

First 5 San Joaquin

COVID-19

Newsletter



COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the early childhood system in San Joaquin County. For over a year, First 5 San Joaquin (F5SJ), contractors, and families with children ages 0-5 have been navigating the health, social, and economic effects of the pandemic.

This evaluation report documents the impact of COVID-19, F5SJ and F5SJ contractor's response to the changing needs of families, as well as opportunities for F5SJ to support response efforts in the years ahead.

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on families with children ages 0 to 5. Families have experienced the pandemic's health and human toll alongside its broader societal impacts, including:

- Limited socialization and access to community resources due to physical distancing and shelter-in-place guidelines
- Family involvement in distance learning as schools and childcare closed
- Job loss, income loss, and shifts to telecommuting
- Feelings of stress, fear, uncertainty, and trauma

First 5 San Joaquin (F5SJ) and F5SJ contractors acted quickly to support families during the pandemic. Programs adapted their existing programs and offered new services to better meet families' urgent needs. While contractors and families have adapted to these emerging challenges, the pandemic's impact will continue to influence F5SJ's program supports in the future.

This evaluation report documents COVID-19's impact on F5SJ, contractors, and families from 2020 through early 2021. It also presents opportunities for F5SJ to continue to respond to families' evolving needs in the years ahead. Key findings and recommendations from this evaluation include:

Key Findings	Future opportunities for F5SJ
<p>Families identified several urgent needs including basic household items and rental assistance as well as housing and homeless assistance. Both Families and F5SJ contractor staff experienced high levels of stress and trauma as a result of the pandemic.</p> <p>With F5SJ's support, contractors quickly pivoted to continue serving families. Adjustments included offering virtual services, shifting outreach strategies, and developing partnerships with organizations who could help meet families' needs.</p> <p>The pandemic is expected to have long-term impacts on children's development, physical health and mental health. In addition, services and funding will likely continue to be affected in the coming years.</p>	<p><i>Continue to serve as a convener and source of reliable, up-to-date information.</i> In addition to partnering with organizations who can respond to families' new and exacerbated needs, F5SJ should continue to be a source of information about available community resources, PPE, and the COVID-19 vaccine.</p> <p><i>Continue to provide training to scale up best practices and support culturally responsive program adaptations.</i> This could include training on virtual service platforms, trauma informed care, and strategies to reach communities most impacted by COVID-19.</p> <p><i>Consider the new and emerging effects of the pandemic when developing the next strategic plan.</i> F5SJ's upcoming strategic planning process will benefit from being responsive to newly identified needs as well as the anticipated long-term effects of the pandemic. The strategic plan should also be flexible as the pandemic continues to evolve.</p>

Background

For over 20 years, First 5 San Joaquin (F5SJ) has had a long-standing commitment to supporting the health and well-being of families with children ages 0 to 5 in San Joaquin County. Since March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the needs, resources, and priorities of these families and the agencies that serve them. In the year since the pandemic began, over 68,000 San Joaquin County residents have contracted COVID-19, and over 1,200 have died.¹ Countless other families in the county have experienced challenges related to school and childcare closures, income loss, and the pandemic's social and emotional stressors. In response, F5SJ and F5SJ contractors rapidly changed their services to meet families' urgent needs while abiding by new public health and safety guidelines. Contractors and families have adapted to these emerging challenges; however, the pandemic's impact will continue to influence F5SJ's program supports and priorities for the foreseeable future.

This evaluation report documents the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on F5SJ, F5SJ contractors, and families during 2020 and early 2021. The report also describes the ways contractors and F5SJ responded to these changing circumstances, as well as the pandemic's anticipated long-term impacts for San Joaquin County families with young children. Finally, the report highlights future opportunities and priorities for ongoing response to the pandemic. Findings are informed by surveys of contractors and parents/caregivers, interviews with F5SJ staff, and additional program and evaluation materials. For a full description of evaluation methods, please refer to the technical appendix.

