The Next California Governor Can Build a California Where all our Children and Families are *Valued and Free*

A future where our children and families grow up secure, respected, nurtured, valued, and free from racism is within our grasp. This vision of our future guides our priorities and actions, informing the strategies we use to turn vision into reality.

A blueprint that IMAGINEs a more hopeful future for children, families, and vulnerable communities.

California's landscape is always evolving. The successes and challenges of the last decade have shifted our vision of the future and its possibilities. A northstar agenda to end child poverty in California has resulted in bold investments that lifted millions of children and families out of poverty. However, manufactured cruelty at the hands of the Trump Administration's policies and budget cuts are working to dismantle the future of California's children.

California must respond with a blueprint that restores faith in our democratic process and hope for the children and families who call the Golden State home.

The IMAGINE Agenda is rooted in five shared values that define the California we envision: a California where every child and family is secure, nourished, respected, valued, and free. Together, these pillars call for progressive revenue to protect families from federal cuts; food, health care, and cash assistance for all; dignified work and accessible child care; strong, community-rooted support for children and families; and bold investments to advance economic and racial justice and close the racial wealth gap. This is a northstar agenda to end child poverty in California by dismantling the policies and systems that create it and building a promising future for children, families, and vulnerable communities.

A Decade Long Effort to Cement A North Star Legacy of Ending Child Poverty in California

The End Child Poverty California Coalition emerged following the passage of the Lifting Children and Families Out of Poverty Act (AB 1520, 2017), a milestone achievement of grassroots activism and community leadership. The Lifting Children and Families Out of Poverty Task Force developed the End Child Poverty Plan, a comprehensive roadmap that identified 43 evidence-based recommendations to end deep poverty and reduce child poverty statewide.

As a catalyst for increased investment in child and family-first policies, the End Child Poverty Plan was incredibly successful. Since 2017, our coalition has been able to *achieve full or partial progress on all 43 recommendations. California has invested billions to lift children and families out of poverty.*

Highlights of these bold achievements include:

- Ending Deep Child Poverty for most households by lifting CalWORKs grants above 50% of the federal poverty line (unless the household has an excluded member)
- First in the nation universal school meals for all, and nation-leading implementation of SUN Bucks to prevent child hunger year round
- Establishing HOPE Accounts, the nation's largest and California's first Baby Bonds program
- Reimagining CalWORKs through a landmark set of initial evidence-based reforms toward an anti-racist, trauma informed, and family-centered program
- Among first in the nation states to make ongoing investments in community schools and place-based partnerships through Promise Neighborhoods
- Historic progress toward universal childcare access and compensating providers to match the true cost of care, including enabling childcare providers to collectively bargain
- Creating the California Young Child and Foster Youth Tax Credits, and expanding all refundable tax credits to ITIN holders
- First in the nation state-funded Guaranteed Income programs
- Nation-leading wages for fast food, healthcare, and other sectors to provide pathways out of poverty
- Significant progress toward Health and Food for All

However, child poverty rates have already partly rebounded, as temporary pandemic solutions expired and corporate greed resulted in historic cuts to America's social safety net.

Cruelty by Design: Trump Administration Policies and Budget Cuts are Working to Dismantle Our Future for California's Children and Families.

According to 2024 data on poverty, income, and health from the U.S. Census Bureau's **Current Population Survey**, California's **overall poverty rate was 17.7%**, and **its child poverty rate was 18.6%** (as measured by the **Supplemental Poverty Measure**). These figures indicate that California still has the highest overall child poverty rates in the country.

- Despite California being the fourth-largest economy in the world, about **7 million** Californians live in poverty, and **nearly 2 million Californians** live in deep poverty.
- The racial wealth gap persists as Black, Latine, Indigenous, AAPI, and immigrant Californians continue to disproportionately experience poverty. **Black (23.3%) and Latine (22.7%) Californians experience poverty at almost twice the rate of white Californians (13.3%).**
- In California alone, the richest 1% of households are expected to receive an average federal tax cut of more than $35,000 in 2026, while the lowest-income 20% will receive just $100 on average—an amount unlikely to come close to offsetting higher costs and losses in public benefits.[1]
- **The increases in poverty for all age groups and all racial/ethnic groups from 2021 to 2024 are statistically significant.** This shows that pandemic-era expansions to the social safety net, namely the expanded Child Tax Credit, SNAP/CalFresh emergency allotments, and Pandemic EBT, successfully combated both overall poverty and child poverty. **Poverty in California dropped to 10.5% in 2021,** the lowest it had been over the last decade. Expirations of these proven programs led to historic spikes in poverty and a return to pre-pandemic levels as California's 2019 SPM was **17.2%** (about 6.7 million people).

