



**COLORADO**

**Office of Children,  
Youth & Families**

Division of Child Welfare

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**Birth-to-Five Task Group:  
Recommendations for the Colorado Department of Human Services'  
Child Welfare and Early Childhood Sub-Policy Advisory Councils**

***Introduction***

The first five years of a child's life are vitally important for healthy development and growth. It is also the period of time when a child is the most vulnerable to suffering consequences of child abuse and neglect. The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), Office of Children, Youth, and Families (OCYF) Division of Child Welfare (DCW) oversees the system charged with responding to allegations of child maltreatment. The CDHS Office of Early Childhood Division of Community and Family Support was established with a Child Maltreatment Prevention Unit. Both DCW and DCFS, are constantly looking to better understand how to support families and prevent child maltreatment.

At the national level, the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities (CECANF) was established to produce a national strategy and to make recommendations for eliminating child fatalities across the country. In anticipation of the CECANF report, CDHS requested that the Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) establish a joint sub-PAC Task Group with representatives from both the Child Welfare and Early Childhood sub-PACs. The purpose of the joint sub-PAC Task Group was to inform next steps and create a stronger partnership and bridge between child welfare and early childhood systems.

Group members included skilled, experienced, and passionate workers, providers, managers, and administrators from both the child welfare and early childhood systems (see Appendix A for full participant list). Members volunteered their time due to a deep commitment to ensure they are doing the best work possible for the children and families they work with each and every day. The group was charged with recommending policy, training, and cross-system collaboration changes by answering the question: *How does the child welfare and early childhood systems, in partnership with families and communities, prevent maltreatment of children age five and under?*

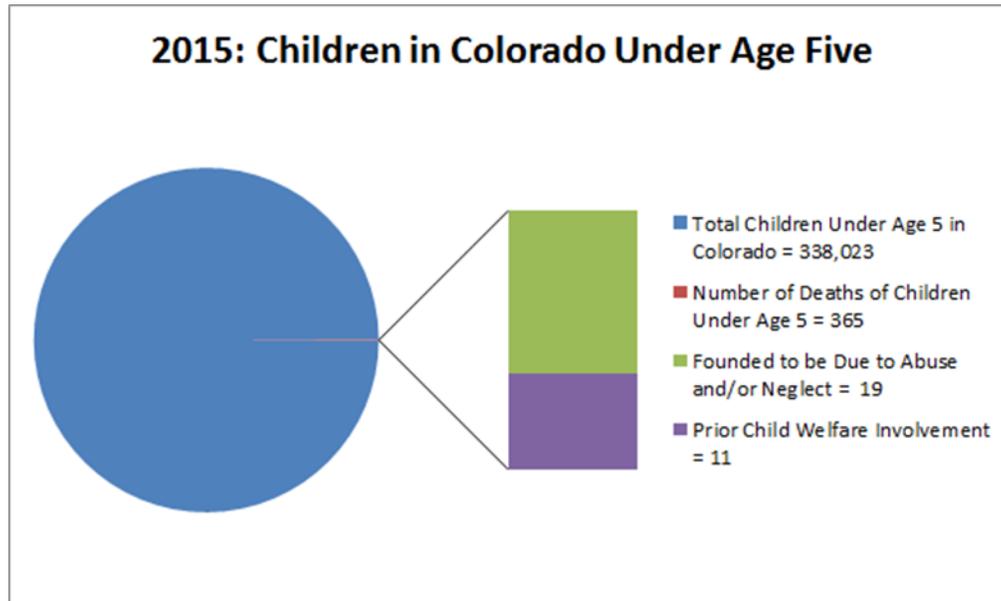
During calendar year 2016, the group engaged in multiple activities, including reviewing reports and research; conducting focus groups; and analyzing data. The first area of focus was the performance and data related to the screening and assessment of reports of suspected child abuse and/or neglect to the child welfare system. This focus was based on a hypothesis that the child welfare system was not making correct screening decisions and/or conducting thorough child welfare assessments. The second area of focus was understanding cross-system collaboration. This focus was based on a hypothesis that the child welfare system cannot be the sole protector of children and that the early childhood system can be a valuable partner in the prevention of child maltreatment. A sub-committee was utilized to explore the first area of focus, while the full Birth-to-Five Task Group was utilized to explore the second area of focus.

