From Policy to Practice:
Assigning Unique Identifiers in Community-Based Prevention Services

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This brief provides practical guidance on methodologies to assign and track unique identifiers for children receiving prevention services through the community pathway. This model provides voluntary, community-based prevention services outside formal child welfare system involvement while ensuring data integrity, privacy, and compliance with federal reporting requirements for the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). We encourage readers to share their own agencies' or organizations' strategies and lessons learned as part of a growing field of practice.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) requires Title IV-E agencies to collect and report child-level data to track the use and effectiveness of providing prevention services to families. A key requirement under FFPSA is the child identifier. However, children sometimes receive prevention services through the community pathway, outside the IV-E system. In these instances, it is technically challenging to create a unique identifier that both community providers and the IV-E agency can maintain. Drawing on lessons from the Connecticut Department of Children and Families and the Indiana Department of Child Services, this brief provides guidance for state child welfare agencies, policymakers, and community-based organizations (CBOs) on assigning and tracking unique identifiers for children who receive prevention services through community-based organizations. This brief also offers suggestions on balancing privacy concerns with the FFPSA's federal reporting requirements. Connecticut and Indiana are receiving federal reimbursement for claims submitted through their community pathways, demonstrating compliance with FFPSA's Title IV-E requirements. By examining these state models, policymakers can identify adaptable approaches that align with their jurisdiction's needs while safeguarding family privacy.

BACKGROUND

Community-based prevention keeps families safely together through trusted services and accountable data.

The Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), enacted in February 2018, marked a transformative shift in child welfare policy in the United States. By prioritizing preventing foster care placements, the FFPSA aims to keep children safely with their families while providing federal Title IV-E funds for evidence-based prevention services. This approach diverges from traditional models of family separation and foster care placement, focusing instead on providing critical services designed to improve outcomes on key domains like child safety, child permanency, child well-being, and adult well-being.

Under the FFPSA, Title IV-E agencies are reimbursed for delivering eligible prevention services, including mental health care, substance abuse treatment, and in-home parenting support.1 The legislation encourages states to implement these services to create safer and more stable environments for children, aiming to intervene before issues escalate and foster care becomes necessary (Children's Defense Fund, 2021). This proactive stance underscores the importance of keeping families intact and providing them with the resources they need to thrive.

Community pathways play a critical role in expanding access to prevention services without direct involvement from child protective services. These pathways leverage the strengths of CBOs, prevention service providers, and public agencies that offer families access to services without requiring formal involvement with the child welfare system. They also offer culturally relevant services that may be more accessible and trusted by families. These pathways facilitate a fundamentally different experience for families by minimizing their contact with child welfare agencies, thereby fostering trust and engagement.

Community pathways offer several advantages:

- **Cultural relevance**: Services are provided by local organizations that understand and address the unique cultural and social dynamics of their communities.
- **Building trust**: Families are more likely to engage with services offered by trusted community organizations rather than child welfare agencies.
- **Prevention focus**: Early intervention and support services help prevent situations from escalating to the point where child welfare system intervention is required.
- **Reduced trauma:** Families avoid the trauma associated with unnecessary investigations and involvement with the child welfare system

[1] In most jurisdictions, the Title IV-E agency is the state. However, federally recognized Tribes and certain U.S. territories may also be designated Title IV-E agencies. In state-supervised, county-administered systems (for example, California), counties implement prevention services locally, but the state submits claims and receives reimbursement.

At least 24 jurisdictions have incorporated community pathways into their Family First Prevention Plans, reflecting a growing recognition of the importance of alternative approaches in achieving the goals of the FFPSA (Chapin Hall, 2024). A critical component of effectively implementing community pathways is assigning and tracking unique identifiers for families receiving prevention services. This is especially challenging when families do not have current or prior involvement with the child welfare system, which would otherwise open a case and automatically assign a unique identifier in the Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS) or Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS). Unique identifiers within community pathways are essential for several reasons:

