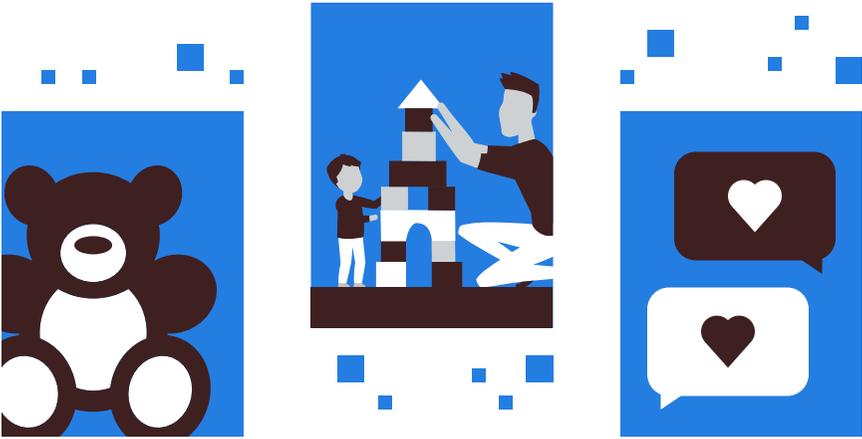


14. KEEPING KIDS SAFE AND HEALTHY

Changing Colorado Policies to Prevent Child Neglect

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While there have been numerous initiatives in Colorado to demonstrate the state’s commitment to evidence-based policymaking, one success was in ensuring that Colorado’s children are safe and healthy. The Keeping Kids Safe and Healthy initiative created a strategic plan to improve and strengthen the state’s child welfare system. The initiative launched in 2012 and initially focused on identifying best practices that could fit within Colorado’s communities while improving outcomes for children.

Reforming a state child welfare system can be complex, time-consuming, and expensive. Colorado cautiously adopted reforms, including evidence-based prevention services to reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect. Specifically, the Colorado governor and the state Department of Health and Human Services’ Office of Early Childhood wanted to increase prevention services for families who were once reported to Child Protective Services for child abuse or neglect but were eventually screened out. These children may not currently be in danger anymore, and their families may be stable enough for now, however, to ensure true stability and reduce chances of the children ending up back in the child welfare system, these families need support. The prevention-services program that addresses this need is Colorado Community Response, a voluntary family-focused program that provides a range of targeted services.

ISSUE BACKGROUND

When launching the Colorado Community Response program in 2014, decision-makers faced weighing how to address two related issues: child maltreatment and the screening procedures for families. Child neglect accounts for roughly three-quarters of confirmed cases of child maltreatment nationally and is the least clearly defined, understood, or

publicly recognized form of maltreatment.¹ Neglect occurs when a parent or caregiver fails to provide for a child's basic needs, potentially placing the child at risk for serious harm. Child maltreatment and a family's socioeconomic status are closely related.² Poverty increases the likelihood of child neglect, especially when combined with other risk factors, such as depression, substance abuse, mental health issues, and social isolation.

In Colorado, approximately 66 percent of reports for suspected child maltreatment are screened out or closed after assessment without the provision of any services from Child Protective Services. This happens when information received does not indicate that abuse or neglect is occurring. Families with closed assessments have a visit from a caseworker but do not have a safety concern requiring child welfare involvement. These determinations are not always perfect because caseworkers cannot predict the future.

Families receiving child welfare support can access family support and prevention services through their local county child welfare agencies. Agencies provide these services to prevent out-of-home placement or to return the children in placement to their own homes. But services are not available to families screened-out during the initial review by Child Protective Services. While an immediate safety risk may not exist for a child, many screened-out families still experience high levels of stress that can lead to future incidences of child maltreatment and re-referral to the child welfare system.