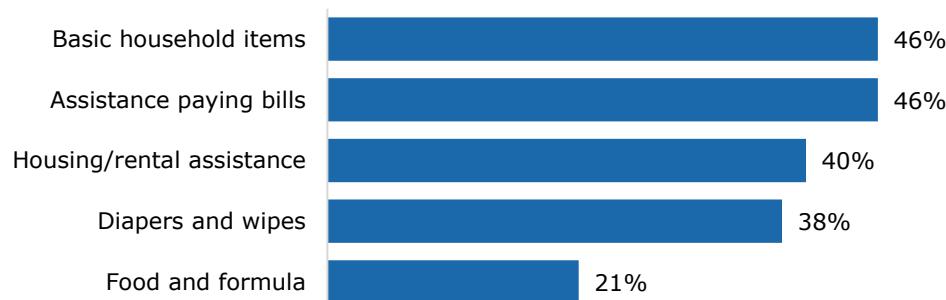
The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the health and well-being of families, contractors, and F5SJ staff

Like all families in California, families in San Joaquin County experienced the economic, social, and emotional impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following state and county stay-at-home orders issued in March 2020, schools and businesses in San Joaquin County closed to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the community. F5SJ immediately communicated to contractors to seize any in person home visits to comply with county guidance. Contractors also followed guidance from their individual agencies regarding remote working procedures.

Due to program closures and service interruptions across the county, many families faced new challenges accessing—and affording—basic needs. According to a January 2021 survey of parents/caregivers participating in F5SJ's home visiting programs (n=140), 47 percent were concerned about the overall impact of COVID-19 on their families. Their most urgent needs included access to basic household items (46 percent), assistance paying bills (46 percent), housing/rental assistance (40 percent), and diapers and wipes (38 percent) (see Exhibit 1). One parent underscored the pandemic's financial impact, sharing that "the greatest challenge is that work is so slow." These sentiments reflect statewide trends; in California, 61 percent of adults in households with children lost employment income between March and December 2020, and 25 percent had little to no confidence in their ability to pay their next rent or mortgage payment on time.²

¹ San Joaquin County COVID-19 Dashboard as of March 25, 2021. Accessed [here](#).

² Population Reference Bureau analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau Household Pulse Survey. January 2021. Accessed [here](#).

Exhibit 1. Basic needs—including housing, diapers, and food—were most urgent (n=116)

In addition to these material impacts, the COVID-19 pandemic took an emotional toll on families. In particular, many parents/caregivers expressed being very concerned not only about the potential risks of COVID-19 infection for themselves and their families (29 percent), but about the challenges of explaining physical distancing restrictions to their children (31 percent) or knowing how to handle their children's stress (25 percent) (see Exhibit 2). They also described the difficulty of making these complex decisions in the face of multiple uncertainties. One parent said "I have a five-year-old. She's in kindergarten. She wants to go back to school. It affected her. I still work [but] at the same time, I can't really go to work because sometimes I can't find a babysitter and I don't want to put her in a childcare facility."

Exhibit 2. Parents were most concerned about COVID-19's impact on the health and well-being of their children and families

