medium-sized county in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, the agricultural hub of the state. While the population is distributed in rural and urban areas, most people live along the Highway 99 central corridor that bisects the County. Interstate 5 also crosses the County through the growing Westside of the County. The continuously growing population of Merced County is over a quarter million residents and has increased by 22% since 2000<sup>1</sup>.

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



Merced County has one of the youngest populations in the state of California. As of 2010 in Merced County, there were 22,381 children under five years of age. In the past year (Fiscal Year 2010-11) First 5 Merced County provided services to 37% (8,424) of children ages five and under. Many of these children do not have access to early childhood education. Only 33% of all Merced County children ages 3-4 attend preschool, and approximately a third of all Merced County children live in poverty.

Poverty is linked to poor access to healthcare and particularly impacts pregnant women, young children and teen parents. Regions with high poverty rates frequently experience higher rates of unemployment (especially tied to seasonal work opportunities), lack of job skills, low literacy levels, lack of diverse economic base, and a range of other challenges.

These challenges impact family functioning and the optimal development of the young children in Merced County. The unique socioeconomic, demographic and ethnic characteristics of Merced County make service delivery—whether in the area of health care, early childhood development or family preservation—particularly challenging. Many of these challenges and needs were documented in the original Strategic Plan and continue to be the focus of First 5 Merced County.

<sup>1</sup> All Population and Ethnicity Data from the US Census, American Community Survey 2010, Five Year Estimates



# Context of this Strategic Plan and Approach to Community Change

California has been greatly impacted in recent years by the economic recession as well as federal and state budget crises. While the needs of California's children and families steadily increase, the resources and funding available for services are on the decline.

While faced with a challenging economic environment and generally declining Proposition 10 funds, First 5 Merced County remains committed to fulfilling its role as a good steward of these public funds. In so doing, First 5 Merced County believes it is absolutely imperative to support programs and systems that strive for goals that, when achieved, will have the greatest overall impact on children's optimal development. Research shows that proactively investing in the well-being of the youngest children not only strengthens their chances for success in life, but also nurtures the ability of the future workforce. Investing in young children is essential in supporting economic recovery of the State of California and the Nation.

This is why First 5 anchors this Strategic Plan with the premise it must be highly discerning with regard to selecting achievable goals.

First 5 Merced County cannot possibly meet all of the prevailing needs that exist for the families and children in the community. While it would prove a valiant effort, such an endeavor would lack both sufficient funding and focus to overcome the multitude of factors and complex challenges preventing children from being most prepared to succeed in school, in life and in the workforce.

Available resources must be directed toward Desired Outcomes and Objectives, established goals that the community most needs and wants to accomplish. Evidence of the progress toward the Desired Outcomes will be found throughout the community, in the well-being of children and families.



# Desired Outcomes and Current Funding Strategy

## Desired Outcomes

With the current context in mind, First 5 Merced County has slightly modified the Desired Outcomes as the target priorities for this updated Strategic Plan. These modifications reflect a continued commitment to these outcomes and a small shift in community priorities:

**Desired Outcome #1:** Improve parents' (especially new parents') nurturing and engaging relationships with their children.

**Desired Outcome #2:** Improve the quality of care provided in out-of-home settings (including center-based care, family child care, and non-licensed environments).

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

**Desired Outcome #4:** Improve community level awareness and acknowledgement of the critical need to prioritize and support structured action for change benefiting our youngest children (0-5 years).

**Desired Outcome #5:** Advocate for improvement and preservation of systems serving children 0-5 years at the local and state level.

These Desired Outcomes provide focus and clear direction for First 5's activities. The modifications that have been made this year reflect changes in the work of First 5 and the needs of Merced County. They communicate the goals First 5 Merced County intends to achieve, and serve as the basis for developing specific objectives in each Desired Outcome area.

First 5 Merced County understands that achieving the Desired Outcomes is an ongoing process and that efforts of great merit take time. Building on past and recent accomplishments, First 5 Merced County maintains a steadfast commitment to achieving these Desired Outcomes.



Additionally, the Desired Outcomes will not be pursued by a single agency or limited set of services, but accomplished through integrated, multi-level interventions working in concert. Primary intervention approaches for each of the Desired Outcomes have been identified based on what First 5 Merced understands works best to affect change in Merced County and communities across the nation.