Recognizing the challenges Colorado faced in addressing and preventing child maltreatment, in 2012 Governor John Hickenlooper launched the Keeping Kids Safe and Healthy initiative. The Colorado legislature funded new prevention services, which allowed the Department of Human Services to prioritize the families screened-out from child welfare with an emphasis on families impacted by neglect and concerns around economic security. The new funding also required Colorado to evaluate the services to understand whether they achieved the intended goals. One of the major gaps identified during the review of the state's existing prevention services was the absence of an evidence-based program model that specifically focused on addressing and reducing neglect. Colorado looked to other states for potential models and identified the Community Response Program in Wisconsin as a promising approach for preventing child neglect.

Program development

Colorado designed its program to expand on the Wisconsin framework to prevent child abuse and neglect.³ Colorado's program provides case management, direct services, resource referrals, home visits, and financial decision-making assistance. These services address characteristics that build on family strengths, buffer risk, and promote better outcomes.

In designing its program, Colorado opted to use an assessment tool for family advocates to assess key factors. One is family functioning. For this assessment, the state considers a range of characteristics, like finances, living arrangements, and social, economic, or health issues in a family. The second area is protective factors, which consider parental resilience, socioemotional issues, and child-development knowledge. Together these factors form the

basis for an assessment of areas of family strength or need. Caregivers along with support from their family advocate can then consider this information in making determinations about which services are most appropriate or necessary for a family to receive.

The assessments are a critical feature of the program design and for ensuring the Colorado Community Response program achieves its goals for addressing issues of child neglect related to economic insecurity and increase overall family functioning. Goals include providing comprehensive voluntary services, reducing referrals to child protective services, increasing protective capacity in families, addressing the link between poverty and neglect, promoting safe relationships, and increasing family economic security. The intent is that if the program achieves these goals, children will be safer and healthier.

EVIDENCE AVAILABILITY

While there is a vast amount of research about child welfare generally, there is a limited body of evidence on programs that target services to families screened-out from child welfare. In looking for relevant programs, Colorado sought programs that had a strong evidence base or were a promising practice for meeting the key goals of preventing child maltreatment and escalation of risk requiring child welfare system involvement.

Prior to even launching the Colorado Community Response program, staff from Colorado's Office of Early Childhood reviewed existing literature and even visited other programs.⁴ Existing research further suggests that the Community Response Program is capable of engaging and successfully working with families around poverty-related neglect issues, income, employment, and other economic needs that could remove the likelihood of child abuse and neglect in the home. Especially when service goals included activities related to work, employment, and increased income, families were less likely to be re-reported to child-abuse hotlines after receiving community-based child abuse prevention services.⁵

Site visits, which collected observational information from the Wisconsin Community Response and the Milwaukee GAIN programs, allowed staff to get a better understanding of the programs in those states and to decide whether modifying policies in Colorado based on those experiences would lead to a relevant policy change. The observation of Wisconsin's program suggested the approach could yield promising results for families not previously involved with child protective services. It also filled a critical gap in the child-maltreatment prevention continuum.

Performance monitoring

Colorado established a series of performance measures and tracked trends and characteristics of program operations. The measures provide timely data and increase transparency for the program, while facilitating continuous improvement. The program established two measures identified by leadership in the department as important to monitor:

- **Economic self-sufficiency:** One measure includes the number of families who have an established goal to improve their economic self-sufficiency within 30 days of a program assessment. This goal provides insights to managers because, as a requirement for program participation, families must establish at least one goal.
- **Change in assessment scores:** Another reported measure monitors the difference between entry and exit scores in economic self-sufficiency. Colorado Department of Human Services expects an upward trend in this indicator, so a negative or reduced level may be cause for concern and potential program changes.

Together these program performance measures provide near real-time information for Colorado’s Department of Human Services to consider how the program is operating.

Impact evaluation

Colorado Community Response was the first to conduct an impact evaluation to determine whether the program achieved intended outcomes. Using a nonexperimental design, the evaluation compared families who received services with those who did not.⁶ Data collection for the Colorado Community Response program evaluation began in 2014 and concluded in 2017, with follow-up one year later. Researchers collected information at 21 sites that provide services to about 600 families in nearly half of Colorado’s counties.