29% expressed fear of COVID-19 infection



25% expressed uncertainty of what to do about child stress



20% expressed concern about explaining restrictions to children

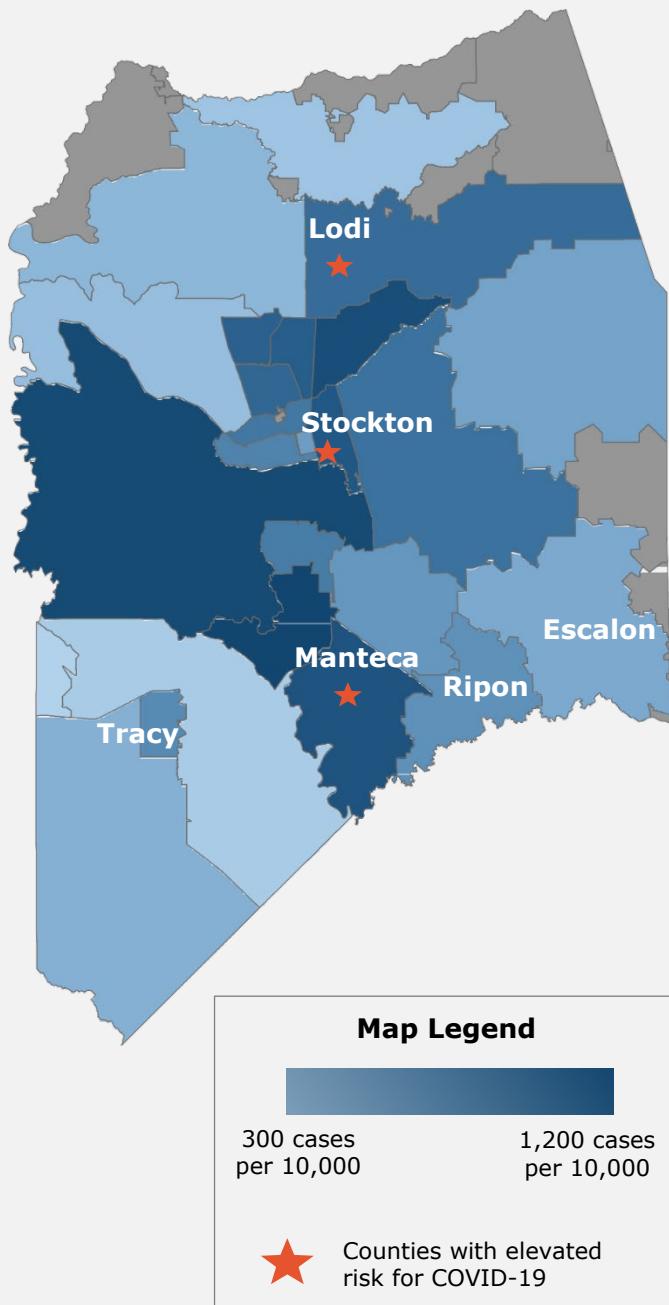
F5SJ staff and contractors also described feelings of stress and grief in light of the pandemic. As one F5SJ staff member stated, "I don't think we can minimize [the number of people] that died that should have never died." One contractor shared that agency staff were as impacted by the pandemic as the families they serve: "There was a lot of fear out there not only among our clients and the community, but among our staff as well. [The staff] have real things that are happening in their families. Some [staff's] families have had to deal with COVID and have had to deal with illnesses, and had to deal with people close to them being sick and dying. We are sometimes in the same situation as our parents are."

Key facts about COVID-19 in San Joaquin County

San Joaquin County recorded its first case of COVID-19 infection on March 10, 2020. Key facts about the COVID-19 pandemic in San Joaquin County in the year since this first case illustrate the magnitude—and disparities within—this public health crisis:

- As of March 25, 2021, San Joaquin County recorded 69,295 cases and 1,244 deaths among county residents.³ Case rates in the county were highest among Hispanic/Latinx, Black, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander residents. Death rates were highest among Black residents.⁴
- The case rate per 10,000 residents is slightly lower in San Joaquin County than in California as a whole (909.2 vs. 924.6). However, San Joaquin County's death rate per 10,000 is higher than the state's (16.3 vs. 14.8).⁵
- According to the City Health Dashboard, Stockton, Lodi, and Manteca are at elevated risk for COVID-19 impact based on the demographics, health conditions, and social vulnerability of their residents.⁶ Exhibit 3 displays the distribution of cases across the county by zip code. Counties with elevated risk factors are indicated with a red star.
- Black, Indigenous, and other people of color are disproportionately represented among essential workers in California, and experienced the most significant job losses during the pandemic.^{7,8} These communities of color make up over 80 percent of families served by First 5 San Joaquin.

Exhibit 3. COVID-19 case rate per 10,000 residents by San Joaquin County zip codes³



While some F5SJ contractors paused service delivery, others pivoted to a virtual model

Nearly one in three F5SJ contractors (29 percent) reported pausing or cancelling services while they adjusted to the new guidelines. For example:

- In person preschool programs were suspended due to school closures throughout the county. However, children were still able to participate virtually in preschool.
- The kindergarten bridge program was cancelled in 2020.
- Registration for Read to Me, Stockton!'s free book program was paused due to funding uncertainty.
- Due to dental clinic closures, care coordinators for San Joaquin Treatment for Everyone on Teeth + Health (SJ TEETH) temporarily stopped scheduling dental appointments for families and shifted to focus on virtual oral health education services.
- Other public benefits programs used by F5SJ families, including CalWORKs, paused or changed their participation requirements.

