

A Vision for Eliminating Poverty and Family Violence: Transforming Child Welfare and TANF in El Paso County, Colorado

By Rutledge Hutson

The Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in El Paso County (Colorado Springs), Colorado, considers itself a child abuse and neglect prevention program, while the child welfare program considers itself an anti-poverty program. These philosophical changes in program orientation were adopted to implement El Paso County Department of Human Services' bold new vision of *eliminating poverty and family violence*.

This vision grew out of the recognition that many of the families involved with the child welfare system are also involved with the cash assistance program. Historically, less than 3 percent of children who received welfare assistance before 1996 program reforms

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moved into foster care; however, approximately 60 percent of children in foster care came from families who had been receiving cash assistance.¹ Similarly, 70 to 90 percent of the children who receive child welfare services while remaining with their families belong to families receiving cash assistance.² In addition, even when families are not involved with both agencies, they often face similar challenges that can interfere with employment and parenting. These challenges include substance abuse, mental health disorders, domestic violence, and poverty. In fact, poverty is highly correlated with child maltreatment: children living in families with less than \$15,000 in annual income are 22 times more likely to be abused or neglected than children in families with incomes of \$30,000 or more.³ Thus, it was logical to look at how the two agencies within the Department could work together to more holistically and effectively address the needs of vulnerable children and families.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This brief summarizes the 56-page report, *A Vision for Eliminating Poverty and Family Violence: Transforming Child Welfare and TANF in El Paso County, Colorado* by Rutledge Hutson. To read the full report on how El Paso County integrated its welfare and child welfare agencies, visit the CLASP website at www.clasp.org or call (202) 906-8000 to order a printed copy.

The report findings are based upon site visits, interviews, review of Department documents, and analysis of other outside reports conducted over an 18-month period. While not a formal evaluation, the study provides a comprehensive look at El Paso County's reform efforts and offers lessons for others who hope to accomplish similar reforms.

When El Paso County considered how to bring the work of the two agencies together, it decided to change its whole way of doing business—not simply to make a few reforms here and there. The Department sought

to integrate its child welfare and TANF agencies so that they would provide seamless, family-centered services regardless of how the families came to the attention of the Department.

El Paso County pursued cultural change and collaboration within both the TANF and child welfare agencies of the Department. However, as those *intra*-agency collaborations developed, it became clear that *inter*-agency collaboration was also needed, and the Department took advantage of those opportunities to build cross-agency collaboration. In effect, the child welfare agency and the TANF agency moved along parallel, yet frequently intersecting, tracks. The process was motivated and guided throughout by the vision of eliminating poverty and family violence in the county.

Gaining Acceptance of a New Vision

How did this vision of eliminating poverty and family violence gain such broad acceptance in the Department? The Director and Deputy Director gave people opportunities and time to make the vision their own. In the mid-1990s, after many years working in the child welfare field, Barbara Drake⁴ became Acting Director of the Human Services Department. As she watched federal “welfare

reform” coming down the pike and responded to state reform efforts, she envisioned a new system that would provide families with the tools and services they needed to become self-sufficient, as the rhetoric of welfare reform demanded. She wanted to create a system that empowered people to help themselves. Drake recognized that the Department could not possibly address all the needs families receiving cash assistance faced. So, she began working with community partners on the urgent need to combine their efforts towards the goal of increasing families’ independence.

Over several years, she developed strong relationships with community providers and helped these providers discover ways to partner with the Department to get families the tools they needed to succeed. For example, she developed a partnership with Goodwill Industries, which now provides half of the case management and most of the job training, job placement, and supported employment services provided to TANF recipients. Now, in addition to the 350-person Department staff, a 90-person staff of community partners works on-site at the TANF offices. The community partners have become so integrated that, when walking through the

office and talking to people, it is nearly impossible to tell who is a Department staff member and who is a community partner.

Change Started at the Top

In 1997, David Berns became the Director of the El Paso County Department of Human Services. Berns brought with him a broad vision of reform and lots of energy. During his interviews for the position, Berns and the County Commissioners agreed that the goal of welfare reform should not be the reduction of TANF caseloads, but the reduction of poverty, which would in turn reduce caseloads. Similarly, Berns convinced the Commission that reducing foster care costs was not the real goal, but that improving prevention, achieving permanency, and obtaining good outcomes for children, the true objective of child welfare services, would ultimately achieve that effect. Berns has continued to demonstrate the fiscal soundness of this approach. Since his arrival, he has decreased the need for county funding for the Department while expanding prevention and early intervention programs.

