California Family Voices

Families' experiences and ideas about public services

Context

Administrative data has vast potential for improving how social services are provided, to better support children and families. To ensure that administrative data is effectively used to tackle the greatest issues, a significant piece of the puzzle is missing: the families' own experiences and perspectives.

VIVA Social Impact Partners captured family stories and experiences as they access and navigate public services to understand the assets, barriers, and priorities in families' own words. VIVA focused our inquiry on families accessing/navigating services that link to predictive factors that correlate with school readiness and early academic success, including:

- Adequate prenatal care and healthy birth weight
- Health insurance access and utilization
- Nutrition
- Healthy development
- High quality early childhood education
- Optimal language development
- Social-emotional development
- Consistent parenting and positive discipline
- Family income

Methodology

To gather the families' perspectives, experiences and opinions on accessing and navigating services, VIVA Social Impact Partners facilitated six focus groups across three counties in California between March and July 2019. VIVA then followed up with a subset of the engaged family participants to capture their personal experiences through videotaped interviews.

In partnership with community benefit organizations, families in rural and urban settings were recruited for focus groups in Fresno, Los Angeles, and San Mateo counties. A total of 55 men and women-parents of children under the age of eight-participated in the focus groups.

In addition to recruiting families, community benefit organizations who partnered with VIVA Social Impact Partners hosted the focus groups. Focus groups were conducted in community rooms and lasted approximately 1.5 hours each. Focus group answers were recorded by note-taking and audio recording.

The focus group notes were transcribed and coded to categorize key themes and identify patterns, phrases, and quotes. Themes, phrases, and quotes were analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions and motivations. Focus group outcomes across communities were examined and compared to help pinpoint ideas or solutions that can have the greatest impact on children's educational outcomes.

Of the 55 parents, 8 parents participated in videotaped interviews. The 8 interviews were filmed with consent. Interviews were conducted in office spaces and lasted approximately 2 hours each.

Gathered interview video footage was clipped based on theme and topic. Semi-structured interviews usually produce results that cannot be generalized beyond the sample group, but they provide a more in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions, motivations, and emotions.

The goal across all inputs was to capture and understand families' experiences and stories about navigating and using public services.

Focus Group Findings

Fresno County

The first focus group conducted in Fresno County was conducted in the city of Fresno. The families present identified the following as public services they were utilizing or had utilized: Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); CalFresh; Medi-Cal; First 5; CalWorks; and subsidized child care.

The second focus group, conducted in the rural community of Huron, presented some overlap in the programs they are accessing or have accessed. The programs that were brought up in these focus groups: WIC, CalFresh, Medi-Cal, home visitation, and Head Start.

In both of these focus groups, WIC and Medi-Cal were brought up as the services that make the biggest difference for their recipients.

In both focus groups, participants shared positive experiences with the WIC program. The positive experiences highlighted great communication services: one participant missed an appointment and someone reached out to them; another participant mentioned that they appreciated being able to communicate with WIC via text. Additionally, participants shared that they appreciated the ease with which they could apply for WIC, as well as the ability to receive information and paperwork on Medi-Cal while there.

Participants were also asked to share some of their best experiences when accessing public services. When it came to WIC, participants were very thankful for the food and service they received there and for the ease of applying for this service.

While Medi-Cal was brought up as a service that made a significant difference for people, experiences accessing Medi-Cal ranged from positive to negative. One participant felt that applying for Medi-Cal was "a breeze" and appreciated that it is possible to apply both online and in the app. Another participant commented on the service they received from Medi-Cal providers: she was very thankful to have been admitted into a regional hospital when she went into labor.

Negative experiences shared when accessing Medi-Cal were related to how the participants were treated by the clinical staff and doctors when receiving medical services. The group agreed with the idea that doctors treat you poorly and differently when you have Medi-Cal versus private health insurance. There were strong emotions when describing the customer service they received. Words like "horrible" were used to describe the service and a participant even shared that the workers were incompetent.

Across Fresno County, communication and outreach were raised as areas that would help improve the experiences of people when they access public services. Communication, the focus groups felt, would allow for a more transparent process, while outreach would raise awareness of the services and resources available to those who need them. Additionally, there were suggestions regarding the accessibility of these services, such as basing income eligibility on income after taxes and better identifying families that need the services.