Federal immigration attacks and budget cuts are worsening affordability challenges for families, and accelerating systemic racial, income, and wealth inequities.

[1] California Budget & Policy Center. (July, 2025). H.R. 1 and the Federal Budget: How California Leaders Can Respond to Trump's Cuts. California Budget & Policy Center.

Poverty rates will only skyrocket as the Trump Administration rolls out its implementation of **H.R.1** and regressive tariff policy unfold, consumers will continue to bear the brunt of increased grocery bills and everyday costs. **Californians with low incomes, immigrants, and households of color will face the most financial hardship** as thousands have lost access to their MediCal/Medicaid and CalFresh/SNAP benefits, are excluded from the federal Child Tax Credit, and face increasing threats from immigration enforcement.

Federal cuts will transfer enormous costs and pressures onto California. The federal budget majorly reduced Medicaid and SNAP funding that will destabilize the state budget and affect millions of Californians, including children, immigrants, older adults, and people with disabilities for years to come. The scale of the threat is difficult to overstate: California could lose between $112 billion and $187 billion in federal health care funding alone over the next decade[2] and at the same time be subject to a $2 billion SNAP payment error rate penalty[3] requiring the state to absorb billions of dollars in benefit costs previously funded entirely by the federal government.

H.R.1 implementation, coupled with the tariff hikes, **will leave the bottom 99 percent of Americans with less after-tax-and-transfer income by 2027**, while the wealthiest 1% of Americans continue to profit. H.R.1 legalizes the largest upward transfer of wealth from working-class Americans to the ultrawealthy in U.S. history by balancing harmful tax and spending cuts on the backs of our most vulnerable children and families.

We are at an inflection point. **H.R.1** will push millions more into poverty and widen existing **racial disparities**, California has an opportunity to counter the federal administration's harmful, regressive policies and continue progress toward a more equitable future. Bold investments are needed to achieve this vision, and the time to act is now. Poverty is not inevitable—it is the result of policy choices.

California must not lose sight of its moral compass and north star agenda to end child poverty across the state.

California has made progress in the face of negative odds. California remains as the fourth largest economy in the world and public benefit programs like CalFresh do more than help families meet their basic needs—they function as economic stimulus in the local food economy. While fear of progressive efforts to establish a human rights economy has been met with resistance from billionaires and corporate greed,

[2] California Budget & Policy Center. (July, 2025). H.R. 1 and the Federal Budget: How California Leaders Can Respond to Trump's Cuts. California Budget & Policy Center.
[3] https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/5126

Californians continue to show up determined to an anti-racist and poverty-free state where children and families can thrive.

A blueprint that IMAGINE's a more hopeful future for children, families, and vulnerable communities.

Building beyond the framework of the **End Child Poverty Plan** is essential to meet the needs of current and future Californians. We must think boldly and creatively to ensure long-term prosperity for our communities.

End Child Poverty California Coalition has developed the **IMAGINE agenda**; a movement for change, focusing on the whole needs of children and families.

End Child Poverty CA - IMAGINE Pillars

We Are Secure: Dismantling Poverty by Design

Raise Progressive Revenues to Fight Federal Cuts and Inequality: California must not balance the budget on the backs of children and families.

California's next governor will take office at a moment when the state faces a fundamental choice: allow federal disinvestment to deepen poverty and inequality, or use California's wealth of resources to protect families and build a more equitable future. California must strengthen its revenue base and ensure that the wealthiest individuals and most profitable corporations contribute their fair share toward the public systems and services that make our communities—and our economy—thrive. Without new ongoing revenue, these losses will place enormous pressure on the state to reduce public benefit access for healthcare and food assistance, be defenseless against anti-immigrant exclusionary policies, and increase child and family poverty.

We Are Nourished: No One Goes Hungry & End Child Poverty

Fulfill the promise of Food for All regardless of age, ability, and immigration status.