Berns and Drake, now the Deputy Director of the Department, also brought together members of the com-

munity, including providers, clients, and other citizens, and asked them to come up with themes they thought were critical to moving toward the goals of ending poverty and family violence. These focus groups developed three general themes: (1) work must pay; (2) services need to be available to non-custodial parents as well as custodial parents; and (3) services need to be available to the broader community, not just those receiving cash aid.

Berns and Drake then met with frontline TANF workers and managers and asked what they needed to help clients achieve real self-sufficiency. Over and over they heard that the agency could help people with job search or job training, child care, and transportation, but that those services just weren't enough if the person had a substance abuse or mental health problem or was experiencing domestic violence. TANF staff noted that they didn't have the resources to help resolve those issues.

When Berns and Drake asked child welfare workers what they needed to strengthen families and keep children safely in their own homes, the reply was essentially the flip side of the coin. Child welfare workers noted that they could connect parents with mental health providers or

help them enroll in substance abuse treatment programs but that such services were only part of the picture. If parents are to stay clean and put their lives together in a way that supports their children, child welfare staff felt they needed access to jobs, transportation assistance to get to those jobs, and ongoing child care assistance. These were not the sort of things child welfare workers were accustomed to providing.

Following these discussions, Berns and Drake charged their staff (frontline workers, supervisors, and managers) from both sides of the Department to come up with a list of system changes or approaches needed to better serve families and to put the three themes identified by the focus groups into action. The staff developed over 70 strategies, most of which were implemented within three to four months. However, since that initial implementation, the approaches have been continually refined and developed, and new ideas are frequently tested.

How Agency Coordination Benefits Families

Initially, the value of coordination was most obvious for families being served by both the child welfare and TANF areas of the Department (e.g., developing coordinated case plans).

Then, the Department recognized that even when families were not in both systems, they had very similar needs. This led to the creation of kinship care initiatives that worked with families whether they were in the TANF or child welfare system and that provided continuity to those families who moved back and forth between the two. The set of initiatives for kinship care families, all of which are voluntary, includes: financial assistance, child care, assistance obtaining legal guardianship or adoption, support groups, and respite care.

The Department also concluded that the needs of teens would be better met by cross-agency coordination. To respond to the needs of at-risk adolescents, the Department developed the Teen Self-Sufficiency Program, which provides independent living skills, employment and training opportunities, and supportive services to adolescents (ages 13 to 25) living in foster care or in families receiving TANF assistance.

The Department found that families who receive TANF for more than two years frequently have significant challenges similar to many families in the child welfare system. To address the needs of these families, TANF and child welfare workers combined forces to assess the fami-

lies' strengths and needs and offer a broad range of voluntary services.

The Department began to broaden its collaboration in an effort to reach out to families not necessarily within either the TANF or child welfare system. Prevention and early intervention services began to be offered through the TANF agency (which had developed a reputation for helping families) so that there would be less stigma attached to seeking such services.

The latest development in cross-agency integration is the Direct Link project, which provides intensive home-based services to families with substance abusing parents who are involved with or at risk of becoming involved with the child welfare agency.

To continue moving towards its vision of eradicating poverty and family violence, the Department created a cross-agency committee to look for new opportunities to link the services. The committee receives regular feedback from clients and staff about how things are working and where change is needed.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

As the Department transformed itself in the ways described

above, there were challenges and bumps in the road. Most of these challenges would be faced by any other community or state trying to adopt El Paso's philosophy and approach. The experience of the Department in addressing these challenges offers the following valuable recommendations for others considering such transformation.

1. Build Widespread Support to Overcome Resistance to Change.

Change is threatening and frightening to most people regardless of its value. Change confronts people with the unknown and therefore often brings with it resistance. If workers are overly resistant to change, it does not matter what policies are written or what programs are created. Changing the way people interact with each other is unlikely to happen in the face of such resistance. In El Paso County, the underlying theme of the Department's vision rests upon respecting and valuing families—recognizing their strengths as well as their needs. If workers are unwilling to adopt such a philosophy, all the policy manuals and program guidance in the world will make little difference. Therefore, steps must be taken to diffuse the resistance to change.