Other contractors began to provide services virtually—including telehealth appointments, virtual home visits, and virtual case management—at the onset of the pandemic. They also implemented a no-contact “door dash” model that allowed them to safely distribute materials to families. F5SJ supported the shifts in service delivery by providing agencies with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for these visits. As one parent/caregiver said, “the program [has] been a really good help. Even though it was a pandemic, [my parent educator] would come over maybe twice a week [to] give me activities. She has been very helpful.” One contractor shared how these early adaptations allowed them to maintain continuity for the families they serve: “[We] were able to transition to virtual telehealth services within a week. This facilitated continuity of care for all parents seeking our services. The need [for our services] increased by 35 percent.”

In addition, contractors increased their communication—including text messages and phone calls—to be more responsive to parents. As one home visitor shared, “We are hearing a lot more from [parents] via text, and it’s even in-between the times that we’re set to have an appointment, or even after the appointment.” Parents also described this weekly—and sometimes daily—communication, noting that this approach strengthened their sense of connection to and support from service providers.

The majority of contractors reported both their staff (88 percent) and parents (82 percent) were satisfied with the changes they had to make to their service delivery model. While many parents wanted to return to in-person, they understood the need to meet virtually and expressed gratitude that agencies continued to offer services during these challenging times. Similarly, some contractors were eager to return to in-person services where and when possible. As one F5SJ staff member shared, “I think a lot of our agencies, if they had the chance, would still probably be visiting the families and doing more outreach in the community because that’s their passion.”

F5SJ contractors expanded services to support families' urgent needs

In addition to adapting existing services, 42 percent of F5SJ contractors added services to help meet families' immediate needs. These services included: rental/bill pay support, food pantries, distribution of household basics and PPE, and

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- F5SJ program participant

informational resources about COVID-19 (see Exhibit 4). In May 2020, F5SJ also dedicated \$133,000 to help contractors meet these needs. These funds were used to purchase and distribute PPE and cleaning equipment. Funds were also used to support the distribution of educational materials for children and families at COVID-19 testing sites. F5CA also funded different sets of supplies including diapers, books, as well as additional PPE and cleaning supplies.

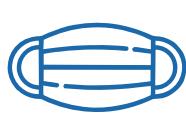
Exhibit 4. Contractors expanded services to support families' urgent needs



Rental and bill paying support



Access to food pantries



Distribution of household basics and PPE



Information and resources about COVID-19

F5SJ supported contractors to make organizational changes in response to the pandemic

The shift to virtual services required enormous effort on the part of contractors. The majority updated their organization's personnel policies (88 percent) and invested in telecommuting software and equipment (59 percent) in the first few months of the pandemic. As one F5SJ staff member shared, "By moving to this virtual format, there was a learning curve for everybody that created some anxiety for agencies and staff."

The beginning of the pandemic also brought financial uncertainty and staffing changes for contractors. In April of 2020, 35 percent of contractors reported applying for additional state or federal funding, and 29 percent applied for emergency loan assistance. In February 2021, 12 percent of contractors reported they had laid off or furloughed staff, however 41 percent reported hiring new staff to meet the increased needs of parents in the community.

F5SJ offered training and technical assistance to support these organizational changes. These supports included:

- A COVID-19 resource guide for families and contractors that included safety guidelines, emergency resources, and educational tools
- Frequent communication with contractors about county public health orders, contract adjustments, and funding availability
- One-on-one support for contractors to support service adaptation or problem solve real time issues
- Connections to professional development opportunities to help ensure agencies could continue to use available funding during the pandemic

One hundred percent of contractors who responded to the January 2021 survey reported satisfaction with the support received from F5SJ during the pandemic. As one contractor shared, "With the temperature changing every hour and the future still so uncertain, I appreciate that [F5SJ staff] are always at the other end of the call, text, and/or email."

