



May 15, 2020

ACTION ITEM

SUBJECT: FAMILY BOOK DISTRIBUTION PARTNERSHIP

Strategic Plan Priority Area: Child Development and Family Functioning

Goal: All children birth through age 5 have high-quality, nurturing environments that ensure their learning readiness.

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUE

If we hope to prepare children for California's future and reduce achievement disparities, California must prioritize the early learning of its youngest residents. A wide body of research has demonstrated that exposure to books and positive parenting practices, such as being read to in the first three years of life, are critical to robust brain development. Many programs and organizations are hard at work in California to provide books and early literacy supports to young families. For example, First 5 California's (F5CA) Talk. Read. Sing.® campaign was initiated out of an understanding of the importance of a word-rich environment to support the brain development of infants and toddlers. The campaign encourages parents and caregivers to prioritize talking, reading, and singing, and provides parent-friendly messages about the importance of early brain development. F5CA also invests in new parent kits delivered to families at the birth of their child through home visiting programs and family resource centers throughout the state, linking materials with resources that help families utilize the materials. These investments promote evidence-based serve-and-return responsive communication between a young child and an adult.

Leveraging key partnerships with the California Department of Social Services and California food banks, as well as current F5CA and local infrastructure, F5CA can further these campaigns by contributing additional resources to ensure California's most vulnerable children have access to early literacy supports. This aligns with the Governor's Parent Agenda by providing needed resources to families. It also supports the Surgeon General's goals to reduce the achievement gap. Early literacy programs encourage parent/child bonding which promotes resiliency and therefore provides positive mitigation against adverse childhood experiences, which is especially important

in the middle of a stress-inducing pandemic and public health emergency. The importance of the caregiver-child relationship, and taking time to bond by reading and playing is outlined in this article: https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVIDProtectiveFactors_ChildTrends_April2020.pdf.

Program Description and Administration

Funding for the California Family Book Distribution Partnership will be used to strengthen community-based efforts to serve low-income families by leveraging local food banks as trusted messengers in the community. F5CA will leverage its existing contract with Fraser Communications to purchase multilingual, culturally-competent books at cost. Existing local infrastructure and relationships will also be leveraged for administration of the program, including book packaging and distribution, and inclusion of a family tip sheet with information on early literacy and early brain development. Local administration will be determined through a non-competitive application process. It is anticipated that local First 5 commissions or libraries may apply to administer the program. Books will be packaged, shipped, and distributed to food banks based on a process set up by the administering entity, with the goal of providing every family with a child or children age 0 to 5 who utilizes food bank services with a set of 3 books to begin or add to a home library.

Through this partnership, California can leverage existing local infrastructure to reach food insecure families with an effective early literacy intervention, through a trusted family touch point. Utilizing existing F5CA infrastructure and funding, F5CA can administer this in a cost-effective and efficient way, resulting in a high-impact, low-investment program. A total investment of up to \$5.5 million would achieve this goal.

Budget Estimates

The program budget is based on the estimated number of food insecure families in California with a child or children age 0 to 5, and an estimate of \$2 per book. The program administration costs reflect coordination and staffing costs, shipping, and distribution of books. This averages just under \$33,000 per county if all 58 counties participate. Administrative costs will be kept to a minimum to allow for purchase of additional books, if needed.

Number of families to be served (food insecure families in California with a child/children age 0 to 5)		600,000
Book costs (\$6/household for set of 3 books)	\$	3,600,000
Program administration costs (shipping, packaging, distribution, coordination, and staffing)	\$	1,900,000
Total program cost	\$	5,500,000

Program Goals and Scaling

The California Family Book Distribution Partnership will leverage existing local food bank infrastructure and could reach 100 percent of food insecure children ages 0 to 5 in California.

RECOMMENDATION

F5CA staff recommends the Commission approve up to \$4 million in one-time funds to launch the California Family Book Distribution Partnership.

BACKGROUND OF KEY ISSUES

Impact of Reading on Child Development

Reading to children ages 0 to 5, as well as exposure to books, has been shown in myriad studies to have profound positive impacts on cognitive development that lasts well beyond a child's fifth birthday. Children who are read five books per day, for example, hear an estimated 1.2 million more words than children who are read only one book per day. This is commonly referred to as the "million-word gap," and significantly impacts a child's vocabulary development and school performance. Exposure to books in the home also has been shown to be strongly correlated to a child's educational performance and reading test scores. The more books a home has, the better a child does in school. Importantly, the effect of each additional book is highest in homes with the fewest books (the law of diminishing returns), and households in low socioeconomic categories. Variety is as important as volume when it comes to books effects on cognitive development. While many programs that distribute books focus on concept books (shapes, colors, animals, etc.), exposure to narrative books is important to develop language and cognitive development.

