



Board Briefing Report

DATE: April 16, 2026
TO: Board of Supervisors
FROM: Sanja Bugay, Director, Department of Social Services
SUBJECT: California Automated Response and Engagement System (CARES)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The California Automated Response and Engagement System (CARES) is the statewide child welfare information system being developed by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) to replace the legacy Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS) and to meet federal Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) requirements. The statewide CARES implementation is currently planned for October 2026 and will be mandated for all counties.

The first phase of CARES, which referred to as CARES Version 1 (V1), is intended to provide the core functionality necessary to fully decommission CWS/CMS while supporting new and evolving state and federal policy requirements, including the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA). The system is intended to streamline business processes, reduce duplicative data entry, improve cross-program integration and enhance engagement with families, caregivers, Courts, providers and partner agencies. CARES includes multiple service areas including but not limited to: Intake, Resource Management, Case Management, Courts, Eligibility, Financial Management, Resource Family Approval (RFA), Administration and Reporting. Fresno County is a designated core constituent county for the Intake, Administration and Resource Family Approval modules and has been actively participating in statewide design, validation and testing activities since 2022.

The purpose of this briefing is to provide the Board of Supervisors with an overview of the CARES project, Fresno County's role, anticipated impacts, key risks and the planned implementation timeline.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Implementation of CARES represents a major statewide systems conversion affecting all core child welfare business functions. Key policy considerations for the Board include:

- Ensuring continuity of critical child welfare operations during system transition.
- Readiness of staff, infrastructure and partner agencies prior to go-live.
- Oversight of data conversion, system security and compliance with state and federal requirements.
- Managing operational risk during cutover from CWS/CMS to CARES.
- Alignment of local implementation plans with statewide governance, training and readiness standards established by CDSS.

No Board policy action is required at this time; however, continued Board awareness and oversight will be important as the project approaches implementation.

HISTORY/STATUS

From 2016 through 2021, California undertook statewide planning and pre-development activities in response to federal CCWIS regulations. This work included assessment of CWS/CMS limitations, stakeholder and county engagement, system visioning and funding and procurement planning which culminated in the formal launch of the CARES design, development and validation phase by the CDSS in June 2022, at which time counties, including Fresno, began participating as core constituent partners.

CARES V1 is intended to deliver the minimum viable functionality required to:

- Decommission CWS/CMS statewide.
- Support core child welfare business processes.
- Meet federal Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) compliance requirements.
- Support new policy mandates such as FFPSA.

Fresno County is a core constituent county for the Intake, Administration and Resource Family Approval modules and has participated in:

- Business requirements definition
- Design reviews
- Prototyping and demonstrations
- Testing and validation activities

The original development strategy relied on a modular, incremental delivery approach. Due to technical integration challenges and limitations in incorporating late-stage business feedback, CDSS has shifted to a more holistic, end-to-end design approach. This approach allows stakeholders to evaluate CARES in the context of complete business processes rather than isolated functions.

Since September 2025, CDSS has conducted a series of statewide demonstrations showcasing:

- End-to-end business scenarios
- User workflows and navigation
- Key system functions
- Data entry and case progression

The CARES project is currently in the design, development and validation phase, with formal implementation activities scheduled to begin in mid-2026. A limited number of counties may participate in early pilot or production simulation activities prior to statewide go-live.

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

At this time, the CARES system is being developed and funded at the state level. No direct system development costs are anticipated to be incurred by Fresno County.

However, anticipated local fiscal and resource impacts include:

- Staff time dedicated to design, testing, validation, training and readiness activities.
- Backfill or overtime costs associated with staff participation in statewide activities.
- Local technical readiness costs, including hardware, network and security preparation.
- Training and change management costs in advance of go-live.
- Temporary productivity impacts during the transition period.

County staff will continue to monitor and report any material fiscal impacts as the project moves closer to implementation.

INTERESTED COMMUNITY GROUPS / OTHER PUBLIC AGENCIES

Implementation of CARES will directly affect multiple internal and external stakeholders, including:

- Caregivers and foster families
- Children, youth and families served by the Department
- Department of Behavioral Health
- Probation Department
- Superior Court and Court partners
- County Counsel and dependency attorneys
- Tribal governments and tribal child welfare partners
- Community-based service providers

A comprehensive communication and stakeholder engagement plan will be developed to ensure all partners are informed and prepared for the system transition.

FOCUS OF STAFF ACTIVITY

Fresno County Department of Social Services (DSS) is actively engaged in CARES readiness activities, including:

- Participation in statewide demonstrations and design reviews
- Review and validation of forms and reports
- User acceptance testing and data validation
- Participation in project implementation and governance meetings
- Development of local change management and communication strategies

DSS has launched a CARES staff portal to provide ongoing updates and project communications to staff at all levels.

ALTERNATIVES / OPTIONS

Because the CARES system is a mandatory; there is no alternative system option available to counties.

However, contingency and business continuity planning is underway at the state level to address:

- System stability risks
- Data conversion issues
- Cutover and rollback procedures
- Interim operational procedures in the event of system disruption

Fresno County will align its local contingency planning with the statewide CARES business continuity framework as it is finalized.

ACTION TIMEFRAME

Current high-level implementation milestones include:

- May–October 2026: Production Simulation Environment available statewide
- June 2026: Web-based training for all staff begins
- August 2026: Early instructor-led training begins
- October 2026: Statewide CARES go-live

Additional readiness milestones will be established through CDSS and the Office of Technology Services and Innovation (OTSI) as implementation planning progresses.

CONTACT PERSON

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