First 5 Merced County encourages and supports those efforts of community agencies and organizations to build coordinated initiatives in partnership. These initiatives are supported not only with funding, but through expanded roles of First 5 staff that includes technical assistance, fund development, and advocacy.

Working in partnership across implemented interventions will assist in overcoming resource-deficits that would otherwise hinder projects working in isolation. This synergy optimizes the probability of success.

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

The Desired Outcomes and objectives have been selected within the financial realities of the present and with an eye toward the future. With the changing fiscal climate in mind, First 5 Merced County is balancing ongoing support of interventions in order to maximize benefits over time.

The remainder of this document specifies First 5 Merced County's approach to community investments in more detail and describes the development, content, and implementation of this Strategic Plan.

## **Current Funding Strategy**

In the 2009-2012 Strategic Plan, First 5 Merced County established "levels of intervention" as part of its strategic framework. This framework was intended to inform, support, and structure grantmaking and contracting so that the likelihood of achieving Desired Outcomes was improved. The rationale included funding strategies at a number of levels to encourage partnership and collaborative approaches. The "levels of intervention" include: the individual level which encompasses direct services to parents and children; organizational and inter-organizational levels; community level where strategies cross entire communities; and systems and policy level.

During 2009 to 2012, funding for Desired Outcomes 1-3 (see page 8-9) emphasized individual level strategies. Funding allocated to Desired Outcomes 4-5 (see page 9-10) emphasized a strong community or systems level emphasis and represented a relatively small proportion of First 5 Merced County funding.

As available funds for First 5 Merced County are projected to decline in the coming years, the Commission developed a strategy to shift a larger percentage of its investments to inter-organizational, community, and systems levels. This Strategic Plan reflects that shift. Efforts to improve the entire system and resulting long-term efficiencies will help to reconcile the gap between the demand for and supply of services.



# The Strategic Planning Process

First 5 Commissioners, staff, contracted consultants, and the Technical Professional Advisory Committee worked together to carry out a collaborative planning process to review and revise this Strategic Plan. This planning process is described below.

## ***Continuity While Looking Toward the Future***

The strategic planning process intentionally began with the current work of First 5 Merced County. The planning consultant reviewed all current contracts by Desired Outcome, evaluation reports, previous plans, Commission documents, and other relevant information. This established a baseline, grounding this Strategic Plan in current efforts and achievements and providing a framework for continued refinement of Desired Outcomes.

## ***Including objectives targeted at multiple levels in each Desired Outcome***

Given the reality of declining financial resources available for First 5 investments, the current strategic planning process establishes clear objectives within the existing Desired Outcomes to guide investments in coming years. These objectives were targeted to impact entire communities, networks of organizations, and systems. As available funds decline, these objectives will promote effective community and system-level strategies that will serve the needs of young children and their families, will better position those strategies to respond to changes, will more effectively utilize funds, and will boost the impact of resources in Desired Outcome areas.

In practical terms, increased support of systems level objectives suggests that First 5 will support select strategies that will benefit organizations or groups of organizations throughout the entire county, thereby improving the ‘system’ that serves young children in Merced County. For example, a coordinated system of care approach that includes cross-collaboration, training, and information sharing makes multiple services more effective. Another example of a strategy with broad benefits is policy efforts that result in expanded availability and utilization of public services for larger numbers of children and families throughout the county.

With this in mind, First 5 Merced County, TPAC, and their consultants took the following important steps to develop the content of this Strategic Plan:

- ✦ Relevant literature and reports were reviewed by the consultant;
- ✦ Key informant interviews were conducted by the consultant to gather input and perspectives from stakeholders;
- ✦ Convenings of providers were facilitated by the consultant to gather input;
- ✦ Dialogues with the community were conducted by TPAC and First 5 Merced County staff to gather input;
- ✦ The information that was gathered was presented to the Commission by the consultant for further analysis and direction;
- ✦ Recommendations were crafted based on this work and were presented to the Commission for feedback;



- ✦ A number of draft objectives were identified by First 5 staff and the consultant that mapped to the baseline conditions of the community and took into consideration prior recommendation;
- ✦ The Commission reviewed the draft objectives at a half day retreat and public comment was gathered;
- ✦ Revised objectives were approved by the Commission at a subsequent meeting.

A range of criteria (identified in the text box below) were used to refine the objectives. Resulting objectives and the summary of the key themes that emerged in the strategic planning process are summarized in the next section.

