

Annual Report 2025

Helping Families Stay Together:
How Think of Us Turned Momentum
into Practice in 2025



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A Letter from our CEO



Dear Friends and Partners,

I still remember looking down at my seat and seeing my name in disbelief. I was in the front row at the White House for the signing of an executive order.

To my right sat the vice president and secretaries. To my left were those with lived experience in foster care; they were seated at the table as peers, present and engaged in the moment. That quiet shift was proof that authentic proximity, decision making alongside the people most affected, is possible.

At the start of the year, that kind of moment felt uncertain. We stepped into 2025 with federal priorities shifting, funding changing, and regulations under active review. It was a period that asked us to reflect on what it means to stay grounded when the conditions around us continue to change. I began the year holding a quiet concern, reflecting on how a decade of work would continue to carry forward with meaning and impact.

So I paused. I got still.

For me, that stillness is a discipline of faith: “Be still, and know that I am God” — Psalm 46:10. When you sit still long enough to quiet the noise and trust your inner guidance, whether rooted in faith, works, or another form of grounding, clarity begins to take shape. That clarity allows you to act from purpose and to fully center who you are in service to: young people and families.

Transformation, I have learned, is complex. It calls for flexibility, imagination, and persistence. This year we committed to staying present in that work and to listening closely to where lived experience shows us how we can make a meaningful difference.

To date, tens of thousands of young people, parents, and caregivers impacted by the child welfare system have shaped our work, informing policies, practices, and the way systems understand what it means to truly support families. Through direct support, research, advocacy, and co-design, we have remained close to the insights that lived experience provides, illuminating both where systems can grow and where new opportunities can take hold.

Our Virtual Support Services have connected thousands to critical resources, and each interaction continues to expand our understanding of how systems can better serve and support families.

Across all of this work, a clear pattern continues to emerge: proximity leads to better decisions, and better decisions lead to stronger lived experiences. This is what it means to treat lived experience as essential infrastructure for decision making.

Across multiple states and jurisdictions, we partnered with birth parents and lived experts to co-design initiatives that help families stay together and strengthen pathways to housing stability, health care, and economic security. We co-designed a national effort (Opt-In for Families), which provides resources to families early before things become a crisis.

At the same time, our kinship work focused on turning policy into practice. Through the KIN Accelerator and partnerships with states and tribes, we helped redesign how relatives step in to care for children, with a focus on making kinship care widely accessible.

Supporting older youth also remained a priority. This year, momentum continued to build as efforts advanced from advocacy into action. Federal attention centered on youth leaving care, including key conversations on the Chafee Program and policies shaped by lived experts. Alongside this, we invested in community rooted models that connect young people to work, housing, and belonging, meeting them where they are and supporting where they are going.

2025 was about staying grounded through change, engaging fully in transformation, centering lived experience, and using data and technology to expand what works. The White House moment mattered because it made visible what we have been building: authentic proximity in practice.

As we look ahead, 2026 brings a renewed sense of clarity.

We are entering a year where implementation and innovation move forward together. As a lived experience and innovation lab, we are focused on ensuring that what works reaches scale within real systems and for real people.

We are also thinking deeply about human and AI collaboration. We see technology as a way to extend human judgment and deepen impact. Our focus is on shaping its use in ways that keep lived experience at the center and strengthen our ability to serve. This is where our role continues to grow.

None of this work happens without the people behind it. I am deeply grateful to our lived experience partners, funders, and staff, who have carried this work forward with care, clarity, and commitment.

Progress unfolds over time. It is built through persistence, learning, and belief in what is possible. And it is always worth continuing.

With gratitude and resolve,



Sixto Cancel,
Founder & Chief Executive Officer
Think of Us

2025 Impact Highlights

Young people, parents, and caregivers who have been directly impacted by the child welfare system hold insights and perspectives that are crucial to improving it. To date, 52,198 of these individuals have contributed to our work, using their lived experience to help transform the policies, practices, and mental models to improve the system.

 **1,157**
Responses to Family Requests Benefiting 3,906 Individuals

Our Virtual Support Services team responded to 1,157 requests from youth and caregivers impacted by child welfare, connecting them to an estimated \$23.8M+ in resources such as housing, transportation, and mental health support.

 **400+**
Youth Engaged in Advocacy to Reform Policies

Youth advocates helped drive important policy reform by offering critical insights around the realities and challenges of the child welfare system borne out of their lived experiences. Their contributions informed conversations about the Chafee Program, technology, what should be done regarding congregate care, and the unique needs of older youth in care.

