The CARES Explorer

Your newsletter and guide to discovering the world of CWS-CARES

CARES
Child Welfare Services

"Find something you're passionate about and keep tremendously interested in it."

 - Julia Child

Welcome back for another adventure through the world of Child Welfare Services - California Automated Response and Engagement System (CWS-CARES)!

Every three months, we will continue to publish updates, highlight new information and raise awareness on the latest developments to navigate your journey to Go-Live. For all the latest news from CWS-CARES, don't forget to **subscribe** and share this newsletter with staff as needed.

The CARES Compass is a bimonthly two-page summary of upcoming communications and project highlights.

Subscribe to future CARES Explorer issues! Join our mailing list

CARES Explorer Navigation

SAVE THE DATE

The next CWS-CARES Stakeholder Briefing will be held on Wednesday, January 29, 2025 from 9am – 12pm. Registration is now open!

Meet the Stakeholders

Leadership Corner: A Letter from Jessica Rougeux

As the holiday season approaches, it's a time for reflection, gratitude, and celebration. It's a season filled with joy, love, and the warmth of human connection. While we often focus on the hustle and bustle of the season, it's also an opportunity to pause and appreciate the relationships that enrich our lives. Whether it's spending time with loved ones, volunteering in our communities, or simply reaching out to a friend, these connections are the true gifts of the season. We are grateful for the opportunity to serve our counties, tribes, and partners. We are particularly thankful for our dedicated team, whose hard work and commitment make our mission possible.

Recent accomplishments include **finalizing 4,500 functional requirements** and the completion of the **core domain data model**. Work on holistic design is progressing as planned with all business process scenarios, applications flows and over 445 technical specifications / blueprints completed in five process groups: Ongoing Case Work, Finish a Case, Courts Processing, Eligibility and Resource Family Approval (RFA). Final preparations are underway for **Extended User Scenario Testing (EUST) 2**. Initial design demonstrations were delivered to our core constituents in September and October 2024, and 8 milestones are being prepared for EUST 2 in March 2025.

Let us carry the spirit of the holiday season with us as we move forward into the new year. Let's continue to build strong relationships, support one another, and strive to make a difference in the lives of others.

Wishing you a joyous holiday season and a peaceful New Year,

Jessica Rougeux
Chief, Child Welfare System Branch
California Department of Social Services

Office of Technology and Solutions Integration (OTSI): CWS-CARES Technology Sponsor Overview

The California Office of Technology and Solutions Integration (OTSI) is responsible for the successful delivery of our large, complex IT systems statewide. As such, OTSI is the technology sponsor of CWS-CARES, and provides ongoing leadership and direction to support the successful delivery of CARES.

As the technology sponsor, OTSI participates in various areas of the CWS-CARES system development. Technical and subject matter experts provide guidance on user experience, state, and federal policy, and ensure that the project is on schedule for delivery. OTSI also administers and manages the CWS-CARES project. This includes project plan management and reporting, project integration, budget oversight, and contract management.

Two of the primary project resources that OTSI manages are the CWS-CARES Monthly Legislative Update and the CWDS Planning Roadmap. The roadmap is bigger picture, and includes milestone descriptions, critical training and implementation activities, and Extended User Scenario Testing (EUST) periods through CARES V1 Go-live in October 2026. The monthly legislative report is more tactical in nature and offers detailed statuses on key project milestones and implementation activities.

CWS-CARES Communications Roles

Your guide on how to participate & support CWS-CARES communications

The CWS-CARES Project team partners with organizations to ensure information is shared effectively. Each organization has **three key communication roles for CWS-CARES** that foster statewide adoption and utilization of CWS-CARES. More roles will be added in the future to support growing communication needs.

