

Colorado's Child Welfare System: Reforms and Improvements Underway to Keep Children Safe and Families Healthy

Colorado Counties, Inc. Summary for Denver Post – December 7, 2012

Colorado has invested considerable staff resources and funding in developing and implementing informed and responsible changes to our state's child welfare system to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

All 64 counties have been implementing significant improvements in partnership with the Colorado Department of Human Services, Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Kempe Center, child protection advocates, local and national non-profits agencies, and the legislative and judicial branches. These efforts are directly in alignment and in partnership with the Governor's child welfare plan and the efforts underway within the Department of Human Services.

Examples of system improvements that have been implemented across the state include:

Governor's Three-Year Strategic Plan

- ❖ Counties were involved in helping to develop the strategic plan for the state's child welfare system, titled "Keeping Kids Safe and Families Healthy." Counties support the plan and its components:
 - Create a common practice approach and philosophy for all counties,
 - Expand the Differential Response model to more counties,
 - Use data to drive decisions and improve performance and outcomes,
 - Strengthen caseworker and supervisor training,
 - Take steps to align funding with the spectrum of child welfare needs
 - Improve transparency by expanding the amount of case information that can be made public.

Child Welfare Practice Model

- Colorado's counties began collaborating in 2009 with the State and several federal partners to build a statewide **Child Welfare Practice Model**, which addresses consistency, quality improvement and best practices for child protection services.
- The Practice Model Initiative rolled out to a cohort of 17 counties and one tribe in 2011. Counties begin by developing a **Continuous Quality Improvement** team and process to identify their strengths and areas of need, and then design plans to address those areas of need. Counties must use approved **best practices** for improvement; any new practices must be evidence-based and reviewed/approved by a Promising Practice subcommittee comprised of state and county employees.
- These counties have developed their CQI process and will be the first counties involved in the expansion of Differential Response over the next 18 months. The second cohort of 18 counties have been identified by the State and are beginning the CQI process.

Differential Response:

- Five counties and the Colorado Department of Human Services applied for and received a \$1.8 million federal research and development grant to fund a four-year research pilot project examining the effects of a **differential response practice model** on outcomes for children and families.
- Colorado was one of three states to be selected by the National Quality Improvement Center on Differential Response and the American Humane Association to conduct the pilot project.
- Large workgroups comprised of staff from all five counties and the State were involved in planning and preparation for DR over 18 months from 2009-2010, and the pilot evaluation began in January 2011.
- As part of the preparation, the five pilot counties developed an **innovative screening guide** to gather more information from callers who report abuse and neglect. Hotline staff are now asking more

questions about the strengths of a family, any positive interactions they may have with their child and what the caller might suggest to improve the child's situation.

- The counties also implemented **RED Teams**, multi-disciplinary meetings to review every referral that comes into a hotline to determine if it should be assigned for a response.
- Counties are now able to use an alternative method to a traditional child welfare investigation for low to moderate risk families, known as a **family assessment response (FAR)**. FAR allows an assigned intake caseworker to speak with a family about their child rearing practices and possible changes to shape healthier parenting. A county can then connect a family directly to services to resolve any safety concerns, rather than opening an ongoing child welfare case.
- The pilot counties have seen many positive outcomes and improved family engagement. In January 2012, the five pilot counties in partnership with the State pursued **legislation to permit the expansion of DR** to all 64 counties. The legislation passed and the State Board of Human Services approved rules to guide statewide DR practice on Dec. 7, 2012.

Family Engagement Through Decision-Making Models

- Counties across the state are using Family Engagement through Decision-Making Models, regular **group decision-making meetings** that engages a child's family to identify concerns and develop plans that nurture children/youth and keep them safe.
- Each meeting involves a facilitated discussion at the county department with the family, friends, various levels of county personnel and other multi-disciplinary community providers regarding the core issues that affect a child's well-being. The meetings help to orient families to the system and serve as a forum to collaboratively develop and monitor progress on a Family Services Plan.
- Strong Family Engagement initiatives throughout the state include Team-Decision Making, LINKS, Family Group Conferencing.