 **426**
Youth, Parents, & Caregivers Engaged

In addition to the lived experience insights generated through VSS engagements, **426 youth, parents, and caregivers impacted by the child welfare system informed our work** through our research, surveys, co-design, and in-person engagements.

 **\$328k+**
Invested in Lived Experts

We invested \$328,105.51 to support lived experts, youth, parents, and caregivers who contributed their insights to our work. This includes compensation for lived experts' time and payments to contractors serving in a lived expert capacity, helping to ensure meaningful participation in engagements with families and young people impacted by the child welfare system.

 **6+**
AI experiments impacting over 1,000 people

Think of Us' Data & Engineering Team designed or deployed tools to triage Help Seeker requests; transform large volumes of case information into concise, actionable insights; and match Help Seekers with the most relevant resources based on their unique location and circumstances.

Introduction

A Pivotal Moment and What It Will Take to Realize It

Across the country, lawmakers, administrators, providers, and advocates are envisioning a child welfare system that looks fundamentally different from what most families have known for decades.

A consensus has emerged:

- One that invests upstream in prevention
- Centers kinship as the preferred pathway for children who cannot safely remain with their parents
- Recognizes the unique needs of older youth,
- Measures success not by procedural compliance but by whether families stay together and children thrive.

What makes this moment distinct is not simply agreement on ideas, it is growing pressure to move beyond pilot programs and translate these principles into everyday practice. The old paradigm, organized around investigation and removal, is giving way to the vision of a child and family well-being system: one that equips families with concrete and economic supports, prioritizes connection and community, and intervenes only when necessary. Moving from vision to implementation is the present challenge.

At its core, the field is working to advance a system that supports families early, listens closely to those with lived experience, and responds in ways that preserve relationships and promote long-term well-being.

Yet momentum alone does not produce change. Federal policy shifts create possibility; they do not guarantee results. For reform to take hold, thousands of communities across the country must solve practical, persistent problems that have slowed or stalled past efforts. The question is not whether the vision is right. It is whether the field has the will and capacity to build the infrastructure needed to make it real. This is where many past reform efforts have faltered.

In 2025, Think of Us sought to focus on the field’s most stubborn obstacles, those that stall progress. Below are five key challenges we’ve identified and seek to address through our present work and investments.

- **Uneven adoption of kinship care.** Many states have made genuine progress, and momentum is real. The next step is making it easier for relatives to say yes through clear licensing pathways, sustained funding, and consistent, responsive support that turns kin-first commitment into everyday practice.
- **Limited internal capacity for change.** Many agencies recognize opportunities for improvement, but the day-to-day demands of serving children and families leave little space to redesign systems at the same time. Staff turnover and leadership transitions can slow progress, making sustained change a gradual process that requires support and stability.
- **Prevention flexibility without implementation capacity or clarity on what works.** Federal reforms have opened space for prevention, but frontline workers still lack the tools, workforce stability, and field-tested service models needed to deliver at scale. Without a clearer understanding of what service models are most effective, prevention remains an aspiration rather than a system function.
- **Complex pathways to basic supports.** Even when resources exist, youth and caregivers face confusing, often overwhelming processes to access housing assistance, SNAP, Medicaid, and other stabilizing supports. These administrative barriers directly undercut economic stability and family well-being.
- **Outdated technology and fragmented data.** Many agencies rely on legacy systems that slow critical decisions and limit visibility into outcomes. Until systems modernize, leaders are forced to manage with incomplete information, unable to measure impact or respond to family needs in real time.



This report is organized around four systemic shifts that, in light of these challenges, we believe are essential to building a child welfare system that helps families stay together whenever safely possible.

- 1 Making family and kinship the system anchor.** We launched the California KIN Accelerator Pilot, partnering with eight counties to co-design and test kin-first implementation strategies, and published revised model kin-specific licensing standards, already adopted by 19 states and 6 tribes (at the time of this publication).
- 2 Building systems that work for older youth and strengthen family well-being.** We engaged lived experts at key moments in federal policy making, including supporting a Senate investigation and Congressional hearings, and invested in the launch of Child Welfare Wonk, a strategic policy intelligence platform providing decision makers across all 50 states with independent, non-partisan, data-driven analysis of the field's most complex challenges.
- 3 Leveraging emerging technologies to build more humane systems.** Our resource navigation services connected families to \$23.8 million in resources across three states, while launching a new innovation site in Texas; we expanded Adverse Placement Score dashboards to 13 states, giving leaders real-time visibility into children's experiences in care.
- 4 Identifying what works in prevention.** We launched OPT-In for Families pilots in three states to test whether early, flexible support can prevent unnecessary system involvement, and supported Bolder Horizon's production of the first comprehensive state-by-state fiscal analysis of Family First Prevention Services Act spending.

