

VENTURA COUNTY FOSTER HEALTH LINK

Connecting Foster Families with Their Essential Records



THE INITIATIVE

Ventura County Foster Health Link (FHL) is a groundbreaking public-private partnership to improve continuity of care and access to essential information for foster youth and their caregivers in Ventura County, California. The Children's Partnership (TCP) worked with the County on this effort from inception to launch, which moves foster children's records from an outdated and impermanent paper format to an automated, secure system that can be accessed, maintained, and shared electronically. Such a solution is sorely needed for the 1,000 children and youth in the foster care system in Ventura County, who—like most minors in the foster care system—experience frequent changes in family placements, health providers, and schools. Such disruptions result in incomplete records that can lead to inappropriate or insufficient health care and gaps in educational and other services. To address this issue, FHL provides a pre-populated, portable electronic personal record for children and youth in foster care that can be accessed by their foster parents and caseworkers. This essential record will be a constant that foster youth can count on, even during chaotic periods of transition.

PROGRESS TO DATE

Over several years, the FHL partnership planned for and built the back-end technology infrastructure needed to populate FHL with key data from the Health and Education Passport (HEP), the core set of information that was previously provided to foster parents in only a paper format. Information from the HEP was thoughtfully customized for electronic display to the foster caregiver community and is populated with critical, up-to-date information from the Child Welfare Services/ Case Management System (CWS/CMS) database housed within the Human Service Agency (HSA) such as immunization history, well-child visits, allergies and health alerts, diagnoses and treatments, and health provider information. It also contains key educational information such as schools attended and highest grade level achieved. Further, a seamless link with the Health Care Agency's medical record system allows foster parents to access a youth's medical record from the e-HEP interface. This connection enables access to additional, timely health information such as medication, lab, and medical test data. The team also analyzed business operations to identify how best to incorporate the tool into the county's workflow and developed necessary data-sharing agreements to govern data exchange.

To facilitate self-management and support, FHL includes a consumer-friendly electronic clearinghouse of information, called a "Network of Care," which helps users find and connect to an array of educational resources, services, and tools available to foster youth and families in Ventura County.

Before its launch, Ventura County validated and tested FHL with frontline workers to ensure that it would be integrated with the county's existing workflows. It also conducted a series of outreach events with foster parents to get feedback on the tool. After completion of the development and testing phase, FHL launched to the foster parent community in July 2015. In the first three months of operation, 51 foster parents and 222 HSA staff created FHL accounts. The uptake has continued since then.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Authentication

Ventura County HSA “turns on” access for caregivers when they begin to care for foster children and then “turns off” access when the children leave the foster home. This process mirrors existing rules for substitute caregivers’ access to information and involves a multi step authentication of identity to ensure that appropriate access is granted. Caregivers who are approved by Ventura County HSA receive an email link from the agency that enables them to log in to FHL using a unique username and password. Caseworkers and public health nurses can also utilize FHL according to their current level of access based on their position within the agency.

Technical Architecture

FHL uses a “federated” model to facilitate data sharing, meaning the different information systems are not merged but rather interconnected via a computer network. Information housed within the CWS/CMS and medical record system (a Cerner electronic health record product) is accessed via a query from FHL using the caregiver’s unique ID. FHL then captures data from the CWS/CMS and the Cerner systems relevant to the children in each foster parent’s care and allows for a time-limited view. Importantly, FHL does not store any data from either record system, but instead facilitates a temporary connection after authentication of the identity of the user has been established.

Legal Considerations

At this time, medical data from the Cerner electronic health record is limited to information for children up to age 12 who have received care through the Ventura County public network of clinics and hospitals. Cerner defined this level of access for legal reasons related to privacy and consent requirements under California law and the technical challenges associated with segmenting different types of data according to the nuances of these privacy and consent laws. For example, certain sensitive information, such as mental health treatment and counseling, drug and alcohol treatment, and a diagnosis of a communicable disease, cannot be shared without a minor’s consent if the patient is over the age of 12. FHL does not link to the county’s behavioral health system, though some limited mental health information is available through the CWS/CMS and Cerner systems.

Because FHL is housed within the county's Human Services Agency, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between it and the Health Care Agency to govern the data-sharing aspects of the program. This agreement spells out what type of data will be shared with FHL and how. It also describes the responsibilities of each agency, including those related to protection of privacy and security.

Security

The Foster Health Link website and mobile application are hosted on a secure, Verisign-encrypted server—the same type of security used in online banking. As noted above, system access is granted only to authorized individuals, who utilize credentials with built-in security clearance.

WHAT'S NEXT

Longer term, the partnership would like to deploy a version of FHL that is made available to older foster youth and broaden the data to include information from Ventura County school systems. In addition, the partnership hopes to expand the scope of information displayed from the Health Care Agency as the infrastructure allows for a segmented data approach—for example, one that would enable the display of Cerner-housed data for adolescents.

PROJECT PARTNERS

The Children's Partnership; Ventura County Human Services Agency; Ventura County Health Care Agency; Verizon Foundation; Ventura County Medical Resource Foundation; Sierra Health Foundation; and Trilogy Integrated Resources.

For more information

- [Top Reasons Why Electronic Care Coordination Can Help Children and Youth in Foster Care Beat the Odds](#)
- Ventura County Foster Health Link, <http://fostervckids.org/fhl/>
- Ventura County Foster Health Link Overview, <http://fostervckids.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/FHL-White-paper.pdf>

The Children's Partnership (TCP) is a policy and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children, especially those at risk of being left behind, have the opportunities and resources they need to grow up healthy and lead productive lives. We work to identify emerging trends and develop high-impact solutions to improve the health and opportunities available to help children succeed. TCP works nationally and in California with staff in Santa Monica, Sacramento, and Washington, DC. For more information, please visit www.childrenspartnership.org. Follow us on Twitter: [@kidspartnership](https://twitter.com/kidspartnership). Like us on Facebook: fb.com/kidspartnership.