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- F5SJ contractor

Some aspects of virtual service delivery remain a challenge

The majority of contractors (81 percent) reported ongoing challenges with client interest in and ability to participate in virtual services. These challenges included:

- Technology barriers for both parents and contractors
- Difficulty engaging children
- Complications balancing services with school-based distance learning
- Challenges identifying health, social/emotional, and developmental needs

In addition, contractors described difficulty enrolling new clients during the pandemic due to restrictions on in-person outreach. As one contractor described, "When we call [families], they are somewhat in crisis. They're saying, 'Well, can you help me get a home, get a place to stay, or can you help me with food?' Those are opportunities to get a foot in the door, and we try to hook that, and try to work with that, to help build our caseload."

Changes spurred by the pandemic also created unexpected opportunities

Despite the pandemic's many challenges, contractors identified some bright spots brought about by reassessing "business as usual" ways to serve families. This included:

- **F5SJ and contractors strengthened relationships.** While physical distancing guidelines limited both formal and informal networking opportunities, F5SJ and F5SJ contractors used this time to strengthen existing relationships and establish new relationships in response to increased needs in the community. These included partnerships with mental health providers, housing resources agencies, food banks, and faith-based organizations.
- **In some cases, virtual formats increased parent's access to services.** While not accessible to everyone, virtual platforms decreased travel and time constraints for some families, and increased their ability to participate. Some agencies noted they may continue to engage with families virtually beyond the pandemic to retain and facilitate engagement.
- **Virtual meetings were more accessible to contractors and F5SJ staff.** Both F5SJ and F5SJ contractors noted there were more opportunities to attend virtual meetings and trainings. This included Commission meetings, Planning Committee meetings, and trainings outside of the county. This has allowed contractors to increase their connections to other organizations and engage in additional professional development.

F5SJ staff and contractors anticipate long-term impacts for families as a result of the pandemic

Parents, contractors, and F5SJ staff described the potential long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families with children ages 0 to 5. Key anticipated impacts are described in Exhibit 5.

Exhibit 5. The pandemic is likely to have long-term effects on families with children ages 0 to 5

Concerns about children's physical, social, and emotional development.

Staff, contractors, and families shared that COVID-19 has resulted in reduced opportunities for social interaction and heightened screen time for young children.

"[Young children are] supposed to be learning social cues and making friendships. For them not to be able to have that, I wonder how that's going to negatively impact my daughter in the future.
– F5SJ parent

Continued economic instability. F5SJ staff and contractors shared that families are feeling pressure from "every angle" and experiencing significant economic stress. San Joaquin County's housing crisis has worsened, and more families cannot afford rent. Simultaneously, the eviction moratorium, while protecting many vulnerable families, has exacerbated the already limited supply of housing for unhoused families.

"The families that are struggling with poverty are also those same families that are struggling with the education. They're also the same families that are struggling with [housing]...So they're being hit from every angle." – F5SJ staff

Challenges related to school-based distance learning.

F5SJ staff and contractors expressed concerns about equitable access to the tools (including internet and laptops) for a high quality school education. One F5SJ staff member also voiced concern over the roles parents/caregivers are expected to fill in the distance learning environment, when not all are equipped to fill this gap due to work schedules, competing family priorities, and systemic inequities that limited their own educational attainment.

Lasting mental health effects. From job loss, increased economic insecurity, and the experience of losing loved ones, families have experienced immense trauma. F5SJ staff anticipate that the traumatic experiences of the last year will have enduring impacts on children and families.

"We can't ignore that parents and families have experienced [trauma and] losses, along with the overwhelmingness of being at home. Recently, in a wellness check one parent said, 'I'm just barely holding on.' We immediately needed to make a referral for this parent to a behavioral health provider. We need to make sure all agencies have a mental health component [moving forward]."
– F5SJ contractor

The pandemic deepened existing disparities in health, economic stability, and educational opportunity.

F5SJ staff and contractors emphasized the disparate impacts of the pandemic on communities across the county. They shared that pre-existing disparities in health, wealth, and educational attainment have been both illuminated and exacerbated in the last year.