	Role	Ways to Stay Informed	
Single Point of Contact (SPOC)	• **Principal point of contact** for communication between the CWS-CARES Project and the organization • **Disseminate** communications shared by the CWS-CARES Project to organization staff	• **CARES Compass**: Bimonthly 2-page summary of upcoming CWS-CARES highlights • **CARES Explorer**: Published quarterly to keep audiences informed on CWS-CARES through a full-length newsletter	• **CWS-CARES Meeting Calendar** • **CWS-CARES Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)** • **CWDS Glossary** • Regional User Group (RUGs) Meetings • CWDS Email Updates
Implementation Coordinator	• Serves as the **primary point of contact** between the Organization and the CWS-CARES Implementation Team • Works closely with a designated CWS-CARES Implementation Lead to conduct, manage, track, and report on Organization readiness activities • Oversees and ensures implementation readiness activities are completed to prepare the Organization and end-users to Go-Live with CWS-CARES	• **Implementation Portal**: Implementation, OCM, and Training Information • **Bimonthly Implementation Meeting**: Implementation, OCM, and Training updates, as well as overall project status and functionality updates	• **Monthly Implementation Readiness Meetings:** Review, discuss, and plan implementation readiness activities with CWS-CARES Implementation Leads • **Quarterly Go-Live Readiness Dashboard Reports**: Review readiness status, mitigate risks, and discuss next steps
OCM Coordinator	• Leads the support and preparation of Organization staff through the changes coming with CWS-CARES • Coordinates delivery of OCM communications and activities, including tailoring communications, if needed • Understands the organization's current (as-is) and future (to-be) business processes and leads tailoring updates to business processes and policies and procedures	• **Implementation Portal**: Implementation, OCM, and Training Information • **CWS-CARES Video Series**: Short videos that highlight the purpose and benefits of CWS-CARES	

CWS-CARES Stakeholder Briefings
The CWS-CARES Project holds regular Stakeholder Briefings with live demonstrations, Q&A, and project updates.

County Spotlight: How Humboldt County is Building Awareness through Engagement

As part of its organizational change management (OCM) strategy, **Humboldt County** is finding creative ways to build awareness and enthusiasm for CWS-CARES. At a recent all-staff meeting, the county's Implementation Team facilitated a **live trivia game** with game-show music featuring 11 questions about CWS-CARES. The questions ranged from "What does CWS-CARES stand for?" to "What is the go-live date for CWS-CARES?"

This activity reflects a broader effort to promote CWS-CARES in a way that highlights the benefits of the new system while encouraging active participation from staff. The results were **overwhelmingly positive**. Staff were engaged, enthusiastic, and eager to demonstrate their understanding of CWS-CARES. Looking ahead, the team plans to incorporate similar quizzes at future meetings and offer CWS-CARES-branded items as prizes.

Explore CWS-CARES

In this section, we will further explore service areas, system functionality, and workgroups like interfaces, content management, data conversion, and external systems.

Federal Reports, State Reports, and Ad-hoc Reports: Highlights for CWS-CARES

There are three Milestones that focus on reporting:

Federal Reports
Federal Reports extends and consolidates metric development completed in previous milestones to generate required Federal Extracts (e.g., National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD)) and deliver interactive dashboard views of Federal Statewide Indicators and other required Federal reports, including those required to draw down Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) funds. CWS-CARES dashboards will support pulling multiple populations as appropriate, including entry cohorts, exit cohorts, attribute- defined cohorts and point-in-time snapshots.

State Reports
State Reports) extends and consolidates metric development completed in previous milestones to deliver interactive thematic dashboard views of both State and Federal metrics. Thematic dashboards organize process, practice (fidelity) and outcome metrics by theme, such as Prevention, Safety and Permanency.

Ad-hoc Reports
In addition to the planned reports that will be available when CARES V1 goes live (federal and state requirements, key outcomes, and practice measures), CARES will provide data consumers with the ability to develop their own reports using Tableau. They will have access to all appropriate CARES data in close to real time, translated into the categories and terminology that are meaningful to child welfare practitioners and researchers. This will include the kinds of historical needed to perform longitudinal studies.

The future of SafeMeasures® and Structured Decision Making® (SDM) Assessments with the Implementation of CWS-CARES

SafeMeasures® and Structured Decision Making®(SDM) are two interconnected tools developed by a company called Evident Change. They are used by child welfare agencies to improve decision-making and service delivery. The majority of counties use these tools today. There have been many questions regarding the future of SafeMeasures and Structured Decision Making (SDM) assessments with the implementation of CWS-CARES.

1. SDM tools will be embedded into CWS-CARES Version 1 and the SafeMeasures integration is currently being planned.
2. Counties will not incur additional costs for the integration and maintenance of SafeMeasures and SDM into CWS-CARES.
3. Counties will continue to be responsible for their contracts until **June 30, 2028**.
4. The state will assume the costs of SafeMeasures starting **July 1, 2028**.

Seamless Integration into CWS-CARES

SDM® assessments will be integrated into CWS-CARES Version 1, providing users with a unified experience through single sign-on access. The SafeMeasures integration is currently being planned. Ultimately, SafeMeasures and SDM tools will be embedded into CWS-CARES, and up to 25 years of historical data collected through these tools will be accessible.

