

Service Integration in Colorado

Connecting Programs to Provide Better Services in Mesa and El Paso Counties

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Overview

In Colorado, administration of human service programs is the responsibility of the counties. In two of these counties, Mesa and El Paso, progressive leadership and collaboration between agency managers, local service providers, and community organizations -- with strong support from the county commissioners -- have resulted in significant efforts to integrate the delivery of services. In Mesa and El Paso counties, **local leaders of human service programs have taken advantage of the flexibility and autonomy provided by the state** to develop client-centered and integrated service delivery systems.

Staff and management in Mesa and El Paso Counties have implemented processes that are **client-centered** and provide necessary benefits and services in a **holistic and comprehensive manner**. To a large extent, programs and services are provided as a continuum, rather than separately. This is accomplished in a number of ways — assessing for multiple needs through a common intake process, going beyond co-location to create teams that include staff from multiple programs, **partnering of county agencies** and local service providers at the leadership and staff levels, and a **shared vision that is continually reinforced**.

The emphases of their efforts to integrate services are somewhat different — in Mesa County, the emphasis is on the integration of employment and training programs with income support programs, while in El Paso County, integration focuses on income support and child welfare programs — the goals are similar. Both counties conduct thorough needs assessments and take steps to provide appropriate services, regardless of programmatic boundaries.

Factors contributing to the overall success of their efforts:

- A high level of cooperation and partnering between government agencies and community organizations
- Strong leadership with political support – sense of shared mission that flows from the leadership to staff
- Going beyond co-location: Staff from multiple county agencies and private service providers work together within the office, in many cases as members of teams. Teaming strengthens connections between programs, increases awareness of the availability of a wider range of services, and facilitates sharing a common vision and goals.
- A pervasive can-do attitude: In both sites, it was clear that managers and staff enthusiastically support the agency's mission and goals, and that they are willing to do whatever it takes -- this attitude is the result of the factors listed above as well as the ongoing efforts of leadership to change agency culture.

The Human Service Delivery System in Colorado

In Colorado, administration of human service programs is the responsibility of counties. In recent years the state has given the counties greater authority and autonomy to develop and implement policies and to manage personnel. From a programmatic perspective, this devolution of authority has resulted in significant variation in program design. All human service programs are the responsibility of a director of human services who answers to the county board of commissioners. **As a consequence, there are fewer bureaucratic barriers to coordination and integration** than exist in other jurisdictions since the majority of human service programs are within the same department.

Mesa County Department of Human Services

In Mesa County, service integration means more than a simple focus on employment, as evidenced by the county's mission statement. "The Mission of the Department of Human Services is to help individuals and families achieve safety, independence and self sufficiency through the provision of professional, fiscally responsible quality human services in a progressive, collaborative and customer service oriented environment."

A major focus of the county's efforts to improve services for residents is the Mesa County Workforce Center. Unlike one-stop job centers in many jurisdictions that are administered through other structures, the Mesa County Workforce Center is a division of the county Department of Human Services. Although they are not co-located at the Workforce Center, the child support enforcement, child welfare, and child protective services programs work closely with staff at the Center.

One **regular point of interaction is in team staffings that are part of the intake process** at the Workforce Center, which is possible due to the integration of income support and other human service programs with employment and training programs. Screening for needed services is part of the intake process. Staff from the following partner agencies are located on-site:

- The Colorado Department of Labor and Employment
- Colorado Vocational Rehabilitation Services and Colorado Project WIN (services for persons with disabilities)
- Hilltop Community Resources, Inc. (social services/job training)
- The Professional Service Division (computer skills instruction)
- Mesa County Department of Human Services
- The Job Corps
- Experience Works (Green Thumb, Inc.) (employment programs for older workers)
- Rocky Mountain SER (employment and education assistance for migrant and seasonal agricultural workers)
- The Ex-Offenders Reintegration program
- The Domestic Violence Program
- Colorado West Mental Health Services

In addition to the shared physical location of the Workforce Center, **managers of county programs and service providers continue to invest significant time in team building, cross training, and improving relationships between programs with staff at the center and in the larger community.** The culture change from eligibility determination processes to a customer-focused, work-first approach was at first resisted, but is now strongly supported by staff.

For clients, the integration of services at the Workforce Center means that in addition to employment-related services, supportive services and financial assistance are also readily available. Each case is then reviewed by a team of staff members from the various on-site partner agencies, as well as child welfare caseworkers, if appropriate. For clients, the result is a process in which employment services and needed supports are provided in an integrated plan in a single location -- the connection with child welfare services is particularly noteworthy. Services and benefits, including intensive case management, focus on strengthening the family and ensuring a stable environment for children.