#### **Criteria for Finalizing Objectives**

- ✦ Objectives will be consistent with prior investments by the Commission and will reflect and/or adapt to the current environment.
- ✦ Objectives will have meaningful impact for children and families.
- ✦ Objectives will be mutually supportive to achieve synergy within and across Desired Outcomes.
- ✦ Objectives will be achievable with the limited funds available.
- ✦ Objectives will cover as large a population as possible without diluting the potential impact.
- ✦ Objectives, where possible, will leverage limited resources.
- ✦ Objectives, where possible, will catalyze, instigate or enable systems improvement efforts.



# Mapping Desired Outcomes and Objectives

As stated before, the Desired Outcomes and objectives in this strategic plan will act as crucial guideposts for the work of First 5 Merced County. Desired Outcomes and objectives resulting from the strategic planning process are identified below. Each of the objectives is primarily targeted at one of the four levels of intervention: individual, organizational, community or systems level. The level of intervention is identified to the left of each objective. The key is as follows:



Individual level (e.g., direct services to parents and children)



Organizational and inter-organizational levels



Community level (for strategies across an entire community)



Systems/policy level

## Desired Outcome #1

**Improve parents' (especially new parents') nurturing and engaging relationships with their children.**

### Objectives



**1.1** Support nurturing practices among strategic parent populations utilizing approaches that empower parents and leverage available resources to maximize impact and sustainability of effort.



**1.2** Improve access to, and efficiency of, parenting education services for parents of children 0-5 years through facilitating collaborations, connections, and coordination countywide.



**1.3** Increase parent and community awareness of the importance of nurturing parent-child relationships utilizing available social media and marketing technologies.



**1.4** Increase awareness and utilization of available parenting information, services, and resources for community members and providers by centralizing and improving access to this information.



## Desired Outcome #2

**Improve the quality of care provided in out-of-home settings (including center-based care, family child care, and non-licensed environments).**

### Objectives



**2.1** Strengthen strategic capacities of early childhood professionals with a focus on improving teacher-child interactions, through support of professional development, access to quality training, and support of advanced degree attainment.



**2.2** Strengthen the professional development infrastructure among early childhood education provider organizations by supporting mentor/coach models and related capacity building that enhances organizations' ongoing commitment to quality.



**2.3** Increase the efficiency and impact of the early childhood education system of services that focuses on raising the quality of care: a) through facilitating collaborations, connections, and coordination countywide among stakeholders, and; b) through increased collaborative planning and implementation of countywide quality enhancement, rating, and assessment systems.

## Desired Outcome #3

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

### Objectives



**3.1** Strengthen the continuum of available services under this Desired Outcome (from screening to treatment) by supporting interventions that fill critical service gaps and leverage durable systemic improvements and available resources.



**3.2** Increase developmental screening capacity among strategic provider groups from multiple disciplines countywide utilizing best practice models of training and capacity building.



**3.3** Improve Desired Outcome 3 system functioning, efficiencies, and the collective impact of services by facilitating enhanced collaborations, coordination and developing linkages needed for seamless alignment.



**3.4** Improve service system providers' capability to implement screening, referral, assessment, and services by addressing technical gaps and related barriers, through identifying catalytic technological solutions, when available.



**3.5** Increase awareness and utilization of available screening, referral, assessment, and services among community members and providers through an effective information system that enhances service accessibility.



## Desired Outcome #4

**Improve community level awareness and acknowledgement of the critical need to prioritize and support structured action for change benefiting our youngest children (0-5 years).**

### Objectives



**4.1** Establish the importance of prioritizing our youngest children as a community norm through communicating key messages to the public utilizing strategic messengers, responsive social marketing approaches, and diverse forms of media.



**4.2** Increase the number and diversity of allies for young children including service providers, parents and primary caregivers, community leaders, the business sector, the faith-based sector, and others through convening community movements and leveraging strategic alliances.



**4.3** Increase the number of those countywide who are actively engaged in supporting our youngest children through structured opportunities and action for change.

## Desired Outcome #5

**Advocate for improvement and preservation of systems serving children 0-5 years at the local and state level.**

### Objectives



**5.1** Build awareness among the general community and stakeholders of policy related to First 5 Merced County's Desired Outcome areas by acting as a key policy information resource.



**5.2** Improve policies and systems that are supportive of children 0-5 years through developing, maintaining, and supporting a focused advocacy agenda.