Los Angeles County

The first focus group conducted in Los Angeles County, was conducted with families in South Los Angeles. The families present identified the following as public services they were utilizing or had utilized: Head Start; Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Black Infant Healthcare; CalFresh; El Nido; CalWORKS; Para Los Niños; Parents as Teachers; Section 8; Medi-Cal; Housing Authority; Healthy Start; Great Beginnings for Black Babies; GAIN, and Welcome Baby.

The second focus group, conducted in the Antelope Valley, presented some overlap in the programs they are accessing or have accessed. The programs that were mentioned at this focus group were: WIC, CalFresh, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), CalWORKS, Section 8, hotel vouchers through CalFresh/CalWORKS, 211, ABA Therapy, health-insurance provided transportation, home visiting, Child Care Resource Center (CCRC), Medi-Cal, Valley Oasis, LA Rise, Antelope Valley Partners for Health, Project Joy, Housing First Transitional Housing, Mental Health America, GAIN, and Transitional Subsidized Employment.

Similar to the Fresno County focus groups, both of the Los Angeles County focus groups shared that WIC and Medi-Cal made the biggest difference for them. On top of these two services, both of the Los Angeles County focus groups also mentioned CalWORKS as a program that made a great impact for them personally.

Public housing services, like Section 8, as well as GAIN services were mentioned in both focus groups as being inaccessible to people. That was the only service that both groups mentioned, however, other services that came up as being inaccessible in one of the Los Angeles County focus groups were child care, CalFresh, and child support.

During the section allotted to discussing their best experiences accessing services, Welcome Baby was shared because of the customer service they provided to applicants as well as the services that were very useful, which included clothing and diapers as well as baby equipment and supplies.

Both groups expressed that some of their worst experiences with access were with child support, the application process was described as complicated with the customer service not being as helpful as applicants need it to be.

A common thread about redesigning the system was around communication. Participants agreed that improving internal and external communication, with a linked data system of sorts, could streamline case management, inform all caseworkers about individual case needs, and identify tailored training needs for staff to improve service delivery and communication with customers. Along the vein of income thresholds being too low, it was said that a redesign of the system would view cases on a case by case basis in order to better inform the eligibility decision.

San Mateo County

The first focus group conducted in San Mateo county was conducted in Daly City, a city in the northern part of the county. The attendees identified the following as public services they were utilizing or had utilized: Medi-Cal; Second Harvest Food Bank; Basic Funds, which provides assistance for school costs; CalFresh; WIC; Peninsula Family Service, subsidized child care specifically; public housing; and Tax Aid.

The second focus group was conducted in East Palo Alto, a city located in the southern part of San Mateo county. The participants of this focus group shared the following public services as ones they were either utilizing or had utilized before: Medi-Cal; WIC; MediCare; CalFresh; home visiting program; HeadStart; Child Development Center; Abilities United, a service for children with special needs; and community clinics provided by Lucile Packard/ Gardner Packard.

As with previous focus groups, WIC was raised as a service with which participants had positive experiences applying for and accessing. Additionally, WIC was highlighted as being one of the services that best helped attendees care for their families. Other services that were noted as being especially helping for caring for family were Medi-Cal and CalFresh.

When the discussion turned to services that families needed but could not access, the services mentioned in Daly City and East Palo Alto did not overlap, demonstrating the difference in incomes between the two communities. The Daly City focus group participants mentioned not qualifying for Medi-Cal, CalFresh, or for the free and reduced lunch program because of the income thresholds. In addition to these services, they mentioned that they wished they could access after school programs but could not due to the long waitlists or because the after school programs implemented a lottery system. The East Palo Alto participants raised a few different services as being inaccessible to them: they mentioned that many of them needed mental health and child care services but that there were no programs accessible to them and they simply could not afford the costs of those themselves.

Only the Daly City focus group shared when it came to discussing their best experiences applying for and accessing services. Peninsula Family Service was mentioned as one of the best experiences due to the fact that the workers were knowledgeable of other resources and that they were flexible to parents' needs and were understanding. The housing services were also shared as being one of their best experiences as the case worker through that service helped connect the recipient to additional services.