Unified User Experience

This integration provides a unified user experience and reduces the need for switching between multiple systems. Further, it will ensure continuity for counties, with CWS-CARES handling more direct operational reports and SafeMeasures continuing to provide more complex reporting. SafeMeasures in CWS-CARES will retain its critical and most-used features and reports, as well as the collaborative service relationship between CDSS, counties, and Evident Change.

Not Considered as External Systems

SafeMeasures and SDM will be part of CWS-CARES and should not be treated as separate external systems. Therefore, they will not require the same level of effort or planning as external systems, particularly for tasks like data conversion, ongoing operations, or decommissioning.

SafeMeasures® is secure, web-based data monitoring and reporting service for social service agencies. It collects and processes case management data to provide insights that help staff, supervisors, and managers make better decisions. This includes improving case management, resource allocation, and overall agency performance. Staff use SafeMeasures to view dashboards, maps, Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), lists, and graphs that can be customized to best fit their needs.

Structured Decision Making (SDM)® is a framework designed to help staff make informed and consistent decisions in complex situations. It involves a series of steps to assess risk, consider various options, and select the best course of action.

The future of SafeMeasures® and Structured Decision Making® (SDM) Assessments with the Implementation of CWS-CARES (continued)

State Assumption of Costs

Based on the planned CWS-CARES Version 2 implementation date, the State expects to take over county costs associated with SafeMeasures starting on **July 1, 2028.** As such, counties will continue to be responsible for their existing SafeMeasures contracts and access until **June 30, 2028**. This includes any associated costs during this period.

Counties must continue to submit an Advance Planning Document (APD) to the California Department of Social Services prior to executing, renewing, or amending the agreement or paying for associated services.

Please see County Fiscal Letter 23/24-12 for APD submission requirements and details. This means counties shall plan to end their contracts on **June 30, 2028**, and will no longer be responsible for these costs after this date.

CWS-CARES Project Coverage of Costs

The CWS-CARES project will cover the costs associated with integrating SafeMeasures into the system and ongoing maintenance, meaning that there will be no additional costs to county budgets for these specific activities.

[1] The state will assume responsibility for CWS-CARES access costs for all counties. The county will assume all costs associated with contracting or consulting services provided by Evident Change.

Resource Family Approval in CWS-CARES

RFA (Resource Family Approval) supports the process of approving foster and adoptive families and is a component that will be integrated into CWS-CARES. Today, RFA features are not currently available in CWS/CMS, and counties are using other systems for this function.

In the future, **RFA features will be integrated directly into CWS-CARES**, eliminating the need for separate county systems. This will prevent redundancy and streamline the approval process for resource families.
RFA systems currently in use will be retired once CWS-CARES is fully operational, including Binti RFA. Greenfield RFA functionality will be incorporated into CARES V1 and will no longer be a standalone system as it is now.

One of the many RFA features that will be incorporated in CWS-CARES is the **RFA Application Portal**. Potential resource families can apply online, reducing paperwork and speeding up the process. The system guides applicants through the streamlined process of becoming a foster or adoptive parent, ensuring all necessary information is provided.

To prepare for RFA in CWS-CARES, **data conversion** from current RFA systems and migration planning activities are underway. The project plans to migrate existing county RFA data into CWS-CARES. RFA functionality in CWS-CARES is planned for testing in February to March 2026 during the third round of Extended User Scenario Testing (EUST 3).

By automating and streamlining the RFA process, CWS-CARES helps to expedite the approval of resource families, allowing children to be placed in stable, loving homes more quickly.

Holistic Design Update: Thanks for Your Feedback!

As part of the holistic design process, Core Constituents have been participating in prototype demonstrations and giving feedback to improve the user experience.

During Prototype Demonstrations, Core constituents review **prototypes, or pre-build designs of CWS-CARES**, that represent system functionality. Then they provide early feedback on user experience, navigation, and screen actions before the designs go into development.

These demonstrations typically begin with contextual information or a scenario, and then presenters show how a user would navigate through the system. The facilitators also allow time for feedback, and participants can ask to revisit items or ask questions. Occasionally, the discussion uncovers differences in procedures or preferences among counties.

Core Constituents can enter their feedback in Microsoft Teams using a form or ask questions during the demonstrations (the team tracks these items as well). So far, the team has logged **232 feedback items** (as of December 5, 2024). The chart on the right - *Feedback Items by Business Process Area* - summarizes the count of items received.