Each section situates our work within broader trends in the field and highlights how we are contributing to addressing the challenges above in ways that we hope to see ripple far beyond any single initiative, jurisdiction, or political moment. Across all this work, lived experience functions not as a slogan, but as a fundamental design input informing decisions alongside frontline, fiscal, and leadership perspectives, while keeping youth and families at the center.



2025 Impact



SYSTEMIC
SHIFT 1

Family and Kinship as the System Anchor

Key Challenges Addressed:

- ✔ Uneven adoption of kinship care
- ✔ Limited internal capacity for change

[Decades of research](#) show that children do best when they are raised by family, especially relatives or other trusted adults who know and love the child. Kinship care reduces trauma, improves stability, and produces better long-term outcomes. In 2023, federal regulatory changes that Think of Us and our partners helped shape have opened new doors for states to prioritize kinship placements and give kin caregivers the same financial support as traditional foster parents.

But policy change doesn't automatically impact practice. Many jurisdictions still face real barriers such as outdated licensing rules, limited capacity, and systems built to favor traditional foster care. In 2025, Think of Us focused on helping partners move from intention to execution by supporting the adoption of kin-specific licensing standards and launching a new implementation model designed to make family-based placement the system default.

2025 Impact

Launched the California KIN Accelerator Pilot to innovate how reform gets implemented

Think of Us designed and launched the **California KIN (Kin Innovation Network) Accelerator Pilot**, a first-of-its-kind initiative that empowers local teams to co-design, test, and scale solutions that keep children connected to kin. The KIN Accelerator Pilot marks a deliberate evolution in Think of Us's role: from producing data and policy guidance to **empowering local leaders to implement change faster through structured support, co-design, and peer learning.**

The KIN Accelerator Pilot addresses a persistent challenge: how to drive change management at scale across systems that have historically been difficult to shift. Despite decades of commitment to building a kin-first culture, California’s kinship placement rates remain well below state goals. Conventional approaches like training, policy updates, and standard technical assistance have produced incremental progress without fundamentally shifting outcomes. The KIN Accelerator Pilot adapts an intensive “accelerator” model, familiar from the tech sector, helping counties rapidly design, test, iterate, and scale kin-first solutions tailored to their specific contexts.



Image: Kin Accelerator Pilot Program Overview

Working in close partnership with the **California Department of Social Services**, **UC Davis**, and **Casey Family Programs**, Think of Us created the initial vision, supporting partners in county recruitment and launch, then stepping up to lead the Pilot’s ongoing co-design and implementation in close partnership. Each participating county assembled a cross-sector team including including child welfare administrators and frontline staff alongside partners such as, kin caregivers, youth with lived experience, law enforcement, educators, tribal representatives, and community providers. Counties are committed to improving a specific, data-driven kinship outcome.



The KIN Accelerator Pilot is a huge priority for me and for the entire department, which is why I’ve been in every single one of the county launches. I love the conversation and the engagement and really getting to understand what’s happening here in your county and how we can work together in a new and innovative way to achieve our goals around Kin-first culture.

Angie Schwartz

*Deputy Director, Children and Family Services Division,
California Department of Social Services*

Think of Us has helped prepare each county for launching their innovations, including:

- **Research sprints and/or data analysis** in all eight participating counties to identify root causes of low kin placement rates and placement disruptions.
- **Convening day-long, multi-disciplinary launch events** in all eight counties, engaging more than 300 system leaders and lived experts. These intensive convenings focused on data deep dives, bringing together diverse stakeholders, many collaborating meaningfully on kinship issues for the first time.
- **Discovery sessions to inform innovation co-design** in six of the eight counties.
- **Each team has selected a specific data-driven area to improve** and performed an initial analysis to support the design and testing of innovations.
- **Robust, ongoing supports for each county team** have been co-designed with county leaders and teams and partner organizations.
- **A Central Resource Hub** supports all participating counties and partner organizations, ensuring easy access to tools, templates, and shared learning.

