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First 5 Advocates rally at Capitol to protect children's mental health funding and expand health and child care access

First 5 Association of California Honors Assemblymember Mia Bonta as 2026 Champion for Children

SACRAMENTO, CA (April 14, 2026) — First 5 Association of California, representing First 5 commissions across the state serving more than 1.2 million children and families each year, today rallied advocates at the State Capitol to urge lawmakers to protect infant and early childhood mental health services; advance AB 2704, legislation that would expand health care access through Medi-Cal payments to early childhood providers; and fund subsidized childcare spaces that were promised to Californians.

At the same event, the First 5 Association of California named Assemblymember Mia Bonta as its 2026 Champion for Children, recognizing her leadership as founding chair of the bipartisan California Legislative Children's Caucus and her steadfast commitment to policies that put children and families first.

"California's future depends on how well we support children in their earliest years. Nearly one in five California children lives in poverty — in the fourth-largest economy in the world. We know California can do better for our kids. My mission is to bring lawmakers together across both parties and both chambers to put children at the center of our policymaking. The First 5 Network is a critical partner in this work, and I'm honored to receive this recognition from First 5 Association of California," **said Assemblymember Mia Bonta (D-Oakland)**. "I will always stand alongside, and wholeheartedly support children and the organizations dedicated to ensuring every child has the opportunity to grow up healthy and ready to succeed."

"Assemblymember Bonta has shown time and again that children's wellbeing is the foundation of everything else we care about as a state, and we are proud to honor her leadership with this award," **said Avo Makedessian, Executive Director of First 5 Association of California**. "We cannot celebrate progress while critical services for our youngest children are quietly eroding. Years of declining revenues and funding gaps in our behavioral health system are converging on the families least equipped to absorb the loss. We are asking lawmakers to act now, and keep past promises to families, before those gaps become permanent."

Earlier this year, Assemblymember Bonta formally launched the bipartisan Children's Caucus alongside child advocates and more than 40 legislators. The Caucus is focused on priorities including child care access, children's health, education, housing security, economic security, and child welfare. Assemblymember Bonta also has a proven legislative record of supporting young children and their families, and continues that work on the Assembly committees for health (where she is chair), education, and budget.

California's First 5 Network is holding this year's Advocacy Day with three urgent priorities:

1. Protecting infant and early childhood mental health services

A major transition in California's behavioral health funding system — triggered by the passage of the Behavioral Health Services Act (BHSA) in 2024 — has put infant and early childhood mental health programs at risk. The new Population-Based Prevention Fund, administered by the California Department of Public Health, does not explicitly allow county First 5 commissions to apply for grants, leaving children ages 0–5 without the resources they need at a time when First 5 revenues are already in decline.

First 5 Association is urging lawmakers to approve a one-time \$20 million investment to bridge the funding gap, establish a permanent funding stream within the state fund for children ages 0–5, and explicitly allow First 5 commissions to apply for prevention grants. Read more about that effort [here](#).

2. Expanding access to Medi-Cal reimbursement: AB 2704

Advocates also called on lawmakers to support AB 2704 by Assemblymember Dawn Addis, which proposes a three-year pilot program providing technical assistance to under-resourced local educational agencies to access Medi-Cal reimbursement through the fee schedule. Currently, only 10% of LEAs have accessed this reimbursement, leaving significant funding on the table for providers serving children ages 0–5. First 5 Association is working to ensure the pilot includes explicit language protecting access for the youngest children, and that First 5 commissions can serve as subcontractors to ensure continuity of care.

3. Shore up Child Care Access, Affordability, and Provider Payments

In partnership with the California Early Care and Education (ECE) Budget Coalition, advocates also called on lawmakers to follow through on a commitment made in the 2021-22 state budget to create 77,000 new child care spaces. Under that plan, 44,000 would be added in 2026-27 and 33,000 in 2027-28 to ensure that no family is disenrolled from care.

Advocates also called for reform on how child care providers are paid. Any new payment rate system, they said, should reflect what it actually costs to run a child care program, considering cost differences across regions, and be protective of the rates providers currently receive and regularly updated to keep pace with rising costs.

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About First 5 Association of California

First 5 Association of California represents First 5 commissions across the state. Together, First 5 supports over 1.2 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 local communities and local First 5 commissions 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.