When sharing their worst experiences when applying for and accessing services, both of the focus groups brought up Medi-Cal and CalFresh. Both groups mentioned that the Medi-Cal application process required a lot of paperwork and that it was complicated.

Additionally, the East Palo Alto group shared the fact that the Spanish version of the application was very confusing and does not take into account that Spanish-speakers do not all speak the same Spanish and thus have difficulty understanding the language used. For CalFresh, both groups had difficulties with their income thresholds for eligibility as the program does not take into account the cost of rent—which is very high in San Mateo County—and bases its decision off of gross income.

Across both focus groups, there were some similarities regarding the desire to have service guidelines and access to services be based on living expenses of families in addition to gross income. Additionally, there was the desire to have more support and services in other areas that are not currently covered—such as child care, after school programming, and mental health services or counseling. One difference worth noting is that the Daly City focus group participants were not eligible for some of the services that East Palo Alto participants were, due to their gross income being higher.

Synthesis

Public Services Used

Across the three counties and six focus groups the following were raised as programs and services that families were accessing: Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); CalFresh; Medi-Cal; First 5; CalWorks; subsidized child care; home visitation; Head Start, Black Infant Healthcare; Section 8; Mental Health America; Welcome Baby; Great Beginners for Black Babies; Healthy Start; Para Los Niños; Parents as Teachers; El Nido; Housing Authority; Hotel Vouchers through CalFresh/ CalWORKS; ABA Therapy; GAIN; Valley Oasis; LA Rise; Project Joy; Housing First Transitional Housing; Peninsula Family Services; Tax Aid; Second Harvest Food Bank; and The BASIC Fund.

Best Experiences

Programs that several focus group attendees expressed having had positive experiences with are: Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and CalFresh. For the participants who were eligible for these programs, they were appreciative of the food that they either received or were able to purchase through these programs.

Additionally, WIC was a program that was mentioned at all but one focus group when discussing best experiences with services. The positive experiences often lay in either the food and formula they were able to receive or the customer service—people described feeling that the application process was simple and that the employees genuinely cared and were invested in helping the applicants.

Worst Experiences

Across the board, the worst experiences with public services were closely related to the lack of eligibility, difficulty in navigating the application process, and not receiving adequate customer support.

Medi-Cal was a service that came up in four of the focus groups when participants were discussing some of their worst experiences accessing resources. The issues folks voiced having with Medi-Cal range from the difficulties applying and being ineligible for the programs to customer service they experienced when receiving medical care from providers.

Services that Are Inaccessible

Food stamp programs or programs requiring documentation or proof of income were described as being inaccessible. For example, a handful of people described that they were not given food stamps because of a missing check or pay stub and another participant shared that when her husband got sick and could not work, they were ineligible for the services. Additionally, families feel that the income thresholds are too low, as they do not qualify for the services and programs and reliefs that they most need.

Housing support services came up in both of the Los Angeles focus groups as being a service that was inaccessible to people who sought it. The reasons brought up as to why they were unable to access the services included long waitlists, as well as the inability to transfer Section 8 vouchers to another area when applicants move. In addition to housing, child care was another service that participants mentioned needing but were unable to access due to waitlists being oversaturated and extremely long.

Redesign: What Would Help?

To tackle the issue of the income thresholds, participants raised the following ideas: increasing the income thresholds, basing income eligibility on income after taxes, and reviewing applications on a case-by-case basis.

Participants suggested that to improve the service that they received, there could be trainings specific to improving customer service. Additionally, it was suggested that there be training to develop the technological skills of service employees to streamline the application processes. Along this vein, focus group participants also suggested that the services could better utilize the internet and cell phones, like text messaging, to reach applicants and communicate efficiently and effectively.

In one of the more rural focus groups, it was brought up that it would be helpful to have a one-stop shop for social services. This sort of design would allow for people to maximize the number of resources they can get information on or apply to in one visit. A similar suggestion was that there be a universal application implemented by the various services to standardize the application process and to allow someone to apply for various services at once.

Dreams

When asked what their dreams were for their children, families responded in many different ways. Many spoke of wanting their children to go to college, get degrees, and have careers. Others mentioned stable housing, health, and income, many contrasting their current financial situations with their hope that their children would break the cycle and experience more stability and success. Finally, many of the answers focused not on their children's situations, but on who they were and would be. Families wanted their children to have confidence, feel supported, be good people, and follow their passions.