Since July 2025, California has seen a consistent CalFresh caseload decline (CalFresh Households: - **5.12%;** Individual CalFresh Cases: **- 6.67%)** due in part to H.R. 1's xenophobic immigrant policy and the adoption of new harsh work requirements. The 2026-2027 budget made investments in county administrative, CalFresh outreach assistance, food banks, and case worker response. Yet, it failed to restore benefits for refugee children and families who are no longer eligible for CalFresh and ineligible for the California Food Assistance Program (CFAP), our state-funded version of CalFresh, without state legislative changes and investment.

We urge California's next governor to be California's anti-hunger champion by providing state-funded CFAP benefits to:

- All children regardless of immigration status
- Immigrant refugees excluded from CalFresh due to H.R. 1
- Households no longer eligible for CalFresh due to H.R. 1 (especially children 14-17 who have lost their dependency status under H.R. 1),
- Seniors 55+, regardless of immigration status access as committed to in prior budget years.

Due to the threat of the CalFresh payment error rates resulting in a $2 billion state penalty, concerns have arisen about the state's future participation in the CalFresh program. We urge California to develop a plan to combat a statewide hunger crisis. This plan should include efforts to limit the overreliance of unregulated private sector artificial intelligence contracts that replace first responder county social workers and heightened risk of algorithmic bias based on race, gender, ability, and immigration status, which further decreases access to benefits.

End Child Poverty by Reimagining CalWORKs

California must preserve and build upon the gains made through the 2025–2026 budget that began to reimagine CalWORKs as a program designed to support, rather than punish, families experiencing poverty. The next Governor has an opportunity to increase CalWORKs grants to 50 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) for a household that is one person larger than the number of people in the family (AU +1), further eliminate sanctions and punitive policies that reduce or eliminate cash assistance, strengthen family reunification, and continue dismantling the sexist and racist policies that disproportionately bar Black and Latina mothers from accessing the lifesaving support they need. By empowering families to choose their own pathways out of poverty, CalWORKs helps two generations at a time.

At the same time, California must protect CalWORKs families from budget shifts that undermine the program's core purpose. As counties face increased pressure on indigent care programs due to reductions in federal Medi-Cal funding, California must ensure that efforts to backfill health care costs do not come at the expense of cash assistance for families experiencing poverty. While we support adequate funding for county indigent care, we urge caution against shifting AB 85 realignment funds in ways that result in cuts to CalWORKs families.

We Are Respected: Dignity, Fair Pay, Worker Justice

Make Quality Child Care Accessible to All Families so Children can Thrive

California cannot achieve economic security for families without ensuring that child care is affordable, accessible, and adequately funded. California must protect and build upon its promise to create 200,000 new child care slots by 2027 while ensuring that expansion does not come at the expense of quality, affordability, or the child care workforce. We urge

the next Governor to adopt a reimbursement methodology that truly fulfills the intent of legislation passed nearly six years ago to establish a full-cost-of-care rate. Child care providers must receive the resources necessary to pay workers fairly, maintain high-quality programs, and serve children with the greatest needs. When families can access reliable care, parents can work, children can learn and thrive, and child care providers can earn a living wage.

Opportunity 4 All, Regardless of Immigration Status

Our coalition proudly endorses the Undocumented Student Led Network's Opportunity 4 All campaign, which seeks to secure equal access to employment opportunities for all students and workers, regardless of immigration status, at public higher education institutions. Public institutions should be places where all Californians can learn, work, contribute, and build a future without fear of exclusion. The next Governor should defend and expand policies that protect immigrant students and workers from discriminatory employment practices and ensure that California's public institutions remain engines of opportunity for all.

Full Pass-Through of Child Support Payments for Families on CalWORKs

California continues to intercept approximately $150 million[4] in child support payments each year from low-income families that currently receive CalWORKs, rather than allowing those funds to pass-through to the children they were intended to support. And this policy has resulted in over $6 billion dollars of government-owed child support that causes incalculable financial and social harm. The interception of child support payments stems from racist and sexist stereotypes about black families and those who must turn to public assistance. California cannot close the racial wealth gap and end child poverty until it reforms the child support program.

We Are Valued: Every Family Belongs

It Takes a Village: For the Next Generation

We urge the next Governor to invest in designated funding for Promise Neighborhoods to strengthen their partnership with Community Schools—creating place-based partnerships and equity-focused, data-driven systems that respond to the needs of California's most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods through trusted community partners. Promise Neighborhoods have connected families to basic needs: food, housing, health care, education, mental health services, child care, and other supports while strengthening the trusted relationships that help the whole child and whole neighborhood thrive.