**5.3** Strengthen the advocacy capacity of our community (parents, leaders, educators, and others) to address the needs of our youngest children through engaging, mobilizing, and developing capacity.



**5.4** Increase policy leaders' understanding of and support for issues impacting young children through education and advocacy.



# Funding Process

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

**Desired Outcomes Funding:** First 5 Merced County plans to continue to invest most of its program resources in the five key Desired Outcomes. However, under this strategic plan, investments will become even more focused as they utilize the objectives articulated to guide funding decisions in each of the Desired Outcome areas. As in First 5 Merced County's last strategic planning period, the majority of available program funding will be allocated to objectives supporting Desired Outcomes 1, 2, and 3. The remaining programmatic investments will be focused on objectives supporting Desired Outcomes 4 and 5.

The bulk of these funds will be allocated through one or more Request for Proposals (RFPs) for the Desired Outcomes, the first of which is projected for release in the Summer/Fall of 2012.

First 5 Merced County anticipates funding a number of programs under the RFP(s) for multi-year periods during the Strategic Plan term. The primary focus of the RFP will be to solicit proposed interventions that directly and specifically achieve the objectives within the Desired Outcomes identified as priorities for this Strategic Plan.

The RFP will focus on facilitating the creation, implementation and enhancement of an effective and integrated set of collaborative services that produce measurable results with regard to meeting the objectives of the Desired Outcomes.

In addition, First 5 Merced County will seek proposals for interventions of interest to the Commission, utilizing best or promising practices in achieving the Desired Outcomes.

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

**Community Responsive Funding:** First 5 Merced County will be responsive to needs of the county outside the scope of its Desired Outcomes. While a lesser amount of funding will be available than in prior years, the Commission will support a variety of efforts to enhance the well-being of children 0-5 years.



Funding for community responsive programs will be allocated through a variety of procurement methods.

The intent of the community responsive funding is to fund innovative, quality interventions that supplement (not supplant) existing levels of services for the benefit of children 0-5 years in alignment with the First 5 vision and mission.

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

- General Mini-grants Program

First 5 Merced County's General Mini-grants Program supports agencies within Merced County on a smaller scale to support program activities that further support First 5's Desired Outcomes, as well as other community needs.

- Family Child Care Mini-grants Program

The Family Child Care Mini-grants Program is a small scale funding program to assist family child care providers to improve the quality of their child care environment and services.

- Event Sponsorship Program

Event Sponsorship funding provides one-time grants to assist in implementing community-based special events to help publicize and address the needs of children 0-5 years.

- Joint Funding Program

Working with other funding entities, First 5 matches funding with other local funders to maximize resources for children 0-5 years, and create greater alignment between local funders' efforts.

- Other Special Commission Partnership Projects

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



# Evaluation

The Children and Families First Act requires First 5 Commissions to collect and analyze outcome data that “measures progress toward attaining results” in line with approved strategic plans. First 5 Merced County shares this state-level commitment to outcomes-based evaluation and has been intentional in efforts to ensure that programs funded with Proposition 10 revenue are evaluated within a context of results-based accountability.

First 5 Merced County will continue the commitment to evaluation guided by the primary aims of this Strategic Plan as articulated in the Desired Outcomes and objectives.

Although First 5 Merced County released RFPs for both evaluation and data systems in 2013, over the past four years, First 5 Merced County has worked with LTG Associates, Incorporated and Persimmony International, Incorporated to implement an evolving and rigorous local evaluation process. LTG Associates has provided support in designing and refining the evaluation approach as well as implementing improved evaluation methodologies. Persimmony International has provided additional support through a web-based data system that assists with gathering information related to the goals outlined in the most recent Strategic Plan. The refinement of the evaluation approach in response to the Desired Outcomes and the Community Responsive funded programs has allowed First 5 Merced County to streamline data collection efforts and focus on data that is required by First 5 California and data that is valuable and relevant to understanding the impact of First 5 Merced County funding in the community.

As the efforts of First 5 Merced County’s programming continue to be refined in this new Strategic Plan, the evaluation will continue to be driven locally by the Desired Outcomes and objectives. While the evaluation contractors for this plan have yet to be determined, the intention is for the evaluation to continue to inform the understanding of the outcomes achieved, the existing and emerging challenges faced by Merced County children and families, and what solutions are effectively addressing those challenges. In this way, the evaluation will support the creation of a knowledge base that allows First 5 Merced County to be increasingly responsive to local families, agencies, systems and communities.