San Mateo groups both focused primarily on education and on being able to be stable and provide for themselves. LA focus groups both focused on breaking the poverty cycle and having the necessary support to attain their dream career. In Fresno, the focus groups were most varied, with responses covering the range previously discussed.

Fresno County - Fresno

- Eligibility
 - "Basically living paycheck to paycheck, you can't save for the future. Basically you are struggling and have to try to budget."
 - "Because you're going to request a service that they can treat you poorly. It does not make a difference if you're seeking a service. Some doctors treat you poorly because you have Medi-Cal."
 - "Doctors do differentiate based on what insurance you have, if it is Medi-Cal, if it is private, if it is Viva."
 - "The only way I'm able to afford fresh foods and vegetables is with WIC, that's it."
 - "I had to take a risk in order to go to work and go to school."
 - "We have to make it better, it can't be like this forever."
- How to Improve
 - "Some focus groups are biased. Fresno County says they're doing focus groups but they forget about the communities of color. How do they get the information of the services they need?"
 - "Families should not have to choose between gas and food for their kids."
 - "For families who don't have money, they go to the Welfare office. But families who are working don't go."
 - "We need to start by making sure that we allocate the services so they go to the people who actually need them."
 - "When you go to the offices, sometimes it seems like they're putting things up to stop you from getting the services."
 - People should never return documents and not get a receipt."
 - "Mindfulness, they don't think about the struggles people went through or people have mental disabilities they can't explain."
 - "You have to pay people more so they care. But you also need to have accountability from the corporations in your community.
 - "People shouldn't be struggling, people should have enough food for their families."
- Emotions Best Experience
 - Relief
 - Thankful
 - Blessed
 - Happy
 - Excited
- Emotions Worst Experience
 - Anxiety
 - Guilt

- Frustration
- Angry
- Like you're less of a person.
- We are people too.
- Dreams for Children
 - "I just want [my children] to grow up healthy and eat good foods and not have to eat microwave dinners - the things I had to eat growing up because we were poor but didn't qualify for food stamps."
 - "My kids to be in a position where they can give back."
 - Education and college
 - "Stop the cycle, poverty is a cycle...I want my kids to be a part of ending this cycle."
 - "When you're poor in these situations, it's so hard to prioritize health, but we also need healthcare and fresh foods"

Fresno County - Huron

- Best Experiences Emotions
 - Thankful
 - Joy
 - Happy
 - ° Glee
 - Our child was going to receive the help from a specialist that our child needed and at home
 - Relief
- Worst Experiences
 - Sometimes work ends at a company and the following week we need to find a job at a different company, so we don't have the paystubs they ask...it feels like the workers at services get angry at us because we can't give them exactly what they want."
 - "For us it is difficult to keep track of all of the variables in our lives like our employment because it is constantly changing - but they require it for the services. So our working situation changed, but we need to work to qualify for the services, but now my husband is only working three days a week."
 - "It's a lot of work to keep track of our work and all of the necessary documentation to continue to be eligible. I have to do all of these things in advance."
- How to Improve
 - Communication
 - Families following up with workers to keep track of their cases
- Dreams
 - "For my children to perform well academically and have a profession."
 - "For my children to not have to work like us, in the fields even when it is raining, for them to lead better lives than our own."

- "Firstly, I want them to be good children, and teach them that in this life there are good people. For my children to not have to have jobs working in the field."
- "I hope they are good people and study so that they have solid futures, so that they can work in and area of their choosing."