Daily reading, singing, and storytelling are recognized as positive parenting practices which research shows have significant impacts on child development, as well as reducing toxic stress in children, a recognized adverse childhood experience. Children who are not read to at all, for example, have been shown to have their risk of developmental delays increase by over 50 percent. Nearly all of the book distribution programs identified by F5CA include an education and training component for participating families, emphasizing the benefits of reading books together and using them as a bonding activity. Reading together and engaging in active questioning about what is in the books provides an opportunity for socialization, bonding, and even fun. The Talk. Read. Sing.® campaign focuses on the importance of these activities and their myriad benefits. Access to books is the foundational element that enables families to engage in these important activities with their young children.

Recognizing the importance of getting books into households with small children, many programs, both private and public, have developed distribution strategies designed to increase the number of books children have in the home. Little By Little leverages

existing service provider networks (WIC) to distribute books and reading education information to families during the course of pre-existing service visits. The State Library and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library deliver books to families through the mail while also leveraging programs like WIC to serve as entry points into their programs. F5CA operates the Talk. Read. Sing.[®] campaign, which encourages families to engage in these activities, through advertising and local events, and distributes more than 175,000 books to new families through the *Kit for New Parents* annually. All of these efforts have an impact. According to the most recent California Health Interview Survey, 87 percent of parents recognize the Talk. Read. Sing.[®] messaging, and almost 90 percent of parents report reading to their children at least 3 times per week.

A frequent challenge for distribution programs is scalability. Unlike education campaigns that focus primarily on delivering information, such as Talk. Read. Sing.[®], book distribution programs must contend with the relatively high cost of purchasing and delivering books. There is currently little ongoing state funding available to support these programs, despite the significant evidence base demonstrating their criticality in child development and success.

Reading as a Protective Factor Amid COVID-19

While ensuring children have access to books is critical at any time, in the midst of a pandemic when schools and daycares are closed and stress among parents and children is heightened, it is more crucial than ever that children have access to books in their home, both from an early literacy and a caregiving perspective. As stated in the above mentioned article, *Ways to Promote Children's Resilience to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, "the primary factor in a child's recovery from an adverse or traumatic event is the presence of a sensitive and caring adult. To support healthy child development during COVID-19, children and youth need to maintain regular age-appropriate connections to important adults in their lives." Activities such as reading, where parents and caregivers spend one-on-one, quality time with children, will help protect children from the harmful effects of this, and any future, crisis.

Food Banks

A food bank is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization that solicits, stores, and distributes donated food. This food is then distributed to a variety of smaller partner agencies which directly serve people in need. Many food banks provide food to hundreds of member agencies in their community who would otherwise lack the means to obtain and store enough food to meet the needs of the people they serve.

Food banks in California are very diverse, ranging from smaller operations that serve just a few agencies spread across large rural areas to multi-acre facilities that store and distribute millions of pounds of food each year.

Due to COVID-19, the Administration and Legislature have provided an additional \$20M in state-funded food boxes to feed more than 900,000 families statewide in April and

May, and are available for pickup at any of the California Department of Social Services' contracted food bank partners.

California's Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) providers will receive additional federal funding to support operations, including an immediate \$12M in additional administrative support funding and \$36M in additional food support by July. Additional federal TEFAP funding is provided through the CARES Act and estimated to total around \$54M for California's food banks.

With significant reach across the state, these food banks provide an additional touch point for families, in particular for undocumented families who may not be able to receive other types of services.

SUMMARY OF PREVIOUS COMMISSION DISCUSSION AND ACTION

In January 2020 the Commission was presented with examples of programs and organizations providing books and early literacy supports to young families. Presentations were given on four models used in several counties in California: Little by Little, Dolly Parton Imagination Library, Raising a Reader, and Reach Out and Read. In April 2020, the Commission engaged in a discussion around potential F5CA investment in a statewide book distribution program consistent with F5CA's mission.

FISCAL ANALYSIS

One and a half million dollars in book cost will be funded through F5CA's current media contract with Fraser Communications. The remaining \$2.1 million in book costs, plus the \$1.9 million for administration of the program will be funded through the Education account. Utilizing the Education account is appropriate given the work outlined in this item. Additionally, Education is one of the most robust accounts in terms of its end-of-year balance for FY 2020–21, and would allow for flexible funding for other projects in outlying years and not jeopardize the accounts in the short or long-term.

ATTACHMENTS

A. First 5 California Book and Literacy Programs Survey Summary