We have also included common questions and answers about this process on the next page.

So far, the team has logged 232 feedback items.

Feedback Items by Business Process Area
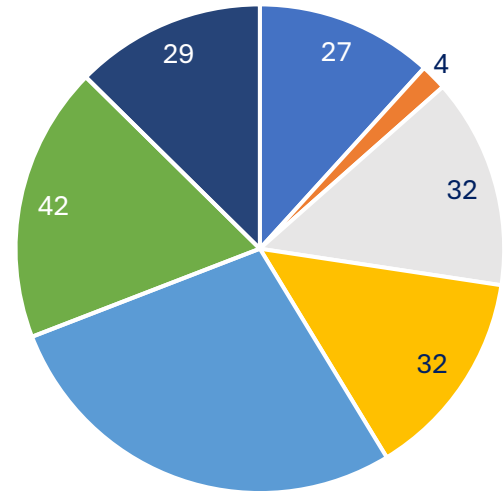
- Case Management - Engagement
- Case Management - Placement
- Courts - Warrants and Court Hearing Framework
- Eligibility
- Intake - Screening
- Investigations - Engagement and Determination
- Service Provider Profile and Services

Holistic Design

The holistic design approach considers the larger Child Welfare ecosystem in which the product exists, and the relationships between functional areas of the product. With holistic design, milestones will be grouped into Process Areas, so that reviews of the CWS-CARES system are conducted in the context of overall business processes.

Holistic design allows the Product Team to:
- Identify dependencies across business areas, design, downstream requirements, and user feedback earlier.
- Conduct analyses across business areas to reduce the likelihood of unexpected findings earlier.
- Gather Core Constituent feedback earlier and at multiple stages of design and build reviews.
- Streamline the user experience with a holistic view of all needs within a process area.

With holistic design, Core Constituents are being involved in the pre-build review of a larger portion of the system. The Product Team demonstrates how the system would function and can gather feedback prior to building the system, making it easier to address feedback.

Questions & Answers: CWS-CARES Prototype Demonstrations and Feedback Process

Will the prototype demonstrations be recorded so that folks can revisit the content later?
Yes, the sessions will be recorded and shared via the Microsoft Teams Channel. Recordings will be available for 3 business days.

Is the Microsoft Teams Channel feedback form the only avenue to provide feedback?
During the prototype sessions, feedback that is given live and in the chat is captured by our team which is then added to the feedback log. Outside of this, the feedback log in the Microsoft Teams Channel is the only avenue to provide feedback. Core Constituents will have additional opportunities to provide feedback in future project phases, including build demonstrations, user feedback, and Extended User Scenario Testing (EUST).

Will Core Constituents have access to the feedback log and the decisions/categorizations made about feedback?
Yes, Core Constituents will be able to see not only the feedback provided and the decisions made regarding it, but also a list of feedback and decisions that other participants have provided as well.

Are we expected to submit feedback through the form if we've already given it verbally during the live demonstration?
The PaaS SI Team will ensure any verbal and chat-entered feedback provided during the call will also be recorded and documented in the feedback log. Participants are also welcome to use the feedback form provided during the session to provide comprehensive feedback during the demonstration.

How long will I have to provide feedback after the prototype demonstration?
The feedback form in the Microsoft Teams Channel will be open for 3 business days after the demonstration.

Can I show the recorded demonstration to others in my county, gather their feedback, and provide it to you via the feedback form on the Microsoft Teams Channel?
We encourage you to invite others in your county to attend and participate in the demonstrations. However, the feedback form will be open for 3 days after the session to gather any offline feedback county users want to share. We request that Core Constituents gather and consolidate all additional feedback and enter it into the feedback form on the Microsoft Teams Channel.

My county has been designated as a Core Constituent for a Service Area I'm not very familiar with. Will there be opportunities for me to be included as a Core Constituent in other Service Areas that I have more experience with?
Counties have been designated to serve as Core Constituents for different Service Areas by recommendation from the County Welfare Director's Association (CWDA). Up to this point in the CWS-CARES Project, we've used those Service Area designations to solicit input from Core Constituents. What Core Constituents will see moving forward in holistic design is a greater emphasis on getting input across Service Areas. For example, all Core Constituents are invited to provide feedback on the upcoming prototype demonstrations. It's not limited to just Core Constituents designated to those Service Areas. We encourage Core Constituents to forward these sessions to colleagues at their organizations with additional expertise.