The evaluation examined “leading” indicators, such as protective factors, increased family functioning, and the provision of concrete services hypothesized to achieve a long-term goal. Researchers assess these indicators by asking caregivers to complete a standardized assessment as a pre- and a post-test for services. The evaluation found that the percentage of families below key thresholds decreased in all domains identified by caregivers as “readiness for change” areas between pre- and post-test.⁷ As part of the assessment process, families also completed a protective factors survey. Protective factors are the strengths each family possess that help buffer and support them. The evaluation identified significant positive changes in each of these domains.⁸

The evaluation also considered “lagging” measures of output in child welfare, such as whether families had an assessment of child maltreatment 12 months after program completion. Lag indicators looked at child welfare re-involvement for families who completed program services versus those who were eligible but not referred. Initial evaluation findings in 2018 suggested families who completed the program had improved assessments, fewer substantiated reports of child maltreatment, and fewer out-of-home placements after one year compared with those who did not participate in the program.⁹

EVIDENCE USE

Colorado implemented the community response program after considering information available on Wisconsin’s pilot initiative in 2012. Colorado launched the program as a

promising approach for increasing economic security for families, while reducing the prevalence of child neglect and further involvement in the child welfare system. The program used performance measures routinely. But it was not until the state conducted a more robust impact evaluation of the program that policymakers had access to the information they needed to determine whether to continue funding the project.

Using performance information

Because the program started collecting performance information early on, decision-makers are able to routinely monitor trends in key metrics. In addition to routine monitoring from program administrators, senior leadership in Colorado's Department of Human Services also monitors performance every month through C-Stat, a performance-based analysis strategy meeting, which allows the department's programs to meet and discuss performance trends. When indicators suggest issues that need attention, the C-Stat allows senior leaders to quickly be attuned, to develop a plan for improvement, and ultimately to contribute to improved performance. By identifying areas of focus, department leadership determines what is working and what areas may need improvement to ensure the best results for families. These regular executive meetings provide a strategy to assess the effectiveness of the program implementation and to support continuous quality improvement of service delivery.

The state made incremental changes as a result of the performance-monitoring data after discussing the issues. For example, performance measures helped identify variability in the delivery of services across multiple program sites. The state could quickly correct these variations through contracting requirements to service providers and by establishing new performance targets to help administrators prevent avoidable variations in implementation.

Use of the evaluation

Completion of the impact evaluation in 2018 allowed the Colorado Department of Human Services to better understand the constructs of what the program should measure routinely in performance measures related to child welfare outcomes and economic well-being for families.^{10,11} The impact evaluation improved the state's understanding of whether families who completed program services had fewer negative outcomes than families who did not receive services.

The program is currently funded, and policymakers are interested in filling yet more gaps in existing knowledge moving forward. Recognizing the limits of the impact evaluation, Colorado planned a second evaluation to consider outcomes associated with families who return to the program within one year of completing services. Early indications suggest the program did prevent escalation of risk resulting in future child welfare involvement.

Additionally, the first impact evaluation did not examine economic well-being. This limited the information available for decision-makers about a key goal and attribute of the program, even though some descriptive analysis was available. In line with the program's

performance measures, a new evaluation will consider whether families with an economic self-sufficiency goal causally achieve better child welfare outcomes.

In this case, by completing an initial evaluation the department and state leaders recognized more information could be helpful in informing future decisions about the program and for achieving child welfare goals.