**Based on a year's worth of research, data review, and discussion, the Birth-to-Five Task Group makes four recommendations:**

- 1. Explore decision-making at the points of assessment closure and case closure**
- 2. Address high staff turnover rates within both child welfare and early childhood systems**
- 3. Enhance cross-system collaboration**
- 4. Ensure that child welfare is engaged in the Colorado Child Maltreatment Prevention Framework for Action developed out of the Office of Early Childhood**

**The Problem**

As indicated in the following diagram, there were 338,023 children under the age of five residing in Colorado in 2015. Within that age group there were 30,706 reports of child abuse and neglect made to child welfare agencies. There were 365 child deaths for children under five in Colorado in 2015, 19 - or 5% - of those deaths included suspected child abuse and neglect. Of those 19, eleven (11) - or 3% of all deaths in this age group - had prior child welfare involvement.



Sources: Child Fatality Review Team, 2016  
Colorado Department of Health & Environment, 2016  
Division of Child Welfare, 2016

The Birth-to-Five Task Group found it difficult to make extensive recommendations based on the circumstances of 11 children and instead, expanded their view to understand the issue of abuse and/or neglect of children age five and under. While the statistics vary, data does point to the existence of common factors, or conditions that may place above-average stress on families that contributed to the abuse and/or neglect of their children. For example, regarding child deaths of all ages, between 30% and 60% of caregivers have a history of mental health concerns (CFRT, 2014; Douglas, 2013); at least one-third of caregivers who have abused and/or neglected their children have a history of substance abuse (CFRT, 2014; Douglas, 2013; Fujwara, et al, 2009); and, over one-third of caregivers have a history of domestic violence (CFRT, 2014). In addition, 50% of caregivers are young parents under age 25 (Fujwara, et al, 2009) which has been linked to less tolerance for normal child behaviors and inappropriate expectations for young children. Finally, at the time of the child death, the majority of caregivers were experiencing major life events, such as losing a job (Douglas, 2013). However, these characteristics are also common among families involved with child welfare and are identified through the Colorado Risk Assessment.

**Assumption #1**

*Colorado's Child welfare system is not responding adequately to allegations of abuse and neglect for the 0-5 population.*

**Findings:** Sub-committee data analysis found that this assumption is not valid. While expecting to find deficiencies in Colorado's child welfare system including screening of abuse and neglect allegations and confirmation of the presence of abuse and neglect; the Birth-to-Five Task Group found the exact opposite: high performance in the rates for acceptance of referrals and assessment of suspected child maltreatment.

One way to measure success is to utilize CDHS Administrative Review Division (ARD) performance data for whether or not counties made correct decisions of whether to accept (screen-in or screen-out) a referral of suspected child maltreatment. This review data consistently shows that county departments of human/social services are making accurate screening decisions over 95% of the time.

The diagram on the following page details the number of children who experience repeat maltreatment after various types of child welfare involvement.