Taking the time to build relationships was a critical part of what helped overcome resistance to change in El Paso County. Although many changes were implemented in a short period of time, the initial process of bringing people together to brainstorm and develop ideas about needed change helped lay the groundwork for seeing others as partners, rather than competitors or adversaries. In addition, this process followed several years during which Drake developed good working relationships with numerous community partners.

The Department also successfully encouraged staff to make the vision their own. The leadership of the Department defined the overall vision, but then engaged the entire community, from clients and staff to community providers, County Commissioners, and others in carrying out the vision. This approach gave everyone ownership of and investment in the success of the initiatives—it helped make the vision relevant to all.

The willingness and ability of the Director and Deputy Director to delegate authority also appears to have been critical to gaining broad acceptance of the new approach and overcoming resistance. Only by letting other staff take the vision

and run with it could Berns and Drake tap the full potential of their staff. Essential to the delegation of authority was the Director and Deputy Director's willingness to back up staff members, even when a project didn't turn out as hoped. Over and over, staff members reported that they felt comfortable with the new approach, not simply because it gave them the flexibility to be more creative in addressing the needs of the families they worked with, but also because they knew "Dave and Barb" put their money where their mouths were. The El Paso approach is both top down (in terms of setting out the original vision) and bottom up (in terms of allowing staff to experiment and be creative about how to implement that vision).

2. Address Issues of Confidentiality Directly and Flexibly.

Issues of confidentiality frequently arise when agencies are working together and partnering with community providers. In El Paso, no statutory or regulatory changes were required to permit information-sharing among the various service providers because the two agencies are housed within the same Department and all contracts with outside providers require adherence to the Department's confidentiality provisions. However, it was necessary to

overcome historical beliefs about not sharing information with others. The team-building that preceded the implementation of these initiatives helped all workers understand that they were working towards common goals for the family and that information-sharing among team members was not only acceptable but also essential. The fact that parents and other family members were present and participating as team members made staff from all agencies and community partners more comfortable with the information-sharing. Once again, the vision provided a guiding force to lead people around a potential pitfall.

In addition, attorneys representing parents often express fear that increased coordination or integration of the TANF and child welfare agencies will increase the power the two agencies have to make life difficult for families. In El Paso County, this fear does not seem to have materialized because the entire focus of the collaboration is to combine forces to assist families.

Sometimes, however, those who are helping parents address underlying problems that interfere with employment and adequate parenting must take an adversarial role to protect the child or children in the family.

However, in El Paso County, this appears to be the exception rather than the rule. The philosophy of the Department appears to be critical to making this approach work. The follow-through on that vision, which necessitates providing a broad range of services and supports for families, is also critical.

3. Work with and Around Funding Silos.

In a number of locations where collaboration or integration has been considered, administrators complain that funding silos—either federal or state—create obstacles. Funding silos have created few insurmountable problems in El Paso County. In part, that is because of Colorado's flexible funding structure and its devolution of authority to the county level. In addition to taking advantage of the flexible funding streams available in Colorado, the funding challenges have been addressed through Berns' creativity. Berns speaks frequently about "pushing the envelope." Christine Schmidt, the head of the Contracts Management Division of the Department, believes this willingness to take risks is an essential component of the Department's success. She said, "If you want to be able to provide people the services they need, you must be creative. When it comes to federal funds,

you sometimes have to push the envelope to get people to think beyond the traditional silos. You have to try to blend or braid the funding streams. Dave is willing to do that, and it makes all the difference.”

Berns believes El Paso County’s approach can be followed elsewhere. In large part, this approach was made possible by the flexibility of TANF. Even in states that are not county-administered, TANF funds can be used to provide the prevention and early intervention services that were key to integrating El Paso County’s TANF and child welfare agencies. The funding strategies would be different and would require more effort at the state level to convince state decision-makers that using TANF for prevention services is not only allowable, but smart.