Backed by California’s significant investments in kinship care, the KIN Accelerator Pilot is positioned to generate tested implementation strategies that can spread statewide and be adapted by other states. **Rather than delivering fixed interventions or top-down mandates, it builds counties’ internal capacity for continuous innovation while ensuring solutions address the real barriers families face**, piloting a new model for rapid, community-grounded change management in child welfare.



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Placing children with relatives at any time, but specifically out of the gate, is just beneficial – beneficial for the child, beneficial to placement stability, beneficial to having that secure anchor as they grow up. We have already made some real milestones following our KIN Accelerator Pilot Launch, identifying some internal hurdles that we could address and others to continue to explore. We’ve already been doing more emergency placements with kin and believe that will accelerate even more.

–

Tim Stevens*Program Director, Kern County*

SYSTEMIC
SHIFT 2

Building Systems That Work for Older Youth and Strengthen Family Well-Being

Key Challenges Addressed:

- ✔ Complex pathways to basic supports
- ✔ Outdated Technology and Fragmented Data

Policy change in child welfare is a long game, built through sustained engagement across multiple administrations and political cycles. In 2025, Think of Us reached an inflection point in federal strategy. After years of work centering older youth, particularly transition-age youth, in national conversations, we're seeing a renewed, bipartisan focus to improve the system to better meet the needs of transition-age youth.

2025 Impact

In 2025, Think of Us made sure that decision-makers had access to credible, implementation-ready insights grounded in lived experience. We focused on moments of inflection where policy direction and system design are shaped, such as congressional testimony, executive action, and state leadership decisions. We engaged proactively, before positions hardened and opportunities narrowed.

Core to our work is the vision that youth are meaningfully engaged in defining the problems that policy must solve, rather than simply validating decisions after the fact. We support youth participation through compensation, preparation, and clear roles. Youth feedback directly shapes our guidance and priorities. Here are some key developments which reflected these core values in 2025.



Congress centered older youth and lived experience in oversight hearings



Michael Leach,
Chief External
Engagement Officer
Think of Us

The U.S. House Ways and Means Committee held hearings examining supports for older youth, particularly the Chafee program. At the [first hearing](#), half of those invited to testify were individuals with lived experience. Think of Us's **Chief External Engagement Officer, Mike Leach**, was invited to testify at the [second hearing](#), focused on leveraging technology to help foster youth succeed. [His testimony](#) emphasized that technology modernization must serve transformed systems built around young people's real needs, not simply automate existing practices.

Deepened attention to congregate care and institutional placements, which largely impact older youth

Think of Us continued to support the U.S. Senate Finance Committee staff as they worked to develop follow-up legislation to the [Warehouses of Neglect](#) investigation. This included providing insight and collecting additional lived experience data to ensure that populations not fully represented in earlier reports were reflected in emerging policy discussions. In 2025, the Committee [released an addendum](#) to the investigation informed by this continued work.

National executive action includes focus on older youth and technology

In November, President Trump signed an [executive order](#) focused on modernizing child welfare systems and expanding support for youth in and transitioning out of foster care. Think of Us supported young people participating in the signing, reflecting our long-standing commitment to ensuring lived experts are present at critical moments across administrations.



Two years ago I was in foster care and living in a group home and now I am sitting front row for an Executive Order signing at the White House on expanding support for youth in and transitioning out of foster care.

—
Former Foster Youth

Attendees at the November 2025 Executive Order Signing

These developments increased federal attention to transition-age youth and strengthened bipartisan engagement around technology modernization, another longstanding Think of Us priority. This marks a meaningful shift: the needs, experiences, and perspectives of older youth are increasingly shaping how policymakers think about modernization, accountability, and long-term outcomes.

Looking Ahead: Turning Momentum Into Lasting Change

Think of Us will work to ensure this momentum translates into real improvements by supporting:

- **Implementation of certain elements of the Executive Order**, which includes development and testing of federal digital platforms, intended to help youth navigate benefits, services, and transition planning.
- **Shifts toward outcome-focused accountability**, including efforts to reduce the compliance burden of federal reporting in favor of measures that reflect young people's lived experience.
- **Expanded cross-agency coordination on lived experience engagement.** Treasury and HUD [committed](#) to hosting roundtables nationwide with transition-age youth to inform new policies focused on housing stability, financial security, and economic mobility for transition-age youth.
- **Implementation support for states**, as federal priorities around modernization, prevention, and family-based care move from policy to practice.

We will continue to bring lived experience, implementation expertise, and bipartisan credibility to this next phase, helping ensure that the attention older youth and technology modernization received in 2025 becomes the foundation for durable systems change in the years ahead.