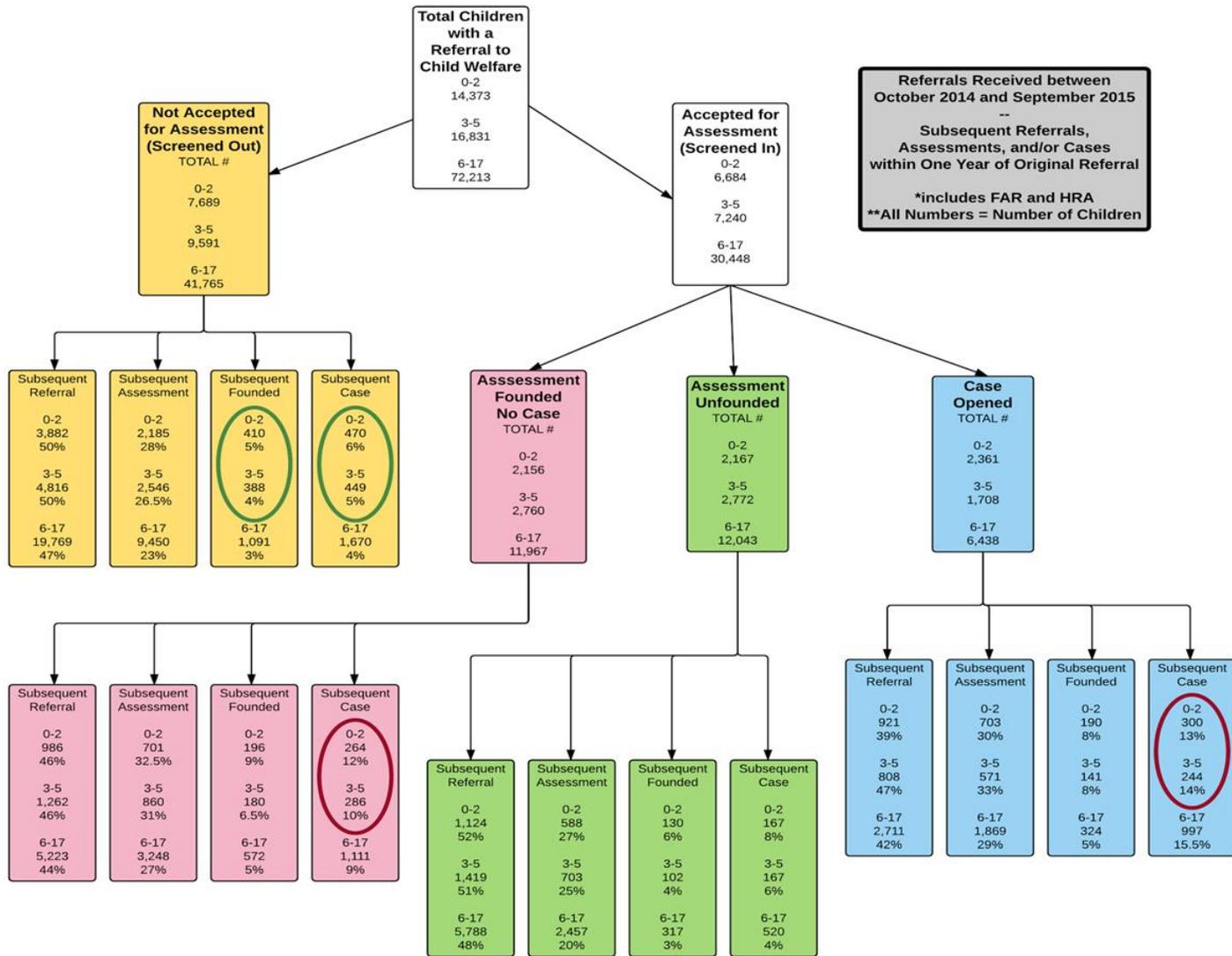
The two areas of concern in the data, as highlighted by red circles, is the percentage of children that have a founded assessment of abuse and/or neglect after either:

1. A founded assessment when no case is opened to provide ongoing services, and
2. A case has been opened to provide ongoing services.

In both of these circumstances there is a higher rate (12% and 13%, respectively) of having a subsequent case than in other scenarios and is a vital point for further exploration by both the Division of Child Welfare and county departments of human or social services.