Colorado's Child Welfare Training Academy

- Employees from Colorado's counties and the state partnered to develop the curriculum and format of a new caseworker training academy in 2009 to develop a skilled workforce dedicated to ensuring safety, permanency, and well-being of Colorado's children.
- Continuous improvement to the academy is underway. County commissioners, child welfare managers and state personnel visited Ohio and California in 2011 to view those states' training models. They came away with recommendations to develop a model similar to that in Ohio.
- As a result, counties are supporting the State on an RFP for a contractor to be issued in December 2012 to upgrade all of the competencies for the academy, refresh the curriculum and expand the training to include incumbent caseworkers, hotline staff, case aids supervisors and administrators.
- County and state employees also are forming training competency sub-committees that will look at how to improve the academy in the following areas: intake, adoption, foster care, kinship, care, adolescents, sex abuse, separation/placement/reunification, case planning, child development, mental health, collaboration and teamwork, culture and diversity, domestic violence, substance abuse, caseworker safety, trauma-Informed care and developmental disabilities.

Child Welfare Financing Reform: Federal Title IV-E Waiver and HB 1196

- Colorado counties closely supported the application by the State for a **federal Title IV-E Waiver**, which will help Colorado to fund early intervention and prevention activities and wrap-around supports for families.
- Colorado was one of nine states to be awarded the waiver. By providing supports before a family's situation escalates to crisis, counties can help families to achieve self-sufficiency, eliminate major stressors that can lead to abuse and neglect, and reduce out-of-home child placements. This funding closely aligns with the Differential Response model, which allows the system to connect lower risks families to needed services without opening a child welfare case.

- Counties were instrumental in the passage of **HB 11-1196** concerning measures to increase flexibility in funding for families. The act developed a three-part state level financial reform mechanism to promote the use of front-end prevention and family preservation services for at-risk families touching the child welfare system.

Statewide Permanency Efforts:

Counties are focused on ensuring that all children involved in the child welfare system find permanent families. Statewide efforts are underway to safely reduce congregate care and provide community-based supports for children and families involved in the child welfare system. Three key components of that work include:

- **Permanency Roundtables:** Thirteen counties are piloting permanency roundtables statewide with a focus on children and youth who have been in out-of-home care for longer than 18 months. PRTs involve a multi-disciplinary staffing of county employees and community providers relentlessly focused on the efforts made toward finding a permanent home for the child and proactively defining next steps for diligent search. This initiative is focused on ensuring all youth have permanent connections with family and kin and the community is fully engaged in building and strengthening permanent families.
- **Three Branch Institute:** Working with the National Governor's Association and the judicial, legislative and executive branches of Colorado, counties have developed a cross-system strategic plan to promote the permanency of youth and the well-being of families. All counties have recognized the need to have strong partnership with the courts and legislature to strengthen the child welfare states. All three branches have recognized our critical work together and have committed to solution-based efforts to support children and families in our communities.
- **No Time to Lose:** This is a statewide effort to highlight and strengthen efforts for older youth that is focused on three strategic priorities: strong family engagement, expediting legal permanency, and reinvesting in front-end investments and family preservation activities.

Trauma-Informed Practice

- Exposure to traumatic events can overwhelm a child's capacity to cope and cause them to exhibit unusual or uncontrollable behavior. Colorado's Division of Behavioral Health is partnering with the child welfare system to role out a model for trauma-informed practice statewide. This is one of the priorities of the Colorado Practice Model and supported by the federal IV-E waiver.
- Counties will use a **trauma-informed assessment tool** supported by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network to answer the question of whether a child who has been abused/neglected is exhibiting symptoms of trauma, and use this information to **shape decisions and therapeutic services** for the child and ensure their safety and stability of out-of-home placements.
- The project also involves **training** child welfare staff, foster families, mental health providers, community partners and educators to be informed about, consider reactions to and help mitigate the impacts of trauma on children.

Data-Driven Child Welfare:

- **County-Level Scorecards:** Metro-area counties developed **county-level child welfare scorecards** in 2009 to monitor their progress on federal performance measures. The robust county scorecard is created directly using TRAILS data. For most measures, counties set their target goal at *higher* than the federal standard required by the Child and Family Services Review. The scorecard template has been disseminated to counties across the state for use and counties are encouraged to share this with the public.

- **Support for C-STAT:** Counties have worked closely with CDHS in the evolution of the C-STAT model and support its expansion and use in the evolution of our data-driven improvement processes.
- **TRAILS Data:** Counties and the State are able to pull an array of caseload data from the TRAILS database system. Caseload and workload data are critical drivers of system-wide performance, as there are numerous and varied functions performed as a component of child welfare services.