- **Compliance with federal requirements**: The FFPSA requires states to systematically track and report fidelity and outcomes data for prevention services, ensuring that federal funds support measurable, accountable programs. Central to this process is the use of unique identifiers, which enable states to evaluate outcomes for families participating in community pathways and to determine whether they subsequently enter foster care. This continuity supports FFPSA's objective to assess how prevention services contribute to family stability and child well-being. Federal guidance specifies that each family receiving Title IV-E prevention services must be assigned a unique identifier, which remains with them across all service contexts. If an Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) number already exists, it is used; otherwise, a new identifier is created, allowing for data tracking if the family later interacts with the child welfare system. This structure enables states to maintain a record of each child's service history, aligning with federal reporting standards while supporting longitudinal evaluation (Children's Bureau, 2021). The required data elements are: child date of birth, race, ethnicity, gender, service type, service start and end dates, and foster care entry status at 12 and 24 months." For a detailed list of Title IV-E Prevention Program data elements required for federal reporting, see the appendix.
- **Data integrity**: Unique identifiers ensure that data collected across different services, agencies, and time periods can be accurately linked and tracked. This helps maintain the integrity of the information and creates a reliable record of a child's service history, allowing longitudinal analyses of outcomes (Children's Bureau, 2023).
- **Privacy protection**: By using alphanumeric codes instead of personal identifying information, unique identifiers allow states to submit Title IV-E claims for service engagement while protecting the privacy of families (Children's Bureau, 2023).
- **Service coordination**: Unique identifiers enable coordination between various service providers, ensuring that families receive comprehensive support tailored to their needs.

This policy brief aims to equip state Title IV-E agencies, policymakers, and CBOs with the necessary knowledge and strategies to implement effective systems for assigning and tracking unique identifiers for families receiving community-based prevention services. By ensuring compliance with federal reporting requirements, maintaining data integrity, and protecting family privacy, these systems will support the overarching goals of the FFPSA, ultimately fostering safer and more stable environments for children and families.

THE CHALLENGE

Implementing unique identifiers within community pathways under the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) presents significant governance, technical, and operational challenges. Title IV-E agencies must comply with federal reporting requirements that necessitate collecting child-specific data, including demographic characteristics, service engagement details, and longitudinal outcomes. However, the community pathway model operates outside the traditional child welfare infrastructure, limiting state oversight to protect family privacy and encourage voluntary engagement. This demands an approach that reconciles federal accountability mandates with the decentralized nature of community-based prevention services, where data collection processes vary widely across providers.

Connecticut and Indiana have developed different approaches to managing these challenges. Connecticut uses MultiVue, a master data management solution that matches records across systems while minimizing the exposure of personal identifiers. Indiana employs a bridge table model that facilitates linking identifiers between community-based service providers and the state's child welfare database, ensuring that service histories remain intact without requiring direct integration. These approaches, discussed in the next section, highlight strategies for mitigating the structural and technical barriers associated with unique identifier implementation in community pathways.

UNIQUE IDENTIFIERS IN ACTION: LESSONS FROM CONNECTICUT AND INDIANA

The following sections describe how Connecticut's Department of Children and Families and Indiana's Department of Child Services have operationalized systems to assign and track unique identifiers for families receiving services through their community pathways. Each section includes a glossary of terms, a community pathway definition, an overview of their approach, a step-by-step breakdown of their processes for assigning identifiers, the specific challenges they've encountered, the solutions they've implemented, and the outcomes they've experienced. Together, these descriptions highlight different methods for ensuring compliance with federal requirements, maintaining data integrity, and protecting family privacy. They offer key insights that can inform other states in building their own community pathways.

Emerging Approach: The Use of Hashing Algorithms

In addition to the state models explored below, another approach has been recommended by Public Consulting Group (PCG) that involves the use of hashing algorithms to generate anonymous identifiers. This method allows prevention programs and Title IV-E agencies to match records without exchanging personally identifiable information (PII). The process creates a hash value from input data (for example, name and date of birth), enabling agencies to assign AFCARS IDs while limiting the exposure of sensitive information.

Although promising, this approach requires system modifications and data standardization agreements between partners to ensure hash values are consistently generated. It also raises important questions about trade-offs related to data security and system complexity. To date, no state is known to have fully implemented this model, but it remains an emerging option under consideration.

To learn more about this approach, contact PCG.

