

Core Services Program Annual Evaluation Executive Summary Calendar Year 2021

Submitted to:

Colorado Department of Human Services
Office of Children, Youth, and Families
Division of Child Welfare

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COLORADO

Department of Human Services
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Core Services Program Annual Evaluation Report Calendar Year 2021

Executive Summary

Background and Introduction

The Core Services Program was established within the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) in 1994 and is statutorily required to provide strength-based resources and support to families when children/youth are at imminent risk of out-of-home placement, in need of services to return home, or to maintain a placement in the least restrictive setting possible. Responding to the complexity and variability in the needs of children, youth, and families across the diverse regions of Colorado, the Core Services Program combines the consistency of centralized state administrative oversight with the flexibility and accountability of a county administered system. This approach allows for individualized services to meet the needs of children, youth, and families across diverse Colorado communities.

The statewide Core Services Program is built to address four clinical emphases:

1. Focus on family strengths by directing intensive services that support and strengthen the family and protect the child/youth
2. Prevent out-of-home placement
3. Return the child/youth in placement to their own home, or unite the child/youth with their permanent families
4. Provide services that protect the child/youth

Each of the 64 counties and one Colorado Tribe (the Southern Ute Indian Tribe) annually develop plans to address these four goals through locally tailored strategies and services. Each jurisdiction designs a unique mix of required and county-designed services, resulting in a multifaceted array of services and opportunities along with accompanying implementation challenges.

The Core Services Program is based on a foundation of research and practice in family preservation. Family preservation services are generally short-term services designed to support families in crisis by improving parenting and family functioning while keeping children/youth safe. These services were developed, in part, as a response to a federal requirement to demonstrate reasonable efforts to prevent removal of children from their homes. Family preservation services grew out of the recognition that children/youth need a safe and stable family and that separating children/youth from their families and communities removes them from natural supports and often causes trauma, leaving lasting negative effects.

The goals of the Core Services Program are to safely maintain children/youth in the home, return children/youth home, promote the least restrictive setting for children/youth, and/or provide services for families at-risk of further involvement in the child welfare system. These goals are achieved in two ways. The first is the provision of services directly to the child/youth. These services promote well-being and may work to address mental or physical health issues that act as family stressors. The second is the provision of services directly to adult caregivers on behalf of the child/youth.

In most cases, the primary goal is for children/youth to remain in the home. In cases where safety concerns prompt a need to remove a child/youth from the home, services work to return that child/youth home in a safe and timely manner. In cases where safety requires the child/youth to be permanently placed out of the home, services focus on stabilizing and maintaining the least restrictive out-of-home placements (including adoptive and

foster homes). These priorities are reflected in the service goals created for each child/youth, which must be entered each time a new Core Service is authorized.

During the 2011 Legislative Session, House Bill 11-1196, Flexible Funding for Families, was passed into law. The language allowed counties to provide prevention and intervention services with existing funding sources, such as the State Child Welfare Block, Core Services Program allocation, and the Colorado IV-E Waiver funding. This is referenced as Program Area 3 (PA3), which is a mechanism to: (1) provide services for children and families who do not have an open child welfare case, but who are at risk of involvement with child welfare; (2) close cases with no safety concerns and continue providing services with a support plan; and (3) help children and youth in out-of-home (OOH) care to step-down to the least restrictive placement setting.

The prevention, intervention, and PA3 rules were presented to the State Board of Human Services for final reading October 4, 2013, and promulgated into Volume 7 Rule, effective January 1, 2014. The impact of the statute and rule is that Colorado county departments of human/social services are able to use state and federal funds to provide and account for prevention services to children, youth, and families prior to a referral to child welfare, or to screened out referrals. If county departments choose to provide preventative services to children, youth, and families, they are able to directly provide services through qualified staff, or contract with available service providers in their community. PA3 is optional, based on county-by-county available funding and ability to provide preventative services. Prevention services are offered as 100 percent voluntary to a family.

The Core Services Program Evaluation Calendar Year (CY) 2021 report, produced by the Social Work Research Center in the School of Social Work at Colorado State University (CSU), is designed to describe the outcomes and costs of the Core Services Program across Colorado to provide meaningful data to support decisions made by the Office of Children, Youth, and Families, Division of Child Welfare, and county Core Services Programs. Significant progress has been made in consistently documenting services in Trails, which is Colorado's Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS), and the County Financial Management System (CFMS), which allows for more accurate tracking of service provision, service outcomes, payments, and costs.

Implementation of the Core Services Program

The Core Services Program is structured as a state-supervised, county-administered system with the Colorado Department of Human Services overseeing funding allocations and working with county staff to set policies and procedures. The legislative authorization requires access to specific services statewide, while maintaining flexibility at the local level as each county operates the Core Services Program to meet the unique needs of families and communities. Through ongoing conversations, counties are always encouraged to identify and utilize evidence-based programs and promising practices with their Core Services Program funding.