Zach Laris,
Founder, Bold Horizon
Entrepreneur in
Residence

A New Platform for Child Welfare Intelligence & Analysis: Child Welfare Wonk

Think of Us is investing in entrepreneurs building vital infrastructure for the field. **TOU Entrepreneur-in-Residence Zach Laris** launched [Child Welfare Wonk](#) to fill a gap he experienced firsthand after more than fifteen years in child welfare: decision-makers had no shortage of advocacy resources and data, but nowhere to turn for non-partisan analytical synthesis they could actually use to inform their deliberations. Child Welfare Wonk exists not to tell leaders what to think, but what to think about, providing the clear, practical analysis needed to exercise judgment on complex issues of policy, financing, technology, and accountability.

The platform has quickly become a trusted resource among the people who shape the field. Its audience of 3,300 decision-makers includes bipartisan congressional staff, nonprofit and philanthropic leaders, and agency administrators from all 50 states. Wonk newsletters have been viewed nearly 400,000 times and its podcast has been downloaded more than 20,000 times. Child Welfare Wonk analyses have been cited by federal agencies and policy organizations, and its framing of issues like child welfare financing reform is actively reshaping how experts define and discuss policy problems, leading to consideration of novel policy opportunities and solutions.

Invested in a community-rooted proof point for justice-involved older youth



LaMorris Sellers
Entrepreneur in
Residence

Think of Us **Entrepreneur-in-Residence LaMorris Sellers** leads the [KinTups Empowerment Network](#), an Atlanta-based program serving one of the most persistently underserved populations: older youth who have become involved in the justice system. Nearly [one-half of foster youth](#) are arrested or incarcerated during their transition to adulthood. Youth have the highest recidivism rates in the nation, with re-arrest rates at five years [above 70%](#) and re-incarceration rates at [56.8%](#). That's why KinTups combines intensive coaching, debate and leadership development, and apprenticeship pathways to help young people build the skills, relationships, and economic footing needed to thrive in adulthood. Driven by lived experience, Kintups recruits and supports youth consultants to co-design program experiences, lead sessions, and serve as peer support. In 2025, KinTups served 20 youth. 7 were placed in apprenticeships and 8 found employment. In all, 40 in-person development sessions were delivered.

Because of the enormous need for programs that can improve outcomes for justice-involved youth, Think of Us has supported KinTups since its earliest days through fiscal sponsorship, initial grant funding in partnership with Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the direct involvement of CEO Sixto Cancel, who serves as a founding board member and treasurer. The program is proving that with the right combination of relationships, skill-building, and economic opportunity, it is possible to divert justice-involved young people from deeper system involvement. The program has reported no recidivism among participants to date, a meaningful early signal in an area where few successful models exist.

SYSTEMIC
SHIFT 3

Leveraging Emerging Technologies to Build More Humane Systems

Key Challenges Addressed:

- ✔ Complex pathways to basic supports
- ✔ Outdated technology and fragmented data
- ✔ Limited internal capacity for change

Child welfare systems generate vast amounts of data, yet too often that information is fragmented, inaccessible, or disconnected from the people it's supposed to serve. Think of Us treats technology not as an end in itself, but as an enabling layer: a way to translate lived experience into action, reduce administrative burden on frontline workers, and help families access support quickly and with dignity.

2025 Impact

In 2025, our Virtual Support Services (VSS) teams responded to 1,157 requests for help across California, Georgia, and Greater Boston, connecting 3,906 individuals to resources valued at \$23.8 million and earning a 4.9 out of 5 user satisfaction score.

Virtual Support Services (VSS) is Think of Us's technology-enabled support model that connects youth, kin caregivers, and parents directly to concrete help such as housing, transportation, food, legal assistance, mental health services, and more. It functions as both a service and a learning system: while families get immediate support, aggregated data reveals where systems are consistently falling short.

When the federal government shutdown in October threatened to disrupt services, the VSS team moved proactively to vet more than 150 new community resources to ensure families continued receiving reliable support throughout the disruption.

VSS also continued to serve as California's statewide kinship navigator, helping kin caregivers access services while generating real-time data on the barriers they face. California's state child welfare leaders regularly use VSS data to identify service gaps, inform budget decisions, and support policy changes, demonstrating how technology can reduce friction for families while strengthening system-level accountability.