Connecticut Department of Children and Families

Overview

Connecticut has developed an approach that integrates data from community-based service providers with the state's child welfare system, allowing for coordinated and efficient service delivery and ensuring compliance with federal requirements. By using the PIE and MultiVue, Connecticut ensures that all relevant information is consistently tracked and easily accessible, enhancing the state's ability to support families in a timely manner. This approach offers a model for how states can effectively manage complex data across multiple platforms, bridging the gap between local services and broader data management needs.

Glossary of Terms

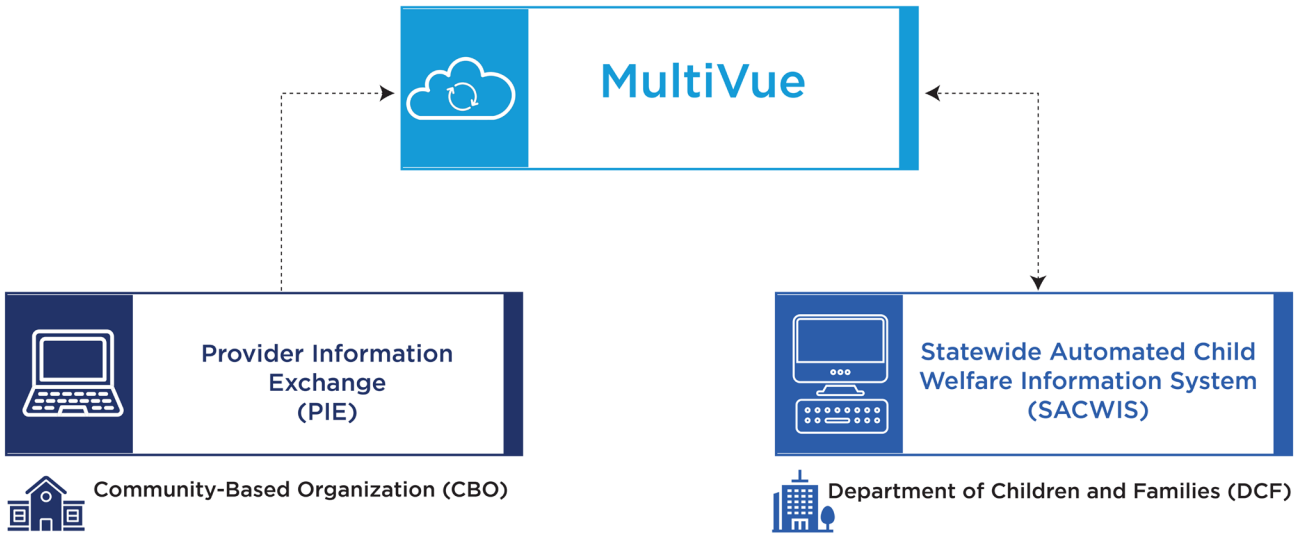
CCWIS (Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System): Connecticut is transitioning from SACWIS to CCWIS, known locally as CTKIND

LINK: Connecticut's SACWIS (Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System)

MultiVue: A master data Management cloud software for matching and merging data across systems

PIE (Provider Information Exchange): A community portal used for managing and tracking prevention services provided by community agencies

Figure 1. The Connecticut Department of Children and Families' System Architecture for Assigning and Tracking Unique Identifiers Across Community and State Systems