"My two daughters are in school and it's a little bit of a challenge. My daughter is in first grade and she's barely learning the letters, the words. Sometimes she gets impatient, and she struggles a little bit more. I try to help them when I can, but I have a one-year-old and he's just everywhere."
– F5SJ parent

Health impacts of interrupted preventive care.

The immediate impacts of the pandemic took precedence over preventive health care for many families. Some families preferred not to seek care due to the associated COVID-19 infection risk. For families with children with developmental delays, the gap in assessment and timely intervention may impact their child's overall development.

"[Due to COVID], there's a lot of fear out there about doing anything health related because [families] don't want further exposure." – F5SJ staff

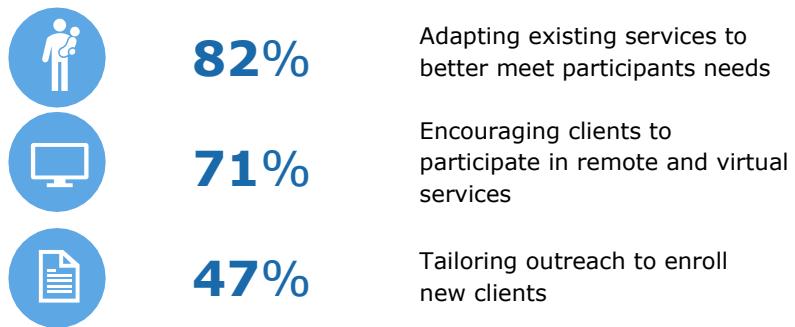
"I'm really concerned about the education piece in the long term and how the disparities may play out in light of COVID."
– F5SJ staff

F5SJ will play a crucial role in supporting contractors in the future

COVID-19 will continue to influence how programs conduct outreach, deliver services, and work remotely. F5SJ staff and contractors identified the need to remain responsive to community needs as the circumstances of the pandemic evolve. F5SJ is embarking on a strategic planning process to determine the agency's long-term direction and goals. One F5SJ staff member noted that the agency will need to be adaptive in its overall approach to long-term planning. She said, "I think having a strategic plan that will be very fluid, that we would be able to somehow adjust accordingly [will be most effective]." F5SJ staff also identified the need to remain flexible to changes in federal, state, and local funding availability and priorities.

Future priorities identified by F5SJ contractors reflect an overall sentiment of flexibility and sensitivity to client needs. Contractors' priorities included continuing to adapt services to better meet client needs (83 percent), encouraging clients to participate in remote services (71 percent), and tailoring outreach strategies to enroll new clients (47 percent) (see Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6. F5SJ contractors identified their top priorities for ongoing pandemic response



F5SJ is coordinating with community partners to support vaccine distribution

F5SJ has made it a priority to advocate for and support COVID-19 vaccination for community members across San Joaquin County. As one F5SJ staff member shared, "Once we knew that childcare providers were going to be on the approved list, we wanted to start [a vaccine clinic] specifically geared to childcare providers." In March 2021, F5SJ partnered with the City of Tracy, Tracy's West Valley Mall, Safeway, the San Joaquin County Office of Emergency Services, and San Joaquin Public Health Services to host two vaccination clinics in Tracy, which, at the time, had a limited number of vaccine clinics. The clinics were available to childcare providers and any other eligible individuals. F5SJ supported an additional vaccine clinic in conjunction with San Joaquin County Human Services Agency (HSA). This clinic focused on reaching newly eligible HSA staff. In total, these clinics vaccinated over 650 people.

