



THE SAFE BABIES COURT TEAM™ APPROACH COST DOCUMENT

Each year, **over 100,000 children ages 0-3 are removed from their families and placed in foster care** and many more come to the attention of the court but remain in their home where prevention services are provided. These babies and toddlers represent the largest group of children entering the system, and their numbers are growing. Sadly, the agencies and public officials responsible for their care and futures—child welfare agencies, dependency courts, and attorneys—often struggle to meet the needs of these young children and their families. As a result, babies and toddlers endure the trauma of sudden separation, prolonged time in foster care, and inconsistent caregiving, which disrupts the most critical period in human development and contributes to negative long-term physical, psychological, and behavioral outcomes. Outcomes are especially poor for young children and families of color, contributing to racial and ethnic inequity.

The Safe Babies Court Team™ (SBCT) approach, a program developed by ZERO TO THREE (ZTT), **transforms the lives of child welfare-involved** infants, toddlers, and families by changing the practices of judges, child welfare workers, service providers, and other community professionals. Led by a local judge and staffed by a full-time community coordinator, SBCTs meet frequently to provide enhanced judicial oversight and support to families, train staff on how to apply the science of early childhood development to their work, connect families to much-needed services, and engage parents as valued partners to solve problems preventing children from returning home. Farther upstream, SBCT's work with court-involved families with infants and toddlers at risk of entering out of home care, helping to connect them with needed services and supports that can help prevent removal and meet the child's needs while remaining in the home.

How is Safe Babies Court Team Different from Standard Child Welfare Practice?

The contrast between the SBCT approach and the traditional child welfare system, including how the child welfare agency, family court, and other child serving agencies work together, is significant. When children are removed from their home **in traditional child welfare dependency cases**, families experience isolation from their children, a judicial process that is adversarial rather than collaborative, and services that are uncoordinated and do not meet the developmental needs of young children. **In the SBCT approach**, families instead work with a consistent point of contact throughout the process; experience a collaborative approach where parents are valued members in planning for their child's future; participate in frequent judicial hearings and experience frequent family contact with their children.

	Standard Child Welfare Practice	Safe Babies Court Team
Court Oversight	- Infrequent hearings (5 to 6 per year with long gaps in between)	- Frequent court hearings (monthly, 12 per year)
Family Strengthening	- Contact with parents is limited to weekly or monthly visits at a child welfare office.	- Frequent, quality Family Time with parents (at least 3 times / week)
Family Engagement	- Adversarial nature of court hearings and case planning meetings limits participation and engagement of parents - Compliance driven efforts meet minimum standards for visitation between parent and child	- Facilitated (ongoing) family team meetings - Trauma-informed court environment leads to greater engagement among parents
Access to Services	- Delayed developmental screening for infants and toddlers - Delayed or lack of identification of needed services for parents	- Early developmental screening and assessment is prioritized - Services to address child and parent needs are front-loaded
Developmental Needs of Infants and Toddlers	- Limited system awareness of urgent developmental needs of infants and toddlers	- Judicial and child welfare staff are trained in best practices for child development

What does the evidence say about the impact of the approach?

SBCT is recognized by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare as demonstrating “Promising Research Evidenceⁱ and research to date has demonstrated compelling outcomes, including:

- Children exit the foster care system **eight months earlier** than children in traditional child welfare.ⁱⁱ
- More than 99 percent of children experience **no recurrence of maltreatment** within 12 months.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Children achieved the **same outcomes, regardless of ethnicity or race time in foster care**, highlighting the potential of SBCT to close significant existing disparities in outcomes for families of color in the current child welfare system.^{iv}

How is the SBCT approach implemented?

The SBCT approach includes core components that can be implemented in a local community by the local child welfare and judicial agencies or through a state effort that coordinates implementation across multiple local sites. The SBCT National Resource Center, operated by ZERO TO THREE, also provides technical assistance and training to sites and states to help them implement the approach.

What does it cost to implement the SBCT approach?

In a local community:

Implementing the SBCT approach in a local community typically costs ~\$8,500 per family. These costs are in addition to existing child welfare system costs and do not include costs incurred by the Infant Toddler National Resource Center for providing training and technical assistance. Many SBCT sites also leverage existing resources by repurposing some of the time of child welfare and judicial professionals-- including judges, attorneys, and case workers -- to better meet the needs of infants and toddlers and their families. Key cost drivers include:

- **Local site costs (\$7,500):** The primary cost for sites is to hire a *Community Coordinator*, a full-time position whose role is to support the judge in convening an Active Community Team, drive the quality and frequency of Family Team Meetings, and help families to access and navigate services. SBCT sites also typically pay for local travel, training for child welfare and judicial staff, and some sites use a full or part-time data analyst position to manage data input, monitoring, and quality assurance.
- **Wraparound services and supports (\$1,000):** SBCTs work hard to identify needs of children and their families through upfront screening and assessment and timely referral to services. As a result, more families can access the services they need, resulting in improved outcomes. Services for *infant and toddlers* include regular well-child visits where children receive age-appropriate developmental screenings, immunizations, and developmental services and supports (e.g. early Intervention services and infant and early childhood mental health services). Services for *parents* include referral to high-quality, trauma-informed mental health and substance use disorder prevention and treatment services, primary and other needed health care services (e.g., postpartum care), and evidence-based parenting interventions. Although many of these services are covered through existing federal funding sources such as Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), or IDEA, Part C, the increased uptake of services for SBCT families represents an additional cost to local or state human services systems and are therefore included in our cost estimate.