Los Angeles County - South Los Angeles

- Worst Experience
 - "Kind of felt like [the worker] thought I was trying to get more means than I was obligated to...I'm not trying to get ahead on your guys."
 - Shame and judgement when accessing services
 - "I felt like the worker thought I was trying to run game on her and get the money to do something else."
 - "You have to advocate for yourself."
 - "It's a barrier. You can get this but you can't get this. And there are no other programs they can refer you to get the services."
 - "As mothers, we are trying to do something productive and show our kids you can do it, you can be brave, you don't have to count on a person, teaching our daughters you don't have to rely on a man."
 - "You're fighting tooth and nail with these programs because [the program workers are] not helping."
- Feelings Positive Experience
 - Blessed
 - Powerful
 - Inspired
 - Relief
 - Ecstatic
 - Joy
 - Thankful
- Importance to Family
 - "I feel like learning about these resources, if you want your family to make it, you want the best for your family, you're going to take advantage of these resources and put up with the bad workers."
- What Would Help
 - "Friendlier workers who have sympathy."
 - "Accessibility to other programs for special circumstances."
 - "Everybody should be equal."
- Redesign
 - "Sit down and assess each person, see what it is they need. They assume everybody needs the same thing, but that is not the case."
- Hope
 - "I want to have hope that I'm not gonna be on these lists for ten more years."

- Dreams
 - "Stable house"
 - "Stability and consistency"
 - "To get my children out of this environment."
 - "I just want them to be successful and highly educated."
 - "Love and confidence, that career, that support for herself so she won't have to depend on a man even if she does have a husband."
 - "I want her to dream big, to have the world."
 - "I want my baby to have the world."
 - "Be successful, know that they can be anything that they want to be and know that they have a strong support system in me and I'm going to support them no matter what. Whatever they decide to be, I will be there."

Los Angeles County - Antelope Valley

- Worst Experience
 - "I've gotten kicked off because I've always had a job throughout, so if I didn't report something right on time, they would set appointments but it would also be during my work schedule, and I wouldn't be able to reschedule."
 - "It's like a constant battle with them, you're trying to get back on your feet, but they're over here docking you because of that. Now I have to go and complain and argue with my case manager to see if I can get transportation and child care back."
 - GAIN
 - "If you're working, the hours are similar, so if you have to drop off something they're closed by the time you get there."
 - "Uncomfortable and embarrassing, you know? Like I don't like letting people know about all of these programs I go to because I feel like it makes me look bad. Like I can't take care of my son by myself, I have to get help from other people. I don't like that, I don't want people knowing I am getting support from others, you know? It's embarrassing."
 - "People there, the workers there are rude, they're short. They don't care about your personal situation, they're just there to do their jobs."
 - "It feels like you're just a number. It's disrespectful, they make you feel like a little kid."
 - "You want me to be on the streets before you help me."
- Emotions (Negative Experience)
 - "You're just stuck...like what do I do, I'm just waiting around for someone to approve [my application]. So I think it is just like frustration, like I'm trying to take care of my child but I'm just waiting, for what?"
- Best Experience
 - "I just feel like there is nothing wrong with WIC."

- Emotions (Positive Experience)
 - "Relief, because they were there for me--which helped me out a lot. Because just to tell you this real quick, I had nothing for a baby, absolutely nothing, and so I had a few friends and neighbors and AVPH bring me everything I needed."
- Inaccessibility
 - "You can't work and claim a medical condition."
 - "I need to work, I have to support us."
 - "You get docked if they know you have other support or are a family system and are trying to work together to make it happen. I know people personally, who get less help because there is a father in the household. I think if they were to change it and make it more geared to keeping a family together you would see less single mothers."
 - "They all intertwine, you need all of them, that is why there should really be one place for you to go."
 - "[The programs give you] some level of comfort, that you're going to be okay. But it never gives you the full comfort because of how the system goes but it does bring you some comfort."
- Dreams
 - "For them to not need these resources."
 - "Be better than us, be a lot better than us, do better than us."
 - "Whatever dreams they have, they can pursue those because every child is born with their own purpose and passion and they're accepted and championed on, to go for it."
- Redesign
 - "Link them together so one worker knows what the other is doing, it all goes back to communication."
 - "Group support, where everybody can ask questions and anyone can answer questions. I know how hard it is for us with kids to get together, but if at least once a month or every quarter something for us families who are involved, so we can talk about this and vent. And get more information. I feel like I'm lost."