Couple this data with the information that is known about the family characteristics of substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health concerns and it becomes clear that these are most likely complex families with multiple challenges. These are not situations that can be addressed in a silo of child welfare and instead, must be addressed with deep engagement of family supports and professionals from multiple systems and agencies. This finding is similar to the findings of the CECANF, who stated in their final report: *"We realize that parents of children who die from abuse or neglect are often struggling. They may have drug addictions, mental illnesses, cognitive disabilities, or previous criminal histories. They may face domestic violence at home or live in unsafe, crime-ridden communities. These conditions do not excuse harmful behaviors toward children, but they do help to explain why no single agency, acting alone, can address all of the complex circumstances in troubled families' lives."* (CECANF, 2016, p 12)

2014-15: Repeat Maltreatment



Source: Division of Child Welfare, 2016

**Assumption #2:**

*The child welfare system cannot be the sole protector of children and that the early childhood system must be a valuable partner in prevention child maltreatment*

**Findings:** The Birth-to-Five Task Group found that this assumption was valid. Members of the Birth-to-Five Task Group conducted twenty focus groups to explore and understand cross-systems that intersect with families. The purpose of the focus groups was to gain information from professionals across disciplines throughout Colorado who help families access services and prevent child fatalities. Below are the questions posed by Task Group members to focus groups from local communities:

1. What makes it easy for families to access the services and supports they need?
2. When you see a need or have a concern for a family, what makes it easy to refer a family for additional services or support?
3. What can we do to decrease deaths of children five and under in Colorado?
4. We often hear that confidentiality issues make it difficult to share information to support families. How can communities share important information to support families?

Based on the information gathered from the focus groups, the Birth-to-Five Task Group identified the following as pivotal findings:

1. Relationships matter: Families are more likely to engage in a service if the referring person/agency has an existing relationship with that service provider *and* professionals are more likely to make appropriate referrals when they understand the available services and the intake/uptake processes. There are also opportunities for shared professional development and training resources when these two groups connect.
2. Collaboration and information sharing is vital: Families are more likely to have positive outcomes when their team of professionals (caseworker, child care provider, early intervention provider, etc.) work together to align treatment plans and family expectations, and when they have the ability to share important family-related information.

***Recommendations:***

***1. Explore decision-making at the points of assessment closure and case closure***

In the review of the data, the Birth-to-Five Task Group saw no need for additional screening of assessment requirements or changes to child welfare statute, rules, or policies related to the assessment of child abuse and/or neglect allegations. However, the Birth-to-Five Task Group did identify the need to further explore the data related to a higher rate of recurrence of child abuse and/or neglect after a founded assessment has been closed and after a child welfare service case has been closed. The Birth-to-Five Task Group recognizes that assessment and case closure are important decision-making points. Therefore, the Group recommends that counties and sub-PAC further explore the data and the need for policies, training, and/or guidance regarding decision-making at assessment and case closure, including the use of the safety and risk assessments throughout the life of a case.

***2. Address Staff Turnover Rates***

When analyzing Colorado's child welfare data, the group determined that Colorado's child welfare workforce performs well when making screening decisions and assessing for child abuse and/or neglect and that there is a robust system for training, supporting, and coaching the workforce. However, high performance and robust training comes at a cost. Child welfare experiences high rates of turnover and burnout, high caseloads and inadequate time and compensation allowances. While the Birth-to-Five Task Group found the need for enhanced collaboration across systems, the Birth-to-Five Task Group also encountered two systems battling the negative effects of turnover. When rates of turnover are high, individual agencies are constantly recruiting, hiring, and training new staff, while also covering vacant position workloads. These activities render professionals unable to engage in the relationship-building that supports cross-system collaboration. The cost of worker turnover is staggering. The Applied Research in Child Welfare (ARCH) at Colorado State University is in the process of analyzing 10 years of child welfare employment data across Colorado. From 2005-2015, seven of the ten largest Colorado counties had an average turnover rate of 29.7% within intake teams, with a total of 648 workers leaving intake positions over the 10 year period (ARCH, draft, 2016). With a conservative estimate of \$54,000 per new hire (NCWII, 2016), this has cost Colorado over \$35 million dollars in the last ten years in only seven of Colorado's 64 counties.