Limits to program and service integration in Mesa County:

- Separate case files are maintained for many of the programs and services.
- Separate information systems must be used to determine eligibility.
- A state-provided information system, CACTIS, does allow staff from the various programs to maintain and share case notes, but overall information systems' support is considered to be problematic by staff.
- Cases that do not involve employment-related services, such as Food Stamp-only and Medicaid-only cases, are handled in a separate county office. Child support enforcement and child welfare workers are also located in that office.

El Paso County Department of Human Services

Service integration in El Paso County involves many projects, including highly coordinated child welfare and income support programs -- a blending of income support and child welfare programs. The vision statement of the El Paso Department of Human Services (DHS) is "To eliminate poverty and family violence in El Paso County." The mission is "To strengthen families, assure safety, promote self-sufficiency, eliminate poverty, and improve the quality of life in our community."

Most human service programs are located in two adjacent buildings in the center of Colorado Springs. Programs with staff located in these offices include:

- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- Food Assistance Program
- Food Stamps
- Medicaid
- Goodwill Industries Career Development Center
- Employment First (job search)
- Teen Self Sufficiency

- Child Care Assistance
- Child Support Collections
- Parent Opportunity Program (helps non-custodial parents meet child support obligations through employment assistance and other services)
- Transitions Team (provides post-employment support to families to maintain and upgrade employment)
- TANF Kinship and Family Empowerment Services (provides supports for grandparents and other caretakers raising relative children and for teens and teen parents)
- Adult Protection and Foster Care Services
- Family Preservation
- Intensive Family Intervention Team (focuses on pre-adolescent and teenage behavior problems)
- Faith Partners (assists individuals and families leaving welfare who need additional support with issues related to the transition from welfare)

Also on site but under different administration:

- The Office of Veteran and Military Affairs
- Senior Services

El Paso DHS staff and partners provide services in other locations in the county:

- Fountain Community Services (DHS staff and partners provide health, human services, and other supports at the local level)
- The Center on Fathering (serves as a central location where fathers can get services such as education, training, and a support group to encourage and facilitate supporting their children)
- The Teen Resource Center (a partnership between the city of Colorado Springs, the county and 30 community partners, which focuses on helping teens achieve educational, employment, and self-sufficiency goals)
- The Family Visitation Center (provides children in the foster care system and their families with a home-like setting for visitation)

El Paso County has implemented a standard intake process for multiple programs and services. The intake interview can last from twenty minutes to one-half day, depending on the situation and client needs. The interview includes “tickler” questions that indicate the presence of problems such as domestic violence, substance abuse, disabilities, and mental health issues that may lead to a more in-depth screening. In these cases, the assessor sends information to a partner agency for an additional interview. An office policy is to routinely check new cases at intake to determine whether there is an open case in the child welfare system in order to **ensure coordination of case planning between programs.**

The following are some of the El Paso DHS programs and activities that emphasize the connections between income support and child welfare programs:

- Kinship Services: Partnering with Grandparents and other Kin
- Domestic Violence Coordination
- Child Care Coordination
- Teen Parent Support
- Employment Support
- Joint Family Preservation/TANF Services Planning
- Joint Training
- Faith Partners Program

Lessons Learned in Both Counties

- **The role of leaders is to lead, not micromanage**

In both counties, strong executive leadership is supported by enthusiastic, experienced, and knowledgeable managers. **Mid-level managers are encouraged to be creative**, take responsibility for the day-to-day operation of their programs, and work collaboratively with their peers and community partners. The directors of the county human services offices see their role at a macro level — to take a broad view across the programs for which they have responsibility — and to depend on their managers to provide expertise and handle most operational issues, rather than micromanaging details. The

directors ensure that the mission of the agency is clear to all staff and provide the resources to support the mission, while managers and staff get the job done without worrying that their decisions will be second-guessed.

- **Staff development needs constant attention**

In both counties, managers emphasized the importance of **continual attention to staff development and training**. In El Paso County, there was significant turnover during the initial stages of shifting philosophy and operations to a more holistic approach that emphasizes the connections between income support and child welfare programs. Staff who were not comfortable with the change were given the opportunity to move into other positions. There has been substantial movement of staff across disciplines; a number of the managers of income support programs have a background in child welfare programs. Staff have participated in cross-training provided by in-house staff as well as outside experts.