I don't think words could describe my experience working with this support system. I'm a single female with no kids and in an instant I became a guardian of my teen niece. I had nothing to offer her as far as finances goes... If it wasn't for this program I don't know where we both would be right now because (VSS Community Responder) Quin has walked with me with everything. This week we will be having our intake with a therapist and starting school. She went from having someone else's shoes on to having a few pairs herself.

—
VSS Help Seeker

Advanced the Lived Experience Engine (LEE) as decision-making infrastructure.

The Lived Experience Engine (LEE) is a database that now aggregates insights from more than 52,000 youth, parents, and caregivers gathered over the past decade. Unlike traditional administrative data, LEE captures what families actually experience as they navigate systems, providing context that is essential for effective policy and practice.

In 2025, LEE data was shared directly with policymakers at the White House, the Administration for Children and Families, and both houses of Congress, informing conversations about the needs of older youth in care, the harms of unregulated congregate placements, and protecting benefits for youth aging out of the system.

Expanded the Adverse Placement Score (APS) dashboards to 13 states to drive improvements in placement quality.

Designed by the Foster Insights team at the University of Chicago through a partnership with Think of Us Senior Fellow Marina Nitze, the Adverse Placement Score (APS) is a composite metric that evaluates a jurisdiction's placement landscape and needs by tracking factors like kinship placement, sibling separation, institutionalization, and when children are moved far from their schools and communities, offering a holistic picture of what a child is actually experiencing in care, rather than whether a system is meeting compliance benchmarks.

APS dashboards now operate in 13 states, giving state and county leaders real-time, zip-code-level visibility into where children are experiencing the highest levels of disruption.

The system has enabled state leaders to quickly identify geographic hot spots, increase cross-agency collaboration, and, as one state official described it, create a “massive positive impact” by making invisible harms visible and actionable. This relationship has also led to deeper data analysis and collaboration with states in areas like educational outcomes, kinship outcomes, placement stability, and prevention.

The Federal government encouraged states to adopt APS in [CFSR Technical Bulletin #14](#) as part of a new, more effective audit pilot. Oklahoma was the first state to sign up for this pilot program and worked closely with our team to incorporate APS and other measures. This pilot is expected to inform the future set of permanent audit measures.

Demonstrated responsible use of artificial intelligence in child welfare contexts.

AI adoption in child welfare has been slow, in part because of legitimate concerns about the potential for increasing surveillance of vulnerable families. Think of Us is working to mitigate those concerns by proactively developing systems that leverage AI in ways that support more humane systems. Through our CEO Sixto Cancel's many appearances at sector convenings and panels, we've shared a range of prototypes that model what AI can achieve by analyzing data in real-time and serving as a valuable assistant to frontline workers. We've helped partners recognize its potential to help workers more effectively support families, do more with data, and make systems more responsive.

In practice, Think of Us deployed AI across multiple workstreams in 2025: automating case summaries and prioritization for VSS staff, reducing initial response times to just 1.5 business hours; supporting data analysis and reporting for the KIN Accelerator and other initiatives; and piloting tools for resource mapping, landscape analysis, and case review. These applications are designed for AI to handle administrative work and surface patterns in data, so that human judgment—which remains at the center of every decision affecting a family—can be sharper.



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Partnering with Think of Us continues to strengthen child and family outcomes. Together our strategic decisions are grounded in shared values, use of data and a common purpose. Safely reducing and ultimately preventing the need for foster care calls for innovation across systems; therefore, we appreciate the shared space we are embarking upon as our organizations navigate an accelerating AI environment.

—
David Sanders

*Executive Vice President, Systems Improvement,
Casey Family Programs*

Building a Second State Proof Point: The Texas Innovation Site

Think of Us impact in California began with a simple but powerful entry point: connecting families directly to resources, listening carefully to what they experienced, and flowing those insights back into policy and practice.

Over several years, that approach grew into something larger: targeted research and surveys to address immediate policy concerns, sharing lived experience data to inform a [billion-dollar annual increase](#) in reimbursements for kin caregivers, and helping county child welfare administrators design and adopt strategies to increase kin placements and support in their jurisdictions.

In late 2025, we took an exciting first step to use what we learned in California to inform a new model tailored to Texas' Region 7, which encompasses Greater Austin and surrounding communities. Texas, home to the country's third-largest child welfare system, is a new proving ground, with its own policy environment, demographics, and structural dynamics. But the core strategy is the same: create trust with families by providing excellent direct service, build strong relationships with the provider community and child welfare agencies by being an excellent partner, generate real-time data about what's working and what isn't, and use that intelligence to build proximity between those experiencing child welfare and those governing it.