Child welfare is not the only system facing turnover. The Colorado State University SafeCare Colorado (SCC) Pilot Project Evaluation Report (2016) found a 36% worker turnover rate within SCC sites with an average of 13 months from training to time of departure. In 2004, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) reported the average annual turnover rate for early childhood educators to be more than 30 percent. A 2012 report by the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRRA) showed a turnover rate between 25 and 40 percent (NACCRRRA, 2012). These studies show that turnover has been a challenge for the early childhood field for the last 25 years. In response, a new effort is underway in Colorado to develop sustainable and varied approaches to recruit, retain, compensate, and support a well-qualified early childhood workforce through research, planning, and pilots that will lead to the spread of practices throughout the state. The Colorado Transforming the Workforce Project is fundraising to pilot existing innovation that promotes retention and higher compensation of the early childhood workforce.

In communities strapped for resources, spending less on turnover and more on service delivery improve program outcomes and ensure that all families have access to the right support, services, and interventions, at the right time.

### ***3. Expand Cross-system Collaboration***

Families involved in the child welfare system are complex. Child welfare data showed that cross-system engagement, both prior to child welfare involvement and after a child welfare concern has been identified, as an area for exploration and opportunity. Protecting children from abuse and/or neglect is a complex process and there are many opportunities for enhancing collaboration at the family-, community-, and system-levels.

Examples of cross-system collaboration include, but are not limited to:

- a. System-Level: Prevention Steering Committee, cross-system sub-PAC work groups, connecting collaboration to quality child care ratings, etc.
- b. Community-Level: Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), Collaborative Management Program, Early Childhood Councils, identifying services availability, streamlining referral processes, shared learning/training opportunities, etc.
- c. Family-Level: Family Engagement Meetings, Support Planning, having a warm hand-off when making referrals for services, etc.

### ***4. Connect Child Welfare with the Office of Early Childhood's Child Maltreatment Prevention Plan Framework for Action***

As a starting point to improving partnerships, the Office of Early Childhood is finalizing a Child Maltreatment Prevention Framework for Action, which outlines the interplay between foundational principles, strategies, and outcomes. The Framework for Action offers an outline in which communities can examine cross-system practices and develop local action plans ensuring that child welfare and early childhood both, along with other community partners, play vital roles in the implementation of the Framework for Action. Ensuring that county child welfare departments are participating in the community-level initiatives is vital for supporting both systems and the connections between the systems.

### ***Conclusion***

Working to prevent child fatalities and child maltreatment of children age five and under is complex and challenging work. It occurs within families and communities, with coordinated support from professionals working with the family. The CECANF report highlights the need for a multi-disciplinary prevention design. By reviewing Colorado-specific data, the Birth-to-Five Task Group was able to identify that Colorado has the appropriate statute, rules, and policies related to responding to and assessing referrals of suspected child abuse and/or neglect. The Birth-to-Five Task Group also identified the importance of cross-system collaboration in addressing the most complex family issues - such as substance abuse, mental health concerns, and domestic violence.

However, the Birth-to-Five Task Group identified turnover as the factor that inhibits strong cross-system collaboration. At the family level, relationship-building and consistency are key to developing strong engagement and as professionals change, the relationship is broken and engagement is lost. At the system level, professionals must have the capacity to learn about programs, understand referrals process, and explore opportunities for creating efficiencies and filling gaps. Again, turnover creates the barrier to strong cross-system collaboration. A stable, consistent early childhood and child welfare workforce means that all families in Colorado are engaged with the right support, services, and interventions at the right time when their children were at the most important stages of development.

Appendix A: Birth-to-Five Task Group Participants

DCW State Representative	County Representative	OEC State Representative
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Appendix B: References

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