Community Pathway Definition

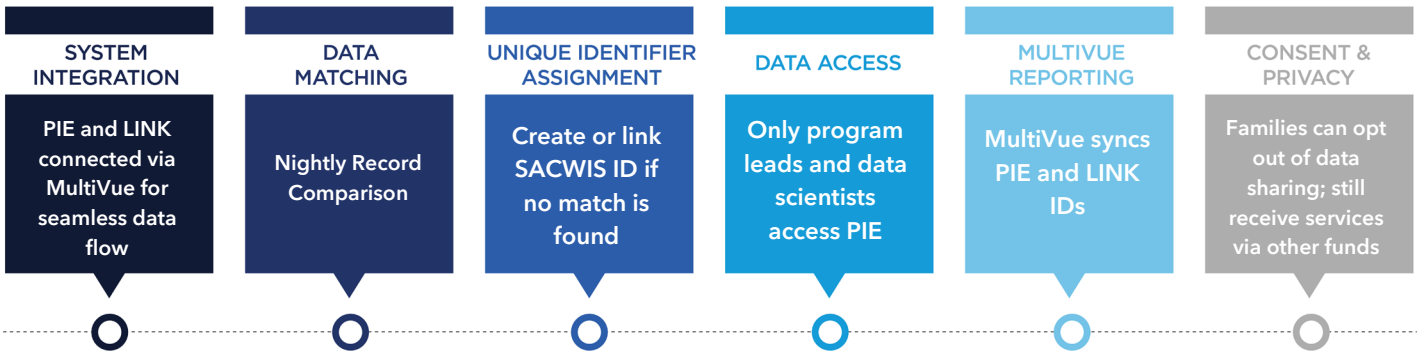
Connecticut's community pathway serves "upstream" families experiencing specific behavior, conditions, or circumstances that are likely to have an adverse impact on a child's development or functioning and for whom research shows that such characteristics or conditions place them at increased risk for maltreatment, involvement with the child welfare system, or out-of-home placement.

The behaviors, conditions, and circumstances that qualify families for services are:

- Being accepted for Voluntary Services, a program offering early intervention and support to families with identified risk factors (such as interpersonal violence or mental health challenges) who do not have formal child welfare involvement but would benefit from prevention services
- Youth who have exited foster care
- Children who are chronically absent from preschool/school or are truant from school
- Children of incarcerated parents
- Trafficked youth
- Unstably housed/homeless youth and their families
- Families experiencing interpersonal violence
- Youth who have been referred to juvenile review boards, youth service bureaus, or another diversion program or who have been arrested
- Caregivers or children who have a substance use disorder, mental health condition, or disability that impacts parenting
- Infants born substance-exposed (as defined by the state Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act notification protocol)

Process for Assigning a Unique Identifier

Connecticut's community pathway uses the PIE system to manage and track prevention services provided by community agencies. This system integrates with the state's SACWIS to facilitate data exchange between community providers and Connecticut's Department of Children and Families. To assign a unique identifier, DCFS staff follow this process:



- **System integration**: PIE manages data for community-based services and is integrated with LINK, Connecticut's SACWIS, using MultiVue, a master data management tool. MultiVue facilitates matching between records in PIE and LINK and supports the synchronization of record identifiers across both systems.
- **Data matching**: MultiVue performs nightly data matching using criteria such as name, date of birth, and gender to ensure accurate linkage between PIE and LINK. The matching process considers variations (such as Fred vs. Frederick) and assigns higher scores for exact matches.
- **Unique identifier assignment:** When a new record is created in PIE, it is matched against LINK using MultiVue. If no match is found, a new SACWIS ID is created in LINK. This unique identifier is then stored in both systems (none of the identifying information in PIE is stored in LINK), allowing for required coordinated tracking of services and outcomes.
- **Data access**: Access to PIE is restricted primarily to program leads of contracted services and data scientists. Connecticut Department of Children and Families workers do not have access to PIE. Enhanced service coordinators, who provide guidance to caseworkers, operate as gatekeepers, ensuring that the right families receive the appropriate services.
- **MultiVue reporting:** MultiVue stores SACWIS IDs that appear in the person data in LINK. These IDs are used to link records in PIE and LINK, ensuring that children who enter care at a later time are correctly matched to their prior records. This process relies heavily on accurate data entry and daily monitoring by data stewards.
- **Consent and privacy:** Connecticut respects family consent regarding data sharing for claiming purposes. Families can opt out of sharing their information and still receive prevention services via other funding sources. It is important to note that a child-specific service and administrative claim will not be submitted for families who opt out of sharing the required, limited child-specific information.

Challenges and Solutions

- **Staffing issues**: Adequate staffing is critical for managing the data matching process. Connecticut plans to have two full-time data stewards to oversee the daily matches and ensure accuracy.
- **Data access management:** Ensuring that only authorized personnel have access to sensitive data through role-based access controls is essential. Enhanced service coordinators and data scientists manage access to PIE and the matching process with LINK.
- **System synchronization:** Regular synchronization and verification are necessary to maintain data consistency between PIE and LINK. MultiVue facilitates this process by generating reports on new or changed data daily.