Children and Families Served during CY 2021. In CY 2021, the Core Services Program served **24,151 distinct clients (unduplicated individuals)**. This represents a decrease of 2.7% in distinct clients served from CY 2020. Similar to CY 2020, 55% of the distinct clients were children/youth directly receiving services and 45% were adults receiving services on behalf of the child/youth. Overall, **14,987 distinct children/youth from 9,005 cases/involvements received or benefitted** from Core Services in CY 2021. This represents a 4.0% decrease in distinct children/youth receiving or benefitting from Core Services from CY 2020.

Services Provided in CY 2021. There were **31,529 service episodes** open at any time in CY 2021. This represents a 5.7% decrease in service episodes from CY 2020. County-designed services represent the most common type of service provided, with 35% of all episodes statewide. This is unsurprising given that this general category encompasses an array of specific services that are identified by each individual county as necessary to meet unique needs in the community. County-designed services encompass components of the menu of Core Services, yet are structured in their delivery and tracked uniquely to gain detailed data on evidence-based programs, as well as programs that are providing positive outcomes in communities around the state.

Outcomes of the Core Services Program

The evaluation report presents short-term service effectiveness outcome measures being tracked by caseworkers in Trails, service goal attainment outcomes, and follow-up child welfare involvement outcomes. In addition, sub-analyses are reported for service goal (remain home, return home, or least restrictive setting), program area, provider type (purchased or county provided), service type, and county.

Service Effectiveness. In CY 2021, 73% of service episodes were closed with a “successful” or “partially successful” service effectiveness outcome. This represents a three percent **decrease** in service episodes closed with a “successful” or “partially successful” outcome from CY 2020. Service episodes for children/youth with a remain home service goal or a prevention or PA3 designation had the highest rates of service effectiveness.

Service Goal Attainment. The service goal was attained in 81% of all service episodes in CY 2021, which is a one percent **decrease** from CY 2020. The service goal attainment rate was 91% for remain home, 81% for least restrictive setting, and 72% for return home.

The remain home service goal was attained in 99% of all prevention service episodes.

Follow-up Outcomes. Based on a distinct count of 5,139 children/youth with closed cases in CY 2020 who received Core Services, 45% of children/youth had a subsequent referral within one year of case closure, 31% had a subsequent assessment, 7% had a subsequent founded assessment, 10% had a subsequent case, 3% had a subsequent placement, 3% had a subsequent Division of Youth Services (DYS) involvement (detention or commitment), and 1% had a subsequent DYS commitment.

Costs of the Core Services Program

The evaluation report presents average cost per service episode, average cost per client, and average cost per child/youth receiving or benefitting from services. In addition, a cost offset measure estimates the additional placement costs that would be incurred by counties in lieu of providing Core Services to children/youth in the home or in OOH care.

Cost per Service Episode. The cost per service episode measure is intended to provide an overall average cost for each paid service intervention. This analysis only includes the costs for paid services (costs for no-pay services cannot be calculated from Trails) and does not include the cost of county-provided services. The average cost per service episode for all therapeutic Core Service episodes closed in CY 2021 was \$2,608 with an average service duration of 161 days. For therapeutic assessments/evaluations, the average cost per service episode was \$1,270 with an average service duration of 72 days, which represents an increase of 24.1% or \$247 in average cost per service episode from CY 2020, and an increase of 24.1% or 14 days in average duration per service episode. For therapeutic interventions, the average cost per service episode was \$2,751 with an average service duration of 171 days, which represents an increase of 8.2% or \$208 in average cost per service episode from CY 2020, and an increase of 8.9% or 14 days in average duration per service episode.

Cost per Client and Cost per Child/Youth. The average cost per client statewide for CY 2021 was \$2,327 based on total expenditures of \$56,578,729 and 24,310 clients served. This represents an increase of 6.8% or an additional \$148 in average cost per client from CY 2020. The average cost per child/youth statewide for CY 2021 was \$3,738 based on total expenditures of \$56,578,729 and 15,135 children/youth receiving or benefitting from Core Services. This represents an increase of 8.3% or an additional \$285 in average cost per child/youth receiving or benefitting from Core Services from CY 2020.

Cost Offset. Overall cost offset was calculated using a methodology that assumes that all children/youth would have been placed in out-of-home care in the absence of Core Services. Based on actual Core Services and OOH expenditures of \$140,287,827 and an estimated OOH cost of \$176,487,745 an additional **\$36,199,918** would have been spent by county agencies statewide in CY 2021 if OOH placements had been provided exclusively instead of a combination of Core Services and OOH placements. This figure is based on children/youth who were able to entirely avoid OOH placements by using Core Services, children/youth who were reunified in a shorter time frame by using Core Services, as well as children/youth who entered a less restrictive setting as a result of Core Services.

Over the past nine calendar years, an additional \$420 million would have been spent by county agencies statewide if out-of-home placements had been provided exclusively instead of a combination of Core Services and out-of-home placements.

Conclusions

The following conclusions illustrate the high level of overall program success as measured by service effectiveness, service goal attainment, subsequent child welfare involvement, and cost offset.

The Core Services Program is Working as Designed. The findings from this report support the Core Services Program as an effective approach to strengthening Colorado families by keeping or returning children/youth home or in the least restrictive setting while maintaining safety. For example, 99% of children/youth who received prevention services remained home, which also indicates that the Core Services Program is serving the population targeted by the legislation. Furthermore, the Core Services Program is clearly providing the appropriate levels of support, as evidenced by the findings that 3% of children/youth had a subsequent placement after receiving or benefiting from Core Services.