Texas is in the midst of one of the most significant child welfare transformations in the country. Under [Community-Based Care](#) (CBC), responsibility for foster care, family support, and permanency services will shift from the state to community-based organizations. A central goal of Community-Based Care is to keep children safely connected to their families, schools, and communities whenever possible. This model moves decision-making closer to families, but it also places a greater emphasis on local infrastructure to support prevention, kinship placement, and family stability. In Region 7 specifically, more than 75 organizations spanning child welfare, health, behavioral health, faith communities, and advocacy are actively preparing for this transition.

As community-based organizations take on an even greater role, their ability to identify family needs early, identify service gaps in real-time, and connect youth and families to resources will be essential. The innovation site will support strengthened and integrated resource connectivity, creating data feedback loops to guide system leaders.

Thus far, we have been laying the groundwork to deliver services with integrity: building strong partnerships with Region 7's community organizations, landscaping and vetting local resources, and launching a Microcash Grant survey to understand the nuances of Region 7's kin caregiver and transition-age youth experiences. A survey launched last December has already disbursed \$12,000 in direct cash assistance to young people. Families will begin receiving direct support in 2026.

Our aim over time is to model the depth of engagement that has made our California work impactful:

- **Direct service + system intelligence:** Starting in Travis County, TOU will pilot Resource Navigation services that are both human-centered and AI-enabled. This provides immediate support to transition-age youth and kin caregivers while creating a real-time data feedback loop about what works and where systems of support break down. As philanthropic and government leaders review this data on a regular basis, this builds proximity to lived experience: a deeper understanding and empathy for how systems impact individuals, and a desire to know more.
- **Technology as infrastructure for learning:** In Texas, we will test some new AI-enabled tools and approaches that we believe can help increase the speed, consistency, and quality of resource navigation, while also dramatically expanding what can be done with lived experience data and insights. These features would support scale and expansion to new states in the years ahead.
- **Policy and implementation alignment:** Insights from service delivery, research sprints, surveys, and data analysis are made available as a resource to inform service delivery, budget decisions, and policy conversations, bridging the gap between what families experience and how systems are governed.
- **A platform for learning and replication:** Texas is serving as the beta site for codifying this state impact model, learning from it, and adapting our approach. The goal is for the frameworks, playbooks, and evidence generated in Texas to serve as a blueprint that Think of Us or other organizations can adapt and apply in other local contexts.

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Collaboration, innovation, and data-informed solutions are the hallmarks that define Think of Us. Their commitment to authentically engaging the voices of young adults and families, combined with their dedication to sharing the information they gather with community partners, makes them an invaluable asset for those of us striving to achieve positive, scalable change for individuals, communities, and systems. I am thrilled to reconnect with Think of Us as they launch their resource navigation services in the Greater Austin area...it's clear they are not only bringing their expertise in technology, youth, young adults, and kin caregivers, but also their unwavering commitment and passion for driving novel and necessary scalable solutions.

—
Katy Bourgeois

Vice President of Systems Advancement,
Texas Center for Child and Family Studies

Identifying What Works in Prevention

Key Challenges Addressed:

- ✔ Prevention flexibility without implementation capacity
- ✔ Outdated technology and fragmented data
- ✔ Complex pathways to basic supports
- ✔ Limited internal capacity for change

Most families who come to the attention of the child welfare system are not there because of abuse. They are struggling with poverty, housing instability, mental health challenges, substance use disorder, and/or lack of access to support, and without help, those struggles can escalate into crises that lead to unnecessary family separation or involvement with the public system. Prevention means providing families the support they need to reduce their risk of adverse outcomes.

While prevention is now broadly endorsed in policy, providing better support to families at scale remains one of the field's most complex and challenging unsolved problems. In 2025, Think of Us focused on building practical proof points: testing what prevention actually looks like in real communities, generating comparative data across states; ensuring family support strategies are informed by lived experience; and helping shape the policy environment needed for broader adoption.

2025 Impact

OPT-In for Families launched services in three jurisdictions to test prevention at the system level.

[The Opportunities for Prevention and Transformation Initiative \(OPT-In for Families\)](#) is a multi-site initiative testing whether community-based resource navigation and flexible financial support offered outside the traditional child welfare system can support families before they reach a crisis point. It focuses on a population that has long fallen through the cracks: families whose cases are screened out of Child Protective Services, who often receive no help despite facing serious challenges and who are at high risk of future system involvement.