Opportunities for F5SJ to continue supporting children and families during the pandemic and beyond

F5SJ contractors and staff highlighted the strengths of the response to COVID-19 thus far. Additionally, all contractors—as well as F5SJ—garnered many lessons learned in their efforts to support families and young children facing unprecedented challenges during the last year. As the pandemic continues to progress, opportunities for F5SJ to respond to both immediate and long-term needs include:

- **Continue to serve as a convener and source of reliable, up-to-date information.** F5SJ’s efforts to mobilize the collective efforts of its contractors and other partner organizations to meet the needs of families resulted in a coordinated and informed pandemic response. F5SJ should continue to serve as a connector to respond to the pandemic. In particular, they should partner with organizations who can respond to families’ behavioral health and mental health needs, organizations serving those who have been most impacted, as well as agencies that can share knowledge and experiences in providing trauma-informed care.
- **Continue to support vaccine roll-out.** F5SJ’s efforts to support vaccine campaigns and clinics have positively impacted hundreds across the county. The agency’s unique ability to connect health systems, front-line workers, and highly impacted communities underscore their importance in vaccination efforts. F5SJ should continue to work with contractors to promote and distribute informative outreach campaigns in communities with heightened hesitancy towards the vaccine, as well as communities of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color who have been most affected by COVID-19. Supporting trusted messengers to reach community members, such as leaders from contractors or other community organizations, is one way F5SJ can ensure that families receive reliable information to make informed decisions.
- **Provide training to scale up emerging best practices.** Continuing to adapt to the pandemic may require additional training and capacity-building, particularly to disseminate emerging best practices and lessons learned. This could include training on virtual service platforms, hybrid service delivery models, trauma informed care and strategies to support communities most impacted by COVID-19.
- **Support culturally responsive programmatic adaptations.** To date, contractors have expressed satisfaction and gratitude with F5SJ’s resources for navigating the pandemic. Given contractors’ desire to continually tailor services and outreach efforts in response to families’ diverse cultural needs, F5SJ should continue to work with them to support these efforts. This could include activities that respond to linguistic preferences, experiences of trauma during the pandemic, and mistrust of medical and social service providers due to historical exploitation.
- **Consider the new and emerging effects of the pandemic when developing the next strategic plan.** F5SJ’s upcoming strategic planning process will benefit from being flexible and responsive to the community’s changing needs. Identifying core focus areas for the work ahead, while leaving space to adapt to the evolving pandemic, will facilitate the development of targeted strategies that address the most pressing needs of children and families in the years to come. Given the momentous events of the last year, engaging the community will be an important step in the development of F5SJ’s strategic plan. Hearing directly from contractors and families will help F5SJ ground its vision for the future within the community’s priorities.

Technical appendix

This evaluation report includes data from the following sources:

- **Contractor survey (Time 1, n=33 and Time 2 n=22).** In early April 2020, F5SJ contractors were invited to complete a brief online survey about the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey asked contractors about changes to their staffing, programs, funding, and needs as a result of the pandemic. In February 2021, contractors were invited to complete a follow-up online survey about adaptations to their programs, services, and agencies. In addition, contractors identified ongoing challenges, satisfaction with the support provided by F5SJ, and their priorities for the coming year.
- **Learning conversation with contractors (n=12).** To help make sense of results from the February 2021 contractor survey, F5SJ contractors were invited to participate in a virtual learning conversation. The learning conversation was held in February 2021 included a review of survey findings and opportunities for contractors to respond to, interpret, and add context to these findings.
- **Parent/caregiver survey (n=141).** As part of F5SJ's Home Visiting Strategic Plan developed for First 5 California, consultant Melanie Estarzaiu conducted a survey of 140 parents/caregivers receiving home visiting services through F5SJ contractors in January 2021. In addition to assessing parent/caregiver experiences with home visiting services, the survey also asked about several aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact, including: changes in home visiting needs, major areas of concern and needs, and supports received from home visitors during the pandemic. Surveys were conducted online and were available in both English and Spanish.
- **Interviews with F5SJ staff (n=4 interviews with 6 staff).** Interviews were conducted with F5SJ staff in January 2021. They explored the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on families and programs, key service adaptations, potential long-term impacts of the pandemic, and F5SJ's priorities for the coming year.
- **Additional program and evaluation materials.** This report also drew on other program materials and evaluation reports that documented the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on F5SJ, F5SJ contractors, and San Joaquin County families. These materials included: the SJ TEETH evaluation report (December 2020); special needs evaluation newsletter (March 2021); FamilyWORKS evaluation briefs (April 2021); and F5SJ materials, including Executive Director reports (March 2020 to March 2021).