Outcomes and Key Lessons

- **Enhanced service coordination**: Integrating PIE with LINK and developing CTKIND will improve service coordination and data management. This ensures that families receiving community-based services are accurately tracked and their outcomes can be measured.
- **Accurate data tracking:** The use of MultiVue for data matching and synchronization ensures that unique identifiers are correctly assigned and tracked across systems. This facilitates accurate reporting and compliance with federal requirements.

Indiana Department of Child Services

Overview

Indiana links data from HFI providers' Enlite system with the state's child welfare database, MAGIK, ensuring that each family's unique identifier is accurately assigned and consistently tracked. This method balances detailed data verification by staff with automated processes, allowing the system to manage sensitive information with care. The approach is designed to protect family privacy while ensuring that services are delivered effectively, making it a strong model for managing unique identifiers within the community pathway.

Glossary of Terms

Bright Systems (Salesforce): Developer and database provider of Enlite, used by Healthy Families Indiana (HFI)

CCWIS (Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System): Indiana's upcoming system, referred to as I-KIDS.

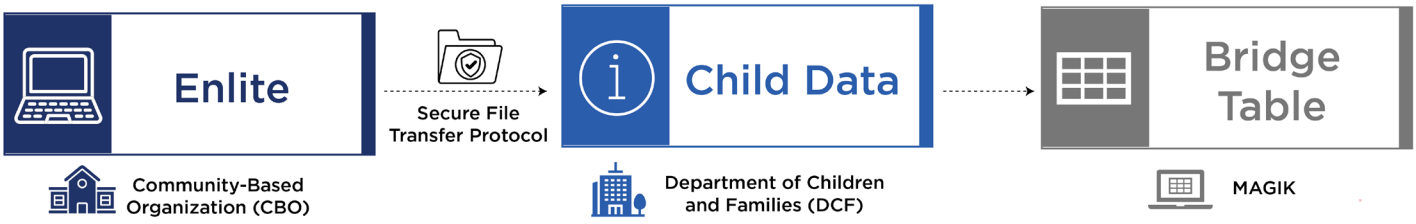
DCS (Department of Child Services): Indiana's state agency responsible for child welfare services

Enlite: A community portal used for managing and tracking prevention services provided by community agencies

HFI (Healthy Families Indiana): A program providing community-based services to families through the community pathway.

SACWIS (Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System): Known as MAGIK.

Figure 2. The Indiana Department of Child Services' Process for Matching Community-Generated IDs to AFCARS



Community Pathway Definition

Families who meet the Title IV-E Clearinghouse target population description of Healthy Families America are eligible to participate in Healthy Families Indiana through the community pathway. Providers complete a screening process to ensure criteria are met.

Process for Assigning a Unique Identifier

- **Receiving files**: DCS receives files from Enlite through a Secure File Transfer Protocol (SFTP). Only certain HFI staff can transmit information and only certain DCS staff can view it or even have access to it (for example, DCS Prevention staff assigned to the HFI program and DCS data and IT staff only).
- **Running searches**: DCS staff run a search in MAGIK (SACWIS) with the information received from Enlite to see if the child already exists in MAGIK using first name, last name, date of birth, Social Security number, and Medicaid ID if available to help match.
- **Matching records**: If a match is found, DCS enters the AFCARS ID into a bridge table. The bridge table (which exists in the master reporting database in MAGIK) tracks both Enlite IDs (18 characters) and AFCARS IDs (12 characters). If a match is not found, DCS creates a new AFCARS ID and enters it into the bridge table. DCS does not create a new person case in MAGIK.
- **Handling errors**: DCS staff manually check, case by case, to see if there are multiple AFCARS IDs for the same child, if a name is misspelled, and for other errors.
- **Business process rule**: If a child has been found in MAGIK with multiple AFCARS IDs, they log the oldest known ID into the Bridge Table. Old IDs are left intact because they are associated with past Title IV-E claims. Each time a foster care case is open, DCS looks at the Bridge Table to see if the child previously received prevention services, logs the AFCARS ID, and tracks federal outcomes.