LESSONS

- ***Innovation should always be paired with an evaluation.*** Colorado looked to identify an evidence-based strategy that could meet their need of addressing child maltreatment and neglect outcomes through programming that targeted economic security, but the state recognized that evidence needed to come from current best practices. In order to move the Colorado-specific Community Response program along the evidence continuum toward evidence-based status, Colorado built on excellent work in other states, such as Wisconsin, and budgeted for a rigorous evaluation up front. One key lesson is that the state should pair innovation with an evaluation to understand the efficacy of programming. As part of the evaluation process, program leaders should refine activities and methods throughout and should focus on both short-term and long-term outcomes with meaningful performance metrics.
- ***The first pilot may not answer all the questions.*** Lessons from the completed impact evaluation highlight that program activities needed to be modified by eliminating variability in the model, program services needed a larger uptake to fully understand program impact, and the state agency has additional questions it wanted answered, such as on the impacts of economic self-sufficiency. The second evaluation will help answer additional questions and further demonstrate how and why building evidence takes time and careful consideration. A program cannot go from being promising or considered a best practice to becoming evidence-based without multiple types of evidence and evaluation.
- ***Effective implementation is essential.*** Effective implementation is necessary both in terms of budgeting and long-term sustainability of quality programming. Implementation resources such as training, coaching, and technical assistance should be ongoing to ensure the best delivery of programming and services. Colorado's program staff remain focused on learning directly from the Colorado Community Response study.
- ***Confidentiality should always be a priority.*** Maintaining confidentiality pledges is essential for county welfare agencies when sharing contact information about a family with community-based prevention programs. While some sharing is

essential, Colorado state law lacks clear guidance on the authority and process for doing so, leading to differing legal opinions about sharing information. Child welfare agencies could benefit from reviewing their state laws to plan for necessary data-sharing activities. The federal government could also provide improved guidance about expectations and how federal laws affect such activities.

- **Funding evaluations strengthens evidence-based programs.** The state legislature provided funding to conduct an evaluation while implementing Colorado Community Response. Funding for program evaluation was critical to strengthening the evidence about the program. However, programs would benefit from using implementation science as a process to identify barriers and reduce program variability across other agencies. State agencies will also take this approach to other innovations. For state policymakers to understand the impact of programming and make informed decisions, we need to ensure we are budgeting for, prioritizing, and advocating for the use of the evidence-based policy. ■

- 1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Child Maltreatment 2016*. Administration for Children and Families. Children's Bureau, 2016. Available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/cm2016.pdf>.
- 2 Paul Bywaters, et al. *The Relationship Between Poverty, Child Abuse and Neglect: An Evidence Review*. Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016.
- 3 Jacqueline Counts, et al. "The Development and Validation of the Protective Factors Survey: A Self-Report Measure of Protective Factors Against Child Maltreatment." *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 34(10): 762-772, 2010.
- 4 National Quality Improvement Center. A literature review of *The Formal Public Child Welfare Responses to Screened-Out Reports of Alleged Maltreatment: Wisconsin's Community Response Program for Families that Have Been Reported for Child Maltreatment*, Project GAIN (Getting Access to Income Now), Parent Support Outreach Program, and the Colorado Family Resource Center Association Family Pathways.
- 5 Paul Bywaters, et al. *The Relationship Between Poverty*.
- 6 The comparison looked at families who received Colorado Community Response services against a comparison group who did not, matching on case characteristics and demographic factors, including referral type (screen out or closed assessment), number of children and adults living in the home, ages of children, prior referrals to child welfare, and type of allegation.
- 7 Paul Bywaters, et al. *The Relationship Between Poverty*.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Kristen Shook Slack, Lawrence M. Berger, and Kathryn Maguire Jack. *Community Response Program (CRP) Pilot Initiative: Final Implementation Report to the Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund*. University of Wisconsin-Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty, March 2012. Available at: https://preventionboard.wi.gov/Documents/CRP_ImplementationReport.pdf.
- 11 Colorado is for Kids. *Evaluation of Colorado Community Response Program Reveals Stronger Families*. October, 10, 2017. Available at: <https://co4kids.org/community/evaluation-colorado-community-response-program-reveals-stronger-families>.