- **Take advantage of opportunities for early intervention and prevention**

Viewing programs and services as a continuum of care, rather than separately, allows programs that are not generally viewed as preventive to serve that function. For example, in El Paso County, children who exhibit problematic behavior while in childcare provide an opportunity for early intervention that may reduce the need for more intensive services in the future. A child's unwillingness to follow instruction may be an indication that there are problems at home that can be addressed at an early stage, eliminating the necessity for more costly and intrusive child welfare services.

- **You never get there**

As communities grow and change, family needs change. There is therefore **a constant need for programs to adapt, experiment, and evolve**. Managers in both counties indicated that there are a number of issues they need to address, including childcare, early childhood education, and additional integration of income support and child welfare programs. While the goals of the programs remain relatively constant, the means by which those goals are achieved can and should change.

Critical Success Factors

- **Devolution of responsibility for program design from the state to the counties**

State officials have given the counties greater flexibility and responsibility in designing and administering programs, most notably with welfare reform. In programs that were previously administered by state staff or were subject to state personnel rules and processes, including child welfare and employment and training programs, state staff are being converted to, or replaced by, county staff. The flexibility to design programs that meet local needs and local control of staff and resources were cited as significant factors in the success of programs in both counties.

- **Location of a wide range of services within a single government agency**

In addition to local control, the inclusion of a wide range of programs within one organization under the direction of a single, high-level executive has facilitated the integration of programs in both counties. While this may seem obvious on its face, it is a factor that should not be ignored. When compared with integration efforts in other jurisdictions, the progress that has been made in El Paso and Mesa counties to coordinate and integrate programs that are much more separate in other jurisdictions is clearly influenced by a single governance structure. A significant difference in the level of integration of income support and employment and training programs is evident in Mesa and El Paso counties. In Mesa County, the Workforce Investment Act One-Stop center is managed within the same department as income support and child welfare programs; in El Paso, the One-Stop has a separate administrative structure. It is probably more than a coincidence that, while the El Paso County Department of Human Services works closely with the One-Stop, the level of integration is less than in Mesa County.

- **Political leadership and program managers who share a common vision**

There are close working relationships between program officials and county political leaders in both counties. Though local politics and political leaders (in these counties, the County Commissioners) tend to be conservative, it is clear that the Commissioners support the vision of comprehensive and integrated services that support family stability and self-sufficiency. The close rapport between program officials, political leadership, and the directors of private service providers in Mesa County was obvious during the site visit. By modeling partnering and collaborative behaviors, leadership sets a tone for staff. As the director of one local agency said, "In Mesa County, partners are truly partners."

- **Willingness to share risks and credit for success**

County agencies and community partners are willing to share the financial risks inherent in creating new services to support families. In Mesa County, the Kiddin' Around Child Care Center, located beside the Workforce Center, provides regular child care for local families and temporary child care for clients of the Workforce Center. If charges to parents for childcare are insufficient to cover the costs, the partners are willing to subsidize care from other funding sources. Sharing responsibility for supporting families also means giving up "ownership" of clients and sharing credit for success when

clients become self-sufficient.

- **Team building and culture changing activities**

Management in both counties has invested significant effort in team-building and culture-changing activities, and continues to do so. Moving from stovepiped, eligibility-determination focused processes to working in teams, with a holistic approach to family services, has been a big change. Activities such as cross-program training, special projects that involve staff from multiple programs, a diversity initiative in El Paso County, sponsoring agency events for staff, and recognizing staff accomplishments reinforces the integration of staff and programs. Managers have shifted workers' thinking from a victim mentality, which focused on factors over which workers had little control, to those things that they can control, creating a "can do" attitude.

- **Family involvement in plans/making choices and intensive services for the most at-risk families**

Both counties have adopted strength-based assessment, focusing efforts to facilitate self-sufficiency on marketable skills and attributes possessed by clients. Families are encouraged to participate in development of Individual Responsibility Contracts (TANF) and Family Service Plans (child welfare), including attending team staffings where their cases are discussed. In Mesa County, families in danger of being sanctioned and other complex cases receive more intensive services provided by "intervention specialists," who make home visits to view firsthand family circumstances, broker services, and help break down resistance to program participation by the family.

- **Measuring the effects of programs**

Both counties have taken steps to measure the effects of their programs. In Mesa County, they have contracted with a researcher at the local state college; in El Paso County, they have hired a full-time research and evaluation coordinator. Going beyond common measures that focus on outcomes related to individual programs, such as the number of TANF clients that have moved to employment, they are attempting to look more broadly at the larger issues. In Mesa County, this involves tracking clients both during and after stays on TANF to measure self-sufficiency in terms of employment income and government-provided benefits sufficient to support a family. However, as seems to be the case with most efforts to integrate services, neither county has implemented processes to measure the effect of service integration.