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[4] California Department of Child Support Services. (2026). *Supplemental report of the 2024-25 budget act regarding full pass-through of child support to families currently receiving California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs)*. https://dcss.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/345/2026/02/SupplementalReport_BudgetAct_24-25_02192026.pdf

Health 4 All

California must protect health care access from federal disinvestment and ensure that immigrant families are not forced to choose between health care and other basic needs. We urge the next Governor to restore full-scope Medi-Cal for all immigrant Californians by eliminating enrollment lockouts or "freezes", not cutting full-scope Medi-Cal eligibility for certain immigrant populations, not imposing state-mandated premiums, ensuring immigrants have access to all Medi-Cal benefits including dental, and rejecting work requirements that mirror harsh federal policies. California should further reject discriminatory proposals that shift the costs of health care onto counties and families, including cuts to In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) and drastic reductions to the Medi-Cal asset test, which will force older adults and people with disabilities to impoverish themselves to access health care services.

California must recognize that health care is an economic and racial justice issue. Protecting Medi-Cal and IHSS protects children, caregivers, people with disabilities, and older adults. The next Governor should also prioritize implementing efforts that require California's largest corporations to help cover the cost when their employees rely on public benefits, such as Medi-Cal and CalFresh, due to low wages and lack of employer-based health benefits.

We Are Free: Economic & Racial Justice to Dismantle the Racial Wealth Gap

Reducing the Racial Wealth Gap: The Promise of Baby Bonds

The California HOPE for Children Trust Account Program ("HOPE Accounts"), established by the California Legislature in 2022, is a pioneering initiative and the country's largest and most ambitious baby bonds effort. It demonstrates California's commitment to setting a new standard for asset building for the state's most vulnerable youth. HOPE Accounts will provide more than 50,000 California children and youth who have experienced the loss of a parent or caregiver to COVID-19 or extended periods in state or tribal foster care with a nest egg of approximately $3,000 by the time they reach adulthood.

Research demonstrates that a well-funded baby bonds program can generate some of the greatest gains in wealth for Black and Latine households, making baby bonds a powerful tool for advancing racial and economic justice. In Los Angeles County and across California, expanding baby bonds could significantly increase wealth among families who have historically been excluded from opportunities to accumulate assets and pass wealth across generations. We urge the next Governor to restore the $40 million cut from the original $100 million investment for HOPE Accounts and expand HOPE Accounts to all children born via a Medi-Cal covered birth and infants (0-1) enrolled in Medi-Cal.

Guaranteed Income

California should build on the gains made via the California Guaranteed Income (GI) Pilot Program by establishing a permanent statewide guaranteed income that can alleviate poverty and promote economic well-being for all low-income Californians. A permanent statewide guaranteed income should complement, rather than replace, existing public benefits and should be designed by and for the people it is intended to serve, minimize administrative barriers, protect eligibility for other essential programs, and prioritize communities experiencing the greatest levels of poverty and economic insecurity.

Expand Low-Income Tax Credits to Ensure Families Have Access to Life-Stabilizing Tax Credits

California should strengthen and expand refundable tax credits that put money directly into the hands of low- and moderate-income families. The California Earned Income Tax Credit (CalEITC), Young Child Tax Credit (YCTC), and other state refundable tax credits have demonstrated the power of tax policy to reduce poverty, support working families, and provide flexible resources that families can use according to their needs. Credits go beyond supporting the family, for every one dollar spent on refundable tax credits, two dollars are spent back into local economies.[5] The next Governor should expand eligibility and benefit levels for low-income tax credits, expand investments in free tax preparation and Individual Taxpayer Identification Number application and renewal services, and ensure that families who are most likely to be excluded can receive the full benefit for which they qualify.

Criminal Justice and Youth Justice proposals

California cannot end child poverty without addressing the ways that the criminal and immigration system destabilizes families and limits economic opportunity for young people of color. We urge the next Governor to advance policies that reduce the criminalization of poverty, invest in community-based safety, and prevent unnecessary involvement of children and families in the juvenile, immigration, and criminal legal systems. California should prioritize prevention and healing over punitive approaches that disproportionately harm Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and other communities of color. Youth justice must be rooted in the belief that young people are sacred. California should also eliminate policies that create lifelong barriers to housing, education, employment, and economic mobility for young people and families who have interacted with the criminal or immigrant legal system.

[5] Griffin, K. (August, 2022). Tax Credits Are Powerful Weapon in Fight Against Poverty. National Conference of State Legislatures.