

■ Executive Summary

California's system for providing services to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities needs reform.

The system is coordinated by a network of 21 nonprofit agencies called regional centers, with oversight from the California Department of Developmental Services. The regional center structure was created in 1969 to help individuals and families access available health, public health, and education systems and provide guidance on how to navigate these systems to meet their unique needs.

Decades of research has identified persistent and ongoing disparities in the availability and quality of services among racial and ethnic groups and among geographic localities. The Commission found inconsistencies in data reporting, technologies, vendorization processes, support for regional center governing boards, and availability of client support.

This report includes seven recommendations to reduce geographic and ethnic disparities so that all who are entitled to services receive similar access.

RECOMMENDATION 1: INCREASE CONSISTENCY IN CLIENT EXPERIENCES ACROSS REGIONAL CENTERS

Each of the state's 21 regional centers currently has discretion to establish its own processes to assess individuals for services, to determine the array of services offered, and to craft policies for providing information to those seeking help. This means the level of care can vary significantly for different individuals – even if they have similar needs.

Strategies for Change:

- a. The Department of Developmental Services should create a consistent intake process to be used by all regional centers.
- b. The Department and regional centers should use technology to make it easier for people to find out what services are available.

- c. The Legislature should require the Department to identify a standard set of core services that should be delivered by every regional center by 2025.

RECOMMENDATION 2: TARGET AND REDUCE RACIAL AND ETHNIC DISPARITIES

Numerous research studies, as well as anecdotal evidence gathered through our investigation, show that there are pervasive disparities in the quality and availability of services among different racial and ethnic groups. The Department of Developmental Services could better use data to identify disparities in spending and service access.

Strategies for Change:

- a. Lawmakers should require the Department to create standard categories to measure the racial and ethnic characteristics of clients receiving services.
- b. The Department should conduct robust analyses using existing data to better understand disparities.
- c. The Department should require regional centers to consistently report on additional metrics by various demographic characteristics.

RECOMMENDATION 3: STRENGTHEN STATE OVERSIGHT OF THE DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES SYSTEM

The system's emphasis on local control makes it difficult for the state to provide oversight and address regional disparities. The Department of Developmental Services has an obligation to understand what is and is not working across the 21 regional centers and to step in and address systemwide problems when necessary.

Strategies for Change:

- a. Lawmakers should amend statute to grant the Director of the Department the authority to issue general directives over the system of regional centers.

- b. The Department should issue detailed guidance to assist regional centers and others to understand the regulations regarding service codes and how they may be used.
- c. Lawmakers should conduct an evaluation of the regional center system to identify policy and procedural differences among the 21 regional centers, assess effectiveness in achieving client outcomes, and identify opportunities for additional standardization.

RECOMMENDATION 4: MODERNIZE TECHNOLOGY

The current data systems used by the Department of Developmental Services were developed in the 1980s and lack the functionality to provide real-time financial and client data, making it difficult for the department to provide effective oversight of the regional center system. Further, regional centers use six different case management systems, none of which interfaces with the others.

Strategies for Change:

- a. Lawmakers should amend statutory language to require all regional centers to also use a single system to track service delivery.
- b. The Department should articulate a project scope, plan, budget, and timeframe for the development of unified accounting and case management systems, as well as describe their intended functionality and how the new systems will solve existing technology problems.

RECOMMENDATION 5: STANDARDIZE THE VENDORIZATION PROCESS

The licensing process service providers must undergo to become vendors is inconsistent across regional centers. Challenges for service providers to enter the system can impact the availability of services.

Strategies for Change:

- a. Lawmakers should require the Department to standardize the vendorization process to make it easier for service providers to participate in the system.

RECOMMENDATION 6: STRENGTHEN AND ENHANCE SUPPORT FOR REGIONAL CENTER GOVERNING BOARDS

Regional governing boards make critical decisions about services provided in their communities. More should be done to ensure board decisions are independent and board members are fully equipped to participate in board decisions.

Strategies for Change:

- a. Lawmakers should add Gubernatorial board appointees, restrict regional center executive staff from involvement in board selection, and enhance board protections from retaliatory action.
- b. Lawmakers should require the Department to increase facilitation services to improve consumer participation on boards and enhance board training opportunities.

RECOMMENDATION 7: IMPROVE SERVICE COORDINATION

State law includes a requirement for individuals and families to access all “generic” resources before receiving services through the regional center. While some families have access to help to navigate these programs, many do not. Limited resources are available to provide additional needed support.

- a. The Department should convene a taskforce with relevant state and county agencies to streamline the process of accessing generic services.
- b. The Department should develop, and the Legislature should fund, a competitive grant program to enhance navigation services for regional center clients.