As I reflect on all that Think of Us has contributed over the year, their impact on both OPT-In and the broader field of child welfare is clear and deeply felt. Think of Us has been instrumental in grounding the initiative in the authentic voices of those most impacted by the child welfare system. Across OPT-In communities, families consistently shared that they felt heard, respected, and saw their input meaningfully adopted. This commitment to lived expertise represents the heart of the work and is a central reason we are confident in the initiative's success.

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Jodi Hill-Lilly

Program Director for Child Well-being,
Doris Duke Foundation

In 2025, Think of Us and our partners **Doris Duke Foundation, Harvard Government Performance Lab, Foster America**, and **Chapin Hall** moved OPT-In from design into active implementation. After more than a year working hand-in-hand with jurisdictions and lived experts to co-design each OPT-In pilot, three of the four locations (Washington, DC; Oregon; and South Carolina) launched in 2025. We also built and refined a flexible resource model that allows sites to track referrals, service connections, and family outcomes.

Early implementation signals have reinforced our thesis that families receiving flexible financial support and personalized navigation before a crisis escalates are more likely to stabilize housing, address health needs, and remain safely together.

Bringing Clarity to Nationwide Prevention Investments

One of the persistent barriers to scaling prevention is that policymakers have lacked a clear, apples-to-apples picture of how prevention dollars are actually flowing across states. Think of Us Entrepreneur-in-Residence Zach Laris and his organization [Bolder Horizon](#), which Think of Us is incubating as part of our strategy of supporting independent social entrepreneurs working toward shared goals, led work to address this gap directly.

With support from the Think of Us policy team, Bolder Horizon developed the [first comprehensive, state-by-state fiscal analysis of spending under the Family First Prevention Services Act](#), the landmark federal law that gave states new funding to keep children safely with their families. Unlike previous analyses, which often carried an advocacy agenda, Bolder Horizon's framework is nonpartisan and comparative, showing where prevention dollars are flowing, how implementation is evolving, and what the data implies are the essential tensions and trade-offs for policymakers to consider when debating future policy choices.



Supported Congress in refining the Family First Prevention Services Act.

In October, Think of Us and Bolder Horizon planned and executed a closed-door briefing hosted by the Senate Finance Committee to update congressional staff from more than 20 Senate offices on progress and barriers to implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act. Presenters included our Chief External Engagement Officer, Michael Leach, Jodi Hill-Lilly (Doris Duke Foundation), and Zach Laris (Bolder Horizon), with moderation by Rebecca Robuck of ChildFocus. The briefing focused on both the successes and persistent challenges of Family First implementation, highlighted insights from new analysis on the law's rollout, and surfaced the key policy choices and tradeoffs facing Congress.



Building for What's Next

The work described in this report did not happen in isolation. It reflects years of partnership, trust, and shared commitment with lived experts who bring irreplaceable insight to every initiative, state and county leaders who opened their systems to co-design, and partners and advocates who kept reform moving through an uncertain year—we are deeply grateful to each of you.

2025 was also a year of deliberate organizational growth for Think of Us. After a decade of demonstrating that meaningful engagement with lived experience is necessary for effective reform—from direct service to federal legislation—we're looking to take on an additional challenge: supporting implementation at scale across hundreds of jurisdictions, each navigating change in their own political and operational context.

That expanded scope required us to evolve. We restructured our leadership team, adding senior roles in program, technology, operations, development, and external engagement. We built our project portfolio around initiatives designed to generate replicable models. And we sharpened our strategic focus around a single question: what infrastructure must exist for prevention-first, kin-first, youth-centered systems to function across diverse political contexts?

The California KIN Accelerator and our Texas Innovation Site are early expressions of that focus—implementation models co-designed with local leaders that build their capacity to serve families and sustain change over time. Technology, including emerging uses of artificial intelligence, is part of this infrastructure: not as a replacement for human judgment, but as a tool that makes leaders and frontline workers more effective and families more connected to the process.

Building systems is slower work than seizing more immediate opportunities. It requires trade-offs and patience. But it is the work this moment demands. We are grateful to the many partners, funders, advocates, administrators, lawmakers, and lived experts who are working alongside us. Together, we will build a child and family well-being system that is more humane, more effective, and better aligned with what children and families need to heal, develop, and thrive.

Thank You

Think of Us is a research & design lab working to transform the nation's child welfare system & improve outcomes for the millions of children & families it impacts.

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