

Massachusetts Initiative to Reduce Child Neglect | Theory of Change

January 16, 2026

Overview

A Theory of Change is both a conceptual model of a large-scale social change effort and a concrete product that reflects the model (Annie E. Casey Foundation). Cross-sector teams can rely on theory of change to strengthen strategies and maximize results by charting out the work ahead, identifying what success looks like, and describing how to get there.

This document presents the Theory of Change supporting the **Massachusetts Initiative to Reduce Child Neglect**, a collaborative effort that brings together state agencies, family-serving organizations, individuals with lived experience, and communities to support families and mandated reporters. The initiative aims to shift the way the Commonwealth supports families and addresses the root causes of abuse and neglect. This Theory of Change emerged from a series of discussions, surveys, and interviews involving families, Steering Committee members, and mandated reporters, as well as from a review of organizational materials and conversations with leadership and staff of the **Children's Trust**, the organization serving as the initiative's administrative backbone. These interactions were facilitated by Borderland Partners LLC and took place from October 2025 through January 2026, when the initiative's Steering Committees unanimously adopted the documents.

This narrative and accompanying graphic represent the shared efforts and understanding among the stakeholders contributing to the statewide effort. They are intended to support the workgroups, pilot programs, and other decisions as the initiative moves forward. Importantly, these documents are not meant to be static. They indicate the perspectives of the people and groups currently contributing to the initiative. As momentum continues, the Theory of Change is expected to be amended and refined, as well.

The Context

Families in Massachusetts often encounter the child safety system when concerns arise about a child's well-being. Too often, those concerns are addressed through formal reporting and investigation, rather than through early-support pathways and alternatives.

Current system structures and practices across state agencies, schools, and community and health care organizations are fragmented and do not reliably support families' ability to ask for help early or safely. Inconsistent policies, uneven coordination among partners, and limited shared understanding of families' experiences create conditions in which support can be inaccessible, difficult to navigate, or arrive too late. These system-level gaps contribute to

preventable escalation and reinforce inequitable patterns of system involvement, particularly for families marginalized by racism, poverty, and other structural barriers.

Our Assumptions

1. Collaboration Across Systems

Our strategy will only work if partners have the conditions they need to collaborate, share responsibility, and align practices, so families aren't left to navigate disconnected systems on their own.

2. Shared Understanding Across Agencies

Our strategy will only work if agencies share a common understanding of what "early support" looks like, so responses to concerns are consistent and move practice from "report first" to "support first."

3. Relational Trust

Our strategy will only work if everyday interactions between families, educators, and providers are safe, respectful, and free of judgment, because relational trust is what makes families feel comfortable seeking help.

4. System Trust Through Voice

Our strategy will only work if families, educators, and communities have meaningful influence in shaping policies and practices, because shared ownership builds system-level trust, which supports early help-seeking and sustained engagement with services.

5. Clear and Easy Pathways to Support

Our strategy will only work if simple, coordinated, and easy-to-navigate pathways to support exist and are sustained over time, so people know where to go and can get there reliably when they need help.

6. Workforce Confidence and Capacity

Our strategy will only work if the workforce has the confidence, skills, and guidance to use early-help options instead of defaulting to formal reporting, because prevention depends on practitioners trusting and using the alternatives that are available.

Strategic Pathways

The initiative advances change through four interdependent pathways that together strengthen the system's capacity for equitable, family-centered support.

1. **Programs:** Strengthen and align community-based supports that offer coordinated alternatives to reporting, with clear entry points and consistent follow-through.
2. **Workforce:** Build confidence, clarity, and tools of professionals to act in partnership with families, emphasizing relational and culturally responsive practice.
3. **Community:** Elevate and resource the leadership of families most affected by the system and strengthen trusted community-based supports.
4. **Policy:** Establish consistent definitions, expectations, and accountability structures and support the investment needed to sustain prevention and family well-being.

These pathways reinforce one another; sequencing will reflect local readiness and partnership conditions.

Our Actions

Our initiative will operationalize three interconnected near-term actions:

1. Strengthen Cross-Sector Collaboration

We will strengthen existing steering committees and form additional working groups and structures that expand participation, with attention to identifying clear roles, improving communication technology, and creating feedback loops.

2. Establish a Shared Framework

We will co-develop a shared understanding of family support that shifts from “reporting” to “supporting” and emphasizes partnership, prevention, emotional safety, and trust.

