



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## First 5 Association Calls on State Lawmakers to Protect Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Services

SACRAMENTO — The First 5 Association of California, representing First 5 commissions across the state that serve more than 1 million children and families each year, is urging the California Legislature to protect mental health services for infants and young children following a major overhaul of the state's behavioral health funding system.

*The following can be attributed to Avo Makdessian, Executive Director of First 5 Association of California:*

“A major transition in state mental health funding could jeopardize critical programs that identify and treat mental health challenges for our youngest children. Without action by lawmakers, families across California will lose access to services that cannot be replaced. We're asking lawmakers to approve a one-time \$20 million investment to bridge this funding gap, and to make permanent fixes that ensure children ages zero to five have a dedicated funding stream when it comes to prevention services.

“The early years of a child's life are the most critical time for brain and behavioral development, and California families deserve timely access to the high-quality, culturally relevant services that support it. First 5s are in every California community and have the community knowledge and proven infrastructure to deliver these services to the families who need them most. We look forward to working with state legislators to protect these critical mental health services for California’s youngest children and to utilize the trusted implementation expertise of the First 5 network.”

**Background:** In 2004, California voters passed the Mental Health Services Act (MHSA), funded by a 1% tax on incomes over \$1 million. This investment provided counties with resources for both mental health prevention and early intervention programs. In 2024, voters passed the Behavioral Health Services Act (BHSA), which moved mental health prevention funding to a new state-level Population-Based Prevention Fund. Administered by the California Department of Public Health, the Population-Based Prevention Fund is intended to support community-based programs that stop mental health problems before they start.

Unfortunately, the Fund's rules don't explicitly allow county First 5s to apply for grants, leaving children ages zero to five without these needed resources. With county First 5 revenues in decline, infant and early childhood mental health services face a convergence of funding losses. The First 5 Association of California has asked the legislature for a one-time \$20 million investment specifically for children ages zero to five, a permanent funding stream within the state fund for that age group, and explicit eligibility for First 5 commissions to apply for the prevention grants.

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### **About First 5 Association of California**

First 5 Association of California represents the state's 58 county First 5 Commissions. Together, First 5 supports over one million children and families each year, advancing policies and investments that ensure young children are healthy, safe, and ready to learn. The Association works to advance state and federal public policies and funding that support California's young children and families. Our policy work is informed by county First 5 Commissions and local communities and is grounded in a whole child / whole family lens. We do this while centering the fact that low-income communities, communities of color, and historically marginalized Californians face disproportionate impacts due to systemic racism, wealth inequality, and environmental hazards.

Learn more at [www.first5association.org](http://www.first5association.org).