The ability to step back and look at the big picture and to creatively maximize federal funds earned Berns the moniker “double down Dave.” His approach appears to work because he is providing more and better services to children and families. He does not utilize his creative energies to maximize federal funding simply to reduce county spending. The vision that guides his actions and the Department’s programs helps others accept the “envelope pushing”

in which Berns engages. In addition, Berns demonstrates results. As Schmidt explained, “You get to flexibility by being clear on the outcomes and holding people to them.”

4. Manage the Scope of the Change.

Questions that frequently arise as agencies consider collaborating or integrating are, “How big of a bite should we take? Should we try to restructure everything at once or should we take it a little bit at a time?” Berns believes it is essential to start big. For example, the Department implemented more than 70 changes in three or four months. However, Berns notes that the key is to not have any single player feel overwhelmed by the change. In his view, it is critical to ensure that each person involved in an initiative feels that the changes faced are manageable, while simultaneously moving everything towards the final goal. Not having change occurring everywhere may stifle change anywhere.

There is nothing inherent in the El Paso County approach that prevents it from being adopted on a statewide basis or in a larger city. However, it is important to understand that the approach takes hard work and time. Since “it’s all about relationships,” it will necessarily take longer to build solid work-

ing relationships when many more players are involved. But, there is no reason that strong leaders with vision, energy, and patience cannot create the vision and philosophy of El Paso County elsewhere and achieve a similar level of collaboration and integration.

Another aspect to consider when developing the scope is how many community partners and sister agencies to involve in the effort. In several places considering coordinating services, advocates and administrators raise concerns that there will never be agreement—that each provider, advocacy group, or agency will be fighting for its own turf. This has not been the case in El Paso County. Apparently, both the broad vision—upon which Berns and Drake keep everyone focused—and taking the time to let people make that vision their own and build relationships with others who share this vision led to a new level of collaboration and sharing among community providers.

5. Address Information System Challenges Creatively and Practically.

A final challenge faced by the Department had to do with computer systems. In Colorado, the state maintains the data systems for both TANF and child welfare. County workers input

the data and send it directly to the state, which reports back to the counties in the format deemed most appropriate by the state. This makes utilizing the data for program planning and implementation more difficult. Additionally, the two agencies use totally different computer systems that cannot interface.

These elements of the infrastructure could easily have impeded the Department's implementation of its vision. Even motivated, dedicated trained workers would have a difficult time coordinating with each other when their computer systems hinder information-sharing. The Department overcame this challenge in several ways.

First, to have access to data necessary for program management, the Department required private contractors to collect and regularly report specific indicators. Second, where workers needed to be able to access information from both systems, the county installed both computer systems in the unit and ensured that at least one worker could access both systems whenever necessary. Finally, the Department began collecting

some of its own data and hired a doctoral student to analyze this data.

Conclusion

Over the last five years, the El Paso County Department of Human Services has undertaken a number of new initiatives in pursuit of a bold new vision—eliminating poverty and family violence. The process has been driven by visionary leaders who set the course. Staff, community partners, and clients put the vision in place.

The El Paso approach may appear daunting to outsiders seeking to replicate its successes. However, it appears that the approach can be adopted by other communities willing to put forth the time and effort to build relationships and partnerships, to develop a common vision and mutual goals, and to think creatively about how to provide more comprehensive and coordinated services to children and families.

Endnotes

1 Goerge, R.M., Lee, B.J., Reidy, M., Needell, B., Brookhart, A., Duncan, D., & Usher, L. (2000). *Dynamics of children's*

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2 Geen, R., Fender, L., Leos-Urbel, J., & Markowitz, T. (2001). *Welfare reform's effect on child welfare caseloads*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute. Available at <http://www.urban.org>.

3 Sedlak, A.J., & Broadhurst, D.D. (1996). *Third national incidence study of child abuse and neglect, final report*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

4 Drake is now Deputy Director and is responsible for welfare reform within the Department.

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The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy on issues related to economic security for low-income families with children.

CLASP's child welfare work focuses on ways the child welfare and TANF fields can work collaboratively to help families and explores the role of kinship care in providing for maltreated children. In addition, CLASP is trying to change funding for child welfare

services by promoting fiscal reform. As a first step in this work, CLASP is examining the principles and philosophical and financial underpinnings of our nation's policies for serving maltreated children.

CLASP POLICY BRIEF

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