The recommended caseload is 20 families per community coordinator at any point in time. For the purpose of estimating the per-family cost, we used 27 as the total number of families served over the course of a year. This includes families whose cases may have closed and new families that enroll.

As sites expand to serve additional families, they may incur additional costs. For example, sites may need to hire a new caseworker or attorney that is dedicated to working with SBCT families if they are unable to reallocate existing staff.

In a State:

In states where there are multiple sites, the National Resource Center recommends a statewide team to facilitate implementation and monitor progress. These states typically operate four-person teams—consisting of a Statewide Coordinator, Quality Improvement Manager, Court Data Analyst, and Administrative Assistant that are embedded in states' child welfare or judicial

infrastructure. State teams vary in the number of local sites they manage. For example, as of January 2020 Florida's state team works with 24 local sites while Tennessee supports 12 sites.

How do Sites Pay for the SBCT Approach?

There are currently more than 80 SBCT sites operating across the country. Most of these sites use a mix of local, state, federal, and/or philanthropic funding to finance and sustain the work. Examples of federal funding sources that SBCT sites have used include Title IV-E waiver, Title IV-B, Medicaid reimbursement, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Court Improvement Program funds. The National Resource Center also provides technical assistance to SBCT sites to help them plan for financial sustainability.

How do the benefits produced by the approach compare to costs?

Based on recent outcome evaluation data, the SBCT approach is estimated to generate **over \$14,000 in public savings per family served**, including \$12,000 in child welfare system savings and \$2,000 in healthcare savings.^v This amount exceeds SBCT's projected annual per-family cost of ~\$8,500 by 64 percent. Longer-term public savings are likely to be substantially greater and accrue to a wide array of sectors, particularly in the areas of health, education, and juvenile justice.

SBCTs meaningfully increase families' access to and utilization of critical supports that improve life trajectories for children involved in the child welfare system, many of which have a high social return on investment. For example, when infants and toddlers are screened for developmental delays and receive timely early intervention services (an outcome SBCTs have demonstrated) this reduces long terms costs from providing special education services, as well as costs related to health conditions. Similarly, when parents served through the SBCT receive evidence-based substance use treatment, this can help reduce long terms health costs.

Other research has confirmed the cost-effectiveness of the SBCT approach. A 2012 study on the costs of SBCT estimated that more than 70% of the program's direct costs are recouped in the first year due to faster time to permanency among children in the program, and that these savings would accumulate over time and eventually pay for the program.^{vi} A 2018 study of Early Childhood Courts in Florida, which implement the SBCT approach, also found that the approach was more cost-effective when compared to traditional child welfare practice.^{vii}

ⁱ [The Safe Babies Court Team](#) (The California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, 2019).

ⁱⁱ Casanueva, C., Harris, S., Carr, C., Burfiend, C., & Smith, K. (2019). *Evaluation in multiple sites of the Safe Babies Court Team approach*. *Child Welfare*, 97(1), 85-107. The study compared outcomes from SBCT sites to data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent WellBeing (NSCAW), the only nationally representative study of children investigated for maltreatment.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Estimated per-family savings to child welfare system: \$10,200 due to decreased time to permanency, \$900 due to lower rates of re-entry, \$400 due to increased placement with kin, and \$500 due to decreased recurrence of child maltreatment. Estimated per-family savings to healthcare system: \$2,000 due to decreased rate of child maltreatment. Sources: *Florida Early Childhood Court Booklet* (Office of Court Improvement, Office of the State Courts Administrator, June 2019). [DSP Informational Memo Series 2017](#) (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, Division of Safety and Permanence, December 2017). Cora

Peterson, Curtis Florence, Joanne Klevens, [*The economic burden of child maltreatment in the United States, 2015*](#) (Child Abuse & Neglect, 2018): 86, 178–183.

^{vi} E. Michael Foster, Kimberly L. McCombs-Thornton, Investing in Our Most Vulnerable: A Cost Analysis of the ZERO TO THREE Safe Babies Court Teams Initiative (Economics for the Public Good, 2012)

^{vii} Lisa Magruder, Marianna Tutwiler, Jessica Pryce, 2018-2019 Early Childhood Court Evaluation Final Report to the Office of Court Improvement, Florida Institute for Child Welfare, 2019.