JNET Interface Update

We are pleased to share that the JNET interface for CWS-CARES is now completed **ahead of schedule**!

JNET is used to track children, youth, and young adults involved in the juvenile justice system, whether as probation wards or child welfare dependents.

The JNET interface is currently in use with CWS/CMS. The interface is being kept in place for CARES V1 at the request of **San Bernardino County**. The functionality in CARES V1 will be identical to the existing functionality in CWS/CMS. The interface will update the courts system with current assignments in CWS-CARES that applies to San Bernardino only.

Find Hidden Gems

In this section, you can learn about various resources to support you and help you find success.

The Power of Plain Language

Did you know that there is a **California law** about writing in plain language? The CWS-CARES Project recognizes the importance of clear communication and aims to create content using this law's guidelines.

Plain language is part of the State's commitment to equity. California's plain language law, Government Code § 6219, applies to all written communications: "Each department, commission, office, or other administrative agency of state government shall write each document that it produces in plain, straightforward language, avoiding technical terms as much as possible, and using a coherent and easily readable style."

Try simplifying to an 8th grade reading level or lower. Avoid complex sentence structure, jargon, and figurative language (such as idioms or metaphors). If you struggle with editing, try reading your writing out loud or using a tool like Hemingway.

The State's Office of Digital Innovation (ODI) has many other helpful resources including a "Plain Language Equity Toolkit" on their ODI Innovation Hub.
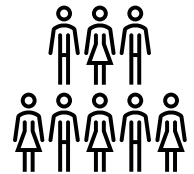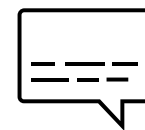
Did you know?

According to a US Census Bureau report, 19% of Californians say they speak English 'less than very well' and 44% of Californians over the age of 5 speak a language other than English at home. Writing in plain language also helps make translation easier.

Organizational Change Management (OCM) Engagement Survey – September 2024

The CWS-CARES Organizational Change Management (OCM) Team disseminated an Engagement Survey to the 58 county child-welfare agency implementation teams (Implementation, OCM, and Training Coordinators and their backups) and representatives from the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) divisions involved in the project: the Child Care Licensing Division (CCLD); Children and Family Services Division (CFSD); and the Research, Automation, and Data Division (RADD).

Purpose
The purpose of this Survey was to gauge the level of preparedness for change at Organizations on behalf of representatives involved with the project and understand their perception of CWS-CARES at this stage in the project.

Format
15 questions were grouped into the following dimensions: Demographics; Compelling Purpose; Product; Stakeholder Engagement; Training and Support; Communications; and Preparation for Change.

Timing
The survey launched September 2nd and closed September 30th, 2024. Note that the Survey's window from September 2nd to 30th coincided with prototype demonstrations beginning September 19th, so several recipients had not yet participated in product demonstrations.

Responses
The Survey's overall response rate was 120 out of 200 **(60%).** 59 out of 61 (97%) Organizations participated. Nearly **60% of respondents have worked in a child welfare-related role for over 10 years**, indicating a strong knowledge base for the needs of child welfare work.

Free Responses - Themes, Summary of Responses, and Mitigation Strategies
The final question of the Survey was a free response question asking respondents if there are questions or comments the project team should review. The free responses were then **shared with the relevant impacted teams**. These included the OCM Team, Implementation Team, Training Team, Strategic Communications Team, External Systems Workgroup, and Product-as-a-Service (PaaS) Team. All of the teams reviewed the language and **suggested mitigation strategies** that are either upcoming in the project roadmap or are new ideas leveraging existing material.

Summary of Findings
Aggregated results indicate that the majority of respondents *agree* or *strongly agree* with statements such as "I believe CWS-CARES will meet future program needs of child welfare work" and "I am aware of ways to provide feedback about CWS-CARES."

Questions resulting in the highest numbers of *disagree* or *strongly disagree* responses were related to external systems ("I understand the impacts that CWS-CARES will have on my Organization's use of external systems.") and preparation for change ("I am confident I will be able to adopt CWS-CARES with ease in the future.").

These findings have been shared and discussed with the appropriate project teams, and mitigation strategies are being developed to address key areas that need improvement.