Challenges and Solutions

- **Staffing issues:** Ensuring sufficient staffing to manage data matches and address discrepancies daily is critical. Manual checking of case records for duplicates or errors requires dedicated resources. Currently, four DCS staff—two developers and two data analysts—support this work, and an additional five prevention team members have access to the database.
- **Data accuracy:** Implementing both manual and automated checks helps ensure data accuracy and consistency. This includes verifying the correct assignment of unique identifiers and resolving any discrepancies.

Outcomes and Key Lessons

- **Improved Data Tracking**: The process of using a bridge table to track Enlite and AFCARS IDs allows for community-based services to be efficiently integrated with the state's child welfare system, ensuring accurate data tracking and compliance with federal reporting requirements.
- **Error management:** The manual error-checking process ensures that any discrepancies in the assignment of unique identifiers are promptly addressed, maintaining the integrity of the data.

CONCLUSION

The Family First Prevention Services Act requires Title IV-E agencies to report whether children receiving prevention services subsequently enter foster care within 12 and 24 months of prevention plan initiation (specified in AFCARS regulations under 45 CFR §1355.41).[2] To fulfill this requirement, states must be able to track children across prevention and foster care systems, which in practice requires a method for linking prevention service records to child welfare data systems. For community pathways—which are structured to provide services outside of formal Title IV-E agency involvement—this introduces a central challenge: how can agencies support longitudinal reporting without expanding unnecessary data visibility or undermining the voluntary nature of participation.

Connecticut and Indiana have addressed this challenge through distinct technical designs. Connecticut integrates its community portal, the Provider Information Exchange (PIE), with its SACWIS (LINK) using MultiVue, a master data management tool that automates record matching. Indiana uses a manual process in which the Department of Child Services cross-references records between Enlite, the data system used by Healthy Families Indiana providers, and MAGIK, the state's SACWIS, via a bridge table maintained for reporting purposes. In both models, identifiers used for AFCARS reporting are paired with prevention service records, enabling compliance with federal tracking requirements.

These approaches demonstrate that states can meet federal reporting mandates through varied linkage mechanisms, shaped by existing infrastructure, data governance practices, and provider network structure. However, establishing these connections introduces new points of intersection between community-based service delivery and systems traditionally used for formal child welfare oversight. As these models illustrate, record linkage design decisions—such as how matching occurs, who has access, and what information is stored or shared—carry implications for privacy, governance, and the core principles underlying community pathway implementation.

There is no single prescribed model for implementing FFPSA-compliant record linkage. States must determine how to operationalize these processes in ways that meet federal reporting requirements while aligning with the governance structure, privacy safeguards, and intent of community-based prevention. The experiences of Connecticut and Indiana offer concrete examples of how linkage can function in practice and how technical design choices influence the balance between compliance and the policy goals of community pathways.

[2] The Children's Bureau's Technical Bulletin #1 outlines Title IV-E agency reporting requirements under 45 CFR § 1355.41, including the requirement to report whether children receiving FFPSA-funded prevention services enter foster care within 12 and 24 months of prevention plan initiation. To meet this requirement, states must be able to determine whether prevention service recipients subsequently enter foster care. In practice, this requires states to establish a method for linking prevention service records to their child welfare data systems. Available at: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/afcars-technical-bulletin-1.pdf

CONTACT INFORMATION

Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center that provides public and private decision-makers with rigorous research and achievable solutions to support them in improving the lives of children, families, and communities. We partner with policymakers, practitioners, and philanthropists to construct actionable information, practical tools, and, ultimately, positive change for families. Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit www.chapinhall.org or @Chapin_Hall.