San Mateo County - Daly City

- Best Experience Application and Eligibility
 - WIC
 - "Pretty easy, and simple."
 - Child Care
 - "They are totally understanding of the situation you are in. So, my husband is in the army, and he had to leave and I didn't have anybody to take care of my kids. So, I had to find some affordable childcare. And it's tough. I mean, they would say, you know, you make too much and I'm like, I can't even eat anymore. But Peninsula Family Service did help me with my kids."
- Worst Experience Application and Eligibility
 - Medical

- "They ask for everything in your life, basically."
- "Hard to get ahold of a live-person. When you call them, you're on hold for an hour, just to get a hold of a live-person, and it makes you want to hang up."
- WIC
 - "Who can survive with the income you qualify for?"
 - "When you use the vouchers and go in line, of course it takes a longer process for the cashier to do that. So the people behind you, they get upset, impatient, you're a problem to the community."
- Inaccessible
 - "How can you survive making that? Here? That's impossible, maybe somewhere else."
 - "You have to make minimum wage to qualify for anything and you cannot claim anything because if you claim one person, you're out."
 - "It's not fair [to look at the federal level], that's why we need to have our own."
- Emotions Negative Experience
 - WIC
 - "When you go to some stores, it's not always available. You only have limited items, quantity, and brand and it is not always available in the stores."
 - "They have hundreds of stores you can get them from but some of the stores don't have all of them."
 - "When you use them and go in line, of course it takes a longer process for the cashier to do that. So the people behind you, they get upset, impatient, you're a problem to the community."
 - "Every month I don't use it all out of my fear of being judged. It's a big help, but it's not something I can use fully."
 - "It makes me a burden to everybody else in line, I go early in the morning or late at night, I don't go on the weekend because I know everybody does their grocery shopping on the weekend."
 - Medi-Cal
 - "Whenever I have to use it for consultation and stuff it takes a really long time. Or even if I call in, you're next appoint is just next month. They never have anything, I know if I had private it would be different."
 - "Sometimes I don't want to go to emergency because I don't want to spend more government money for something so simple. But sometimes you don't have an option because the next appointment is next month."
- What Would Help
 - "It's easier to go to the office, because you have to scan documents and you can't do it at home, don't have the proper technology."
 - "Instead of using vouchers, having a card like EBT so it is faster to process and you don't have to have the long lines. Like a debit card that has a cash value."
 - "Do a debit card because people don't have time every month [to go in for the monthly meetings to pick up the checks]."

- Dreams
 - "They're able to buy their house, because they have a good job and provide for the family they will have."
 - "Be good, decent, honest, helpful, kind."
 - "They don't have to struggle like we do. They can provide for their own family like we do."
- Redesign
 - "One shop with the whole menu. One website with all of the information that could fan out to the other resources."
 - "San Francisco County and San Mateo County are completely different, so if a system that could cross counties, that would be good."
 - "Case by case basis, people like families of 6 may be at that borderline and maybe give them other options. Like maybe they don't qualify for Medi-Cal but they qualify for another Medi-Cal where they pay a lower premium."

San Mateo County - East Palo Alto

- Worst Experience Application and Eligibility
 - "Ellos hacen una evaluación de lo que tu ganas pero realmente no evalúan apropiadamente porque no te preguntan cuánto pagas de renta. Ahorita las familias viven amontonadas para poder pagar la renta. Ellos deben ser conscientes de esto."
 - They look into how much you earn but they don't evaluate your income appropriately because they don't ask you how much you pay in rent. Right now families live bunched up in order to be able to pay the rent. They should be conscientious of that.
 - ^o "Depende de la persona que te toca, si no está de buen humor no calificas."
 - It depends on the person who assists you, if they're not in a good mood, then you will not qualify.
- Inaccessible
 - "Es difícil encontrar cuidado o guardería para niños con necesidades especiales porque no tienen el personal adecuado para trabajar con niños con necesidades especiales."
 - It is difficult to find childcare for children with special needs because they do not have the appropriate staff to work with children with special needs.
 - "Parece que le estás pidiendo a ellos."
 - It feels like you're asking them (the workers directly) for the services.
- Emotions Negative Experience
 - Anger
 - Impotence

- Dreams
 - "Con la ayuda de nuestro comunidad podemos hacer más."
 - With the support of our community we could accomplish more.
 - "Nuestros niños necesitan que los capacitan desde su infancia."
 - Our children need to be prepared since their childhood.
 - "Mi sueño que el camino a la universidad sea más fácil no solo para [mis hijos] si no para todos."
 - My dream is that the path to college be easier for not just my children but for everyone.