Invitation to Participate in EUST 2

The CWS-CARES Project is preparing for **Extended User Scenario Testing (EUST) 2**, which is the second round of extended user testing to improve system usability. Previously, testing was limited to certain counties. To broaden participation and gain insights from a more diverse set of users, there is an opportunity for interested Organizations to join the next round of testing, provided they have staff available and access to the EUST 2 environment.

Participation in EUST activities may require organizations to collaborate with their IT/network teams to **configure routing to the CWS-CARES EUST environment**. Further information regarding network setup and connectivity will be provided shortly. The CWS-CARES project requests that **Organizations complete the connectivity setup by mid-January 2025 to prevent any delays**.

Recommended Participant Selection Criteria
EUST 2 participants should have:
- A background in the area being tested (consult the *Scope of EUST 2 Testing* section to the right)
- Availability to conduct CWS-CARES testing activities for approximately 5-10 hours per week from 3/24/2025 - 4/18/2025. Users less familiar with CWS-CARES may need additional time.

Action Requested
Organizations may submit up to 5 primary testers and 5 backup testers if a primary tester is unavailable. Please email the CWS-CARES EUST Mailbox with the list of users from your organization who can fill one or more of the roles below, including their name, email, and current job title by **Tuesday, January 7, 2025**. The project will use this information to establish their system access. Participation is optional for non-core constituent counties.

Feedback Process and Support
As participants complete scenarios, they will be asked to log feedback on the functionalities that they are testing. To support testers throughout the process, we will host virtual office hours where users can drop in to ask questions, receive assistance with navigating CWS-CARES, or discuss any issues. Office hours are optional, and specific timing details will be provided closer to EUST 2.

Once users are configured in the system, we will schedule a 1.5-hour EUST 2 Kickoff to review the CWS-CARES EUST 2 environment, testing and feedback process, and overall expectations. If you have any questions, please contact the CWS-CARES EUST Mailbox.
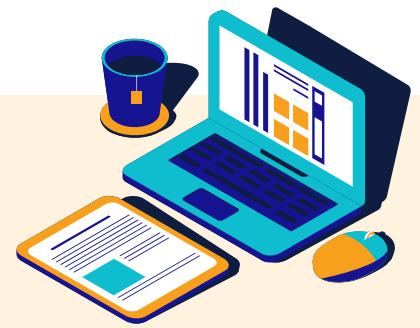
Key Dates
Participation Responses Due:
1/07/2025

Deadline to Establish Connectivity:
1/31/2025

1.5-hour EUST 2 Kickoff:
Week of 3/17/2025 - 3/21/2025

EUST 2 Organization Testing:
3/24/2025 - 4/18/2025

Scope of EUST 2 Testing
EUST 2 participants will complete user scenarios in CWS-CARES related to the following milestones:
- Service Provider Profile
- Services
- Case Management – Engagement
- Case Management – Placement
- Court Hearing Framework
- JNET (San Bernardino County)
- Eligibility - Request Determination
- Redetermine Eligibility
- Foster Care Eligibility Determination (FCED) Interface

Validation of scenarios previously completed in EUST 1:
- Intake
- Investigations

For detailed descriptions of each milestone, please refer to the CWDS Planning Roadmap.

For slides and notes from December information sessions, please contact the CWS-CARES EUST Mailbox.

Stakeholder Briefing Series

Next Session

Wednesday, January 29, 2025
9:00 AM – 12:00 PM
Format: Live Webinar

January 29th Agenda*

- Leadership Remarks
- A Holistic Design & User Feedback Update
- Demonstrations and Feature Highlights:
    - Intake & Investigations (what's changed)
    - Case Management
    - FCED interface
- An External Systems Update
- Implementation, OCM, & Training Updates
- Technology Updates
- Q&A

Agenda is subject to change

Future Dates

2025: January 29th, June 25th, October 23rd
2026: January 28th, April 23rd, June 24th, July 22nd, August 26th, September 23rd

Approach

- Sessions are gradually more frequent
- Sessions are planned on the 4th Wednesday, in the morning
- Biannual sessions June 2024 – June 2025, 2-3 hours
- Quarterly sessions October 2025 – June 2026, Up to 2 hours
- Monthly sessions July 2026 – October 2026, Up to 90 minutes

The CWS-CARES Stakeholder Briefings page on the CWDS website contains session dates, past session recordings, and materials. Please contact your organization's SPOC or Implementation Coordinator if you are interested in attending.

Resources

CWDS Main Page

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

CWDS Bulletins

CWS-CARES Service Areas

CWDS Glossary

Do you have article ideas?
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