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APPENDIX

Appendix Table A-1. Technical Bulletin 1: Title IV-E Prevention Program Data Elements

Element no.	Element name	Definition	XML tag name	Data constraint
1	Title IV-E agency	Indicate the Title IV-E agency responsible for submitting the data	F1_title_iv_agency	String State agencies: 2-digit state FIPS code[3] Tribal agencies: 3-digitEPA Tribal standard code[4]
	Report date	Indicate the date that corresponds with the end of the report period	report_date	Date YYYYMM
2	Child identifier	Indicate the child's identifier/record number. This is an encrypted, unique person identification number that is the same for the child across all report periods agencywide	F2_child_identifier	String Encrypted (by ACF Standards), unique within title IV-E agency
3	Date of birth	Year, month, and day of the child's birth	F3_date_of_birth	Date YYYYMMDD
4	Sex	Indicate as appropriate	F4_sex	Numeric 1 = Male 2 = Female
5a	Race – American Indian or Alaska Native	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North or South America (including Central America) and who	F5a_child_race_american_indian_alaska_native	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes

[3] Census FIPS Codes: https://www.census.gov/geographies/reference-files/2021/demo/popest/2021-fips.html
[4] EPA Tribal identifier data standards: https://www.epa.gov/data-standards/tribal-identifier-data-standard

		maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment		
5b	Race – Asian	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example: Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam	F5b_child_race_asian	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
5c	Race – Black or African American	A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa	F5c_child_race_black_african_american	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
5d	Race – Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Island	F5d_child_race_hawaiian_pacific_islander	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
5e	Race – White	A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa	F5e_child_race_white	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
5f	Race – Unknown	The child's race is unknown because the race, or at least one race of the child, is unknown or the child and/or parent is not able to communicate the child's race	F5f_child_race_unknown	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
5g	Race – Declined	The child or parent(s) or legal guardian(s) has declined to identify a race	F5g_child_race_declined	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
6	Hispanic or Latino ethnicity	Answer "yes" if the child is of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American origin, or a person of other Spanish cultural origin regardless of race Whether or not a person is Hispanic or Latino is determined by how they define	F6_child_hispanic_latino	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes 8 = Declined 9 = Unknown

		themselves or by how others define them. In the case of young children, parents determine the ethnicity of the child Declined – The child or parent(s) or legal guardian(s) has declined to identify ethnicity Unknown – The child and/or parent is unable to communicate the child's ethnicity		
7	Pregnant or parenting youth in foster care	Is the child a pregnant or parenting youth in foster care as described in section 471(e)(2)(B) of the Act?	F7_pregnant_or_parenting_youth	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
8	Prevention plan start date	Indicate the year, month, and day that the Title IV-E agency identified the child in a prevention plan	F8_prevention_plan_start_date	Date YYYYMMDD
9a	Type of Service–Substance abuse prevention and treatment services	Identify the Title IV-E prevention service category for each service provided during the 12-month period beginning on the prevention plan start date	F9a_type_of_service_substance_use	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
9b	Type of service–mental health	Identify the Title IV-E prevention service category for each service provided during the 12-month period beginning on the prevention plan start date	F9b_type_of_service_mental_health	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
9c	Type of service–In-home parent skill-based programs	Identify the Title IV-E prevention service category for each service provided during the 12-month period beginning on the prevention plan start date	F9c_type_of_service_parent_skills	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes
10	Service start date(s)	Enter the start date(s) of the title IV-E prevention service(s)	F10_service_start_date	Date YYYYMMDD

11	Cost of service(s)	Enter the total expenditures for each Title IV-E prevention service provided within the 12 months following the prevention plan start date	F11_cost_of_service	Numeric Dollar amount (round to the nearest dollar)
12	Service end date(s)	Enter the date(s) that each Title IV-E prevention service ended. Note: This date cannot be after the 12 months following the prevention plan start date. If the title IV-E prevention service is still being provided as of the end of the report period, please indicate Null	F12_service_end_date	Date YYYYMMDD Null
13	Foster care placement status at 12 months from prevention plan start date	Indicate whether the candidate was in foster care exactly 12 months from the prevention plan start date	F13_foster_care_status_at_12_months	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes Null
14	Foster care entry	Indicate whether the candidate entered foster care, as defined in 45 CFR 1355.20, within 24 months of the prevention plan start date	F14_ foster_care_status_at_24_months	Numeric 0 = No 1 = Yes Null
14a	Date of entry into foster care	If yes to #14, enter year, month, and day of each entry into foster care	F14a_date_of_entry_into_foster_care	Date YYYYMMDD