



Tipsheet: Health Care Access for Immigrant Youth and Families in California

Last updated: 12/04/2024

Immigration status is a social driver of health ([Castañeda et al., 2015](#)), and immigrant youth and families in California thus face many barriers to health-promoting conditions and access to quality health care. This tipsheet offers practical knowledge to attorneys serving immigrant youth and families who are in need of connecting to medical and behavioral health care. Please note that the information offered here is a starting point; it is critical that attorneys seek information specific to their local context, as policies vary across counties within California.

Immigrants' Rights to Health Care in California

- As of January 2024, [all income-eligible Californians may qualify for full-scope Medi-Cal regardless of immigration status](#). This includes infants through older adults. Review this [overview](#) from the Immigrant Legal Resource Center and the [Medi-Cal income eligibility information](#).
- Under federal law, all individuals receiving health care services in health care systems that receive any federal funding have a right to meaningful language access, which includes interpretation services for all types of health care visits. Review [directory of Medi-Cal interpreter services by county](#).
- Immigrant youth and families may or may not be eligible to receive other health-promoting public benefits, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Eligibility depends on legal status, in addition to income and other requirements. Review this [quick guide](#) and more [in-depth report](#) from the National Immigration Law Center.
- Unaccompanied children (UCs) also have a right to health care in California. Children and youth ages 12 and up who are deemed mature enough can independently consent to sexual and reproductive health care, behavioral health services, and substance use treatment. For other types of health care services, there may be some barriers to obtaining consent for treatment from the caregiver or sponsor, but some medical services can be offered through temporary Medi-Cal or creative service provision. Review the [caregiver's authorization affidavit](#).

Pathways to Health Care for Immigrant Youth and Families

Three of the main pathways to obtaining health care for immigrant youth and their families are:

- [Medi-Cal access systems](#), which are specific to each county.
- [Federally qualified health centers](#), which are community-based clinics and hospitals that provide health care services to underserved populations and areas.
- [School-based health centers](#), which are co-located on public K-12 school campuses throughout the state.



Steps to Access Care

Step 1: Assess urgency/acuity

- If the health care need is emergent or there is imminent risk (including a decline or deterioration in a chronic condition), direct the client to the closest emergency department (regardless of insurance status).
- Otherwise, direct the client to establish their primary care medical home via the public health system (which may include school-based health centers) or through their insurance provider.

Step 2: Obtain health care coverage

- Help the client call or visit a [county Medi-Cal office](#).

Step 3: Establish primary care

- Let the client know they can walk into a [public hospital or federally qualified health center \(FQHC\)](#) to establish care.
- Let the client know they can access health care services at their [school-based health center](#).

Step 4: Access behavioral health care

- Let the client know they can ask their primary care provider for a referral for behavioral health services, or help the client call the [Medi-Cal behavioral health access line for their county](#). Statewide Medi-Cal policy dictates that patients must be offered a behavioral health appointment within 10 days of initial contact.
- Let the client know about the following suicide and crisis prevention hotlines, which are free, available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (except as noted below), and open to anyone, regardless of immigration status or health insurance coverage.

National Suicide and Crisis Prevention Lifeline - call or text 988

Trevor Project (for LGBTQIA+ young people ages 13-24) - call 866-488-7386 or text 'START' to 678-678

Trans Lifeline (for and by trans people, available Monday-Friday 10:00 am-6:00 pm Pacific) - call 877-565-8860 (press 2 to speak with someone in Spanish)

[County crisis lines](#)

Other Resources

[Medi-Cal Expansion Resource Hub](#) via California Immigrant Policy Hub

[San Francisco Asylum Seeker Health Services](#) via SF.gov

[More information about language access protections](#) via National Immigration Law Center

[Immigrant-centered behavioral health care access booklet and videos \(in Spanish\)](#) via Somos Investigadores and UCSF Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences [*coming soon in early 2025 – please check back!*]