3. Identify Solutions for Scaling

We will implement pilot initiatives that test and model collaborative approaches, improve families’ access and experience to community-based supports, document learning through continuous quality-improvement cycles, and generate insights for policy and workforce guidance.

The Children’s Trust will coordinate implementation, ensure alignment, and track progress through milestones and shared learning.

Enabling Conditions

Our initiative’s long-term success and ability to realize sustainable, equitable change depend on system-level considerations: trust, cross-agency collaboration, shared accountability, and stronger, family-centered supports.

- **Trust** is built through consistent, transparent interactions and joint problem-solving, not on one-time agreements.
- **Cross-agency collaboration** grows through regular, two-way communication involving families, communities, and agencies.
- **Shared accountability** emerges through joint decision-making, where partners co-own metrics and actions while retaining defined operational roles.
- **Stronger, family-centered supports** result when these relational and governance conditions lead to coordinated, responsive systems, practice, and norms that are rooted in culturally-attuned practices and proactive engagement.

Our Outcomes

1. System Outcomes

Children’s needs are met earlier through coordinated, supportive family-informed responses, reducing unnecessary formal reports or investigations.

Mandated reporters and frontline professionals have the knowledge, tools, training, and support to recognize family needs and connect them to help.

Stronger cross-sector alignment and shared accountability among state, community, and workforce partners.

Documented learning from pilot initiatives that model preventive, family-centered, and equitable approaches to supporting families.

2. Family Outcomes

Families experience services as helpful, respectful, and trustworthy, with clearer communication and follow-through.

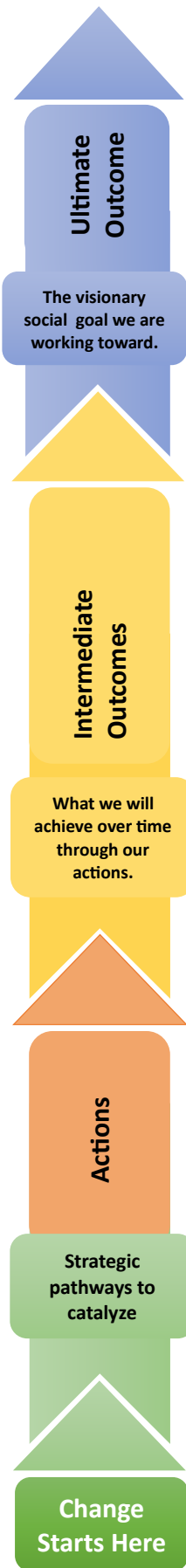
Families encounter more equitable, easy-to-access community-based supports that strengthen their well-being and reduce crises.

3. Impact

A statewide culture shift toward prevention-oriented, trust-based family well-being that is grounded in shared responsibility and equity.

Theory of Change

Massachusetts Initiative to Reduce Child Neglect



To support families, mandated reporters, and community organizations in promoting well-being and preventing unnecessary involvement of child protective services by:

Strengthening and expanding existing pathways of support

Creating new pathways where gaps exist

Building clear, accessible systems of support

Impact: A statewide culture shift toward prevention-oriented, trust-based family well-being that is grounded in shared responsibility and equity.

System Outcomes:

- Children's needs are met earlier, reducing unnecessary formal reports or investigations.
- Mandated reporters and frontline professionals have the knowledge, tools, training, and support to recognize family needs and connect them to help.
- Stronger cross-sector alignment and shared accountability.
- Documented learning.

Family Outcomes:

- Families experience services as helpful, respectful, and trustworthy, with clearer communication and follow-through.
- More equitable, easy-to-access community-based supports that strengthen family well-being and reduce crises.

Strengthen Cross-Sector Collaboration: Strengthen existing steering committees and form additional working groups and structures that expand participation.

Establish a Shared Framework: Co-develop a shared understanding of family support that shifts from "reporting" to "supporting" and emphasizes partnership, prevention, emotional safety, and trust.

Identify Solutions For Scaling: Implement pilot initiatives, improve families' access and experience to community-based supports, document learning, and generate insights for policy and workforce guidance.

Programs

Workforce

Community

Policy

Assumptions

Collaboration Across Systems

Shared Understanding Across Agencies

Relational Trust

System Trust Through Voice

Clear and Easy Pathways to Support

Workforce Confidence and Capacity