Core Services Prevention Programming is Maintaining Consistently Positive Outcomes. The Core Services prevention programs again recorded consistently positive service effectiveness, service goal attainment, and follow-up outcomes in CY 2021. This is especially noteworthy given that there continues to be a downward trend in the perceived availability, accessibility, and capacity of Core Services from CY 2015 to CY 2021.

Core Services are Effective in Achieving Treatment Success. In CY 2021, 73% of all service episodes were determined to be “successful” or “partially successful” with 87% of PA3 service episodes determined to be as such. Core Services coordinators reported that strong and stable collaborations with community partners and providers positively impacted treatment success.

Core Services Facilitate Service Goal Attainment. The service goal was attained by 80% of children/youth with an involvement closed in CY 2021. Similar to past evaluations, the remain home service goal was attained in 93% of service episodes when calculated based on if the child/youth had an open removal on the day the service ended.

Core Services Impacts Subsequent Child Welfare Involvement. For the 5,139 children/youth with closed cases in CY 2020 that received Core Services, 45% of children/youth had a subsequent referral within one year of case closure, 31% had a subsequent assessment, 7% had a subsequent founded assessment, 10% had a subsequent case, 3% had a subsequent placement, 3% had a subsequent DYS involvement (detention or commitment), and 1% had a subsequent DYS commitment.

Core Services Provide Substantial Cost Offset for Colorado. Without the Core Services Program, it is estimated that Colorado counties would have spent an additional \$36 million in CY 2021 on OOH placements for children/youth. Over the past nine calendar years, an additional \$420 million would have been spent by county agencies statewide if OOH placements had been provided exclusively instead of a combination of Core Services and OOH placements. This figure is based on children/youth who were able to entirely avoid OOH placements by using Core Services, children/youth who were reunified in a shorter time frame by using Core Services, as well as children/youth who entered a less restrictive setting as a result of Core Services.

Evaluation Enhancements

Enhancements to the evaluation of the Core Services Program continued during CY 2021. First, county-specific reports were produced and technical assistance was provided to counties through presentations and consultations. These ongoing knowledge translation efforts allow counties to make full use of available data for quality improvement purposes. Second, outcomes and costs for prevention and intervention services were further analyzed and compared. Third, the analysis of Core Services outcomes and costs on a subsample of children/youth receiving an adoption subsidy continued. Fourth, questions on the impact of COVID-19 on the Core Services Program were posed. According to Core Services coordinators, the biggest challenges from the second year of the pandemic were the lack of in-person services, inconsistent access to tele-health services, limited provider capacity, diminished service availability, and family reluctance to engage in services. Lastly, coordinators were asked to reflect on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) efforts in their Core Services programs. Many coordinators report using data to identify underserved populations in their county, including demographics, case characteristics, and provider data. The majority of coordinators indicated that community partnerships were paramount to their DEIJ outreach. A common approach for outreach was targeted programming. In addition, counties have crafted a service environment that is sensitive to the unique needs of underserved populations in their community.

Evaluation Limitations

The primary limitation of the Core Services Program evaluation is that there are competing interventions, service population differences, and county-specific contexts that are not accounted for in the analyses. These potentially confounding factors may be related to overall outcomes or outcome differences and are hard to control without a rigorous experimental research design. Stated another way, while the positive and consistent outcomes from this year and previous years' reports support conclusions that the program is effective, it is not clear whether these positive outcomes are solely due to the Core Services Program. Other limitations include variations in data entry procedures and service delivery across counties. Even with these limitations, this report presents the best available data with the most appropriate analyses to evaluate the impact of the Core Services Program.

Evaluation Implications

Based on the outcome and cost evaluation findings, the key implication is that the Core Services Program is an essential component of the continuum of care in Colorado. Core Services are especially effective for county provided services, prevention services, and for children/youth with a service goal of remain home. Increased efforts to improve outcomes for purchased services and for children/youth with a service goal of return home or a PA4 (youth in conflict) designation continue to be warranted.

The positive findings for service effectiveness and service goal attainment indicate that current Core Services prevention efforts should be enhanced and offered widely to families at risk for child welfare involvement to maximize the opportunity for lowering case numbers and stepping down children/youth to lower levels of care. The Core Services Program also aligns well with other child welfare prevention efforts currently implemented in the state. As such, future evaluation efforts should continue to look across the prevention/intervention array to identify common metrics of outcome, cost, and process effectiveness to provide the state and counties with a holistic understanding of how prevention programs work together to promote safety, permanency, and well-being.

Research consistently documents the health and social inequities experienced by vulnerable populations, with exclusion from meaningful services occurring by race and ethnicity, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning (LGBTQ+) identities, age, socioeconomic level, and disability status. To help advance DEIJ efforts in the human services landscape, improved understanding of how the Core Services program is experienced by underserved communities is necessary. In addition, opportunities to infuse greater DEIJ strategies into the Core Services Program and evaluation should be explored.