

**A VISION for
ELIMINATING POVERTY
and FAMILY VIOLENCE**

**Transforming
Child Welfare
and TANF in
El Paso County, Colorado**

By Rutledge Q. Hutson

January 2003

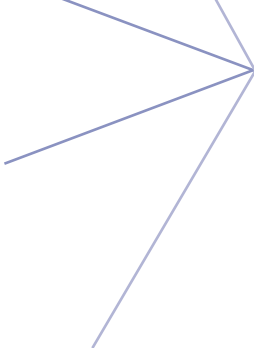
An abstract graphic consisting of several thin, dark blue lines that intersect at a central point on the right side of the page. The lines radiate outwards in various directions, creating a starburst or web-like pattern. Some lines are horizontal, vertical, or diagonal, while others are at more complex angles. The lines vary in length and thickness, with some being double-lined.

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About the Author

Rutledge Q. Hutson is a Senior Staff Attorney who joined CLASP in February 1999. She focuses on the implementation of welfare and other assistance programs for low-income families, particularly the relationship between these programs and the child welfare system.

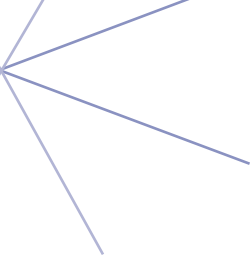


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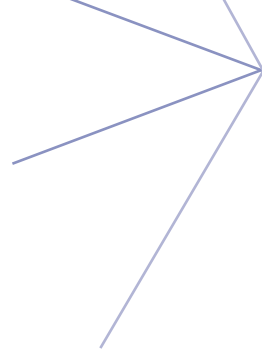
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Executive Summary

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 the Department of Human Services' bold new vision of *eliminating poverty and family violence*.

This vision grew out of 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 benefits moved into foster care; however, approximately 60 percent of children in foster care came from families that had been receiving cash assistance. Similarly, 70 to 90 percent of the children who receive child welfare services while remaining with their families belong to families receiving cash assistance. 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. 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.

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.

In El Paso County, cultural change was undertaken on both the TANF and child welfare sides of the Department and collaboration within each agency was pursued. 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 evolutions of the child welfare agency and the TANF agency moved along parallel, yet frequently intersecting, tracks.

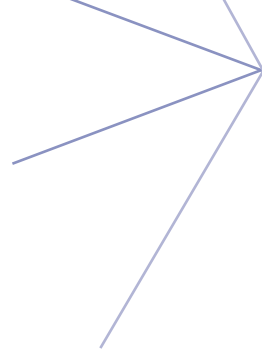
Many lessons can be drawn from El Paso County's experience and applied by others seeking similar transformation:

- **Developing and communicating a powerful vision—eliminating poverty and family violence—was critical to transforming the Department of Human Services and its service delivery.** The vision served as a motivator for change and a guide to dealing with challenges along the road.
- **Successfully encouraging staff members to make the vision their own is essential.** 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.
- **Building inter- and intra-agency relationships was critical to helping overcome resistance to change.** Although many changes were implemented in a short period of time, an initial, intensive 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.
- **The willingness and ability of the Department's Director and Deputy Director to delegate authority also appears to have been critical to gaining broad acceptance of the new approach and overcoming resistance.** Essential to the delegation of authority was the Director's and Deputy Director's willingness to back up staff members, even when a project didn't turn out as hoped.
- **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).** Change is unlikely to happen without commitment from both directions.
- **Families are crucial team members and participate in decisions about their well-being.** The fact that parents and other family members were present and participating as team members seems to have made staff, from all agencies and community partners, more comfortable with the information sharing necessary to make the Department a success. Actively engaging families in decision-making also made it possible to provide services in more family and community-based settings.
- **The flexibility of TANF funding made possible much of El Paso County's approach.** 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. However, El Paso County's experience suggests that the key is looking for opportunities within whatever funding structure exists and carefully reviewing existing law and regulations to determine how innovative approaches to helping families may be undertaken within the boundaries of the law.
- **It is essential that no single player feel overwhelmed by the change, but it is equally important to simultaneously move numerous parts of the department towards the ultimate goal.** Each initiative or program must believe that the changes faced are manageable. On the other hand, not having change occurring everywhere could stifle momentum for change anywhere.

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, but then, involved staff, community partners, and clients put the vision in place.

The El Paso approach may appear daunting to outsiders seeking to replicate their 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.





Introduction

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 the Department of Human Services' bold new vision of *eliminating poverty and family violence*.

This vision grew out of recognition that many of the families involved with the child welfare system are also involved with the cash assistance program. While historically less than 3 percent of children who received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—the welfare program prior to TANF—moved into foster care, approximately 60 percent of children in foster care came from families that 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.

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 make a few reforms here and there. The Department sought to integrate its

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- 1 Goerge, R.M., Lee, B.J., Reidy, M., Needell, B., Brookhart, A., Duncan, D., & Usher, L. (2000). *Dynamics of children's movement among the AFDC, Medicaid and foster care programs prior to welfare reform: 1995-1996*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, available at <http://www.aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/movement00/index.htm>.
 - 2 Geen, R., Fender, L., Leos-Urbel, J., & Markowitz, T. (2001). *Welfare reform's effect on child welfare case-loads*. 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.

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. To get a flavor of the change undertaken in El Paso County, consider the experiences of three families participating in a new program—Direct Link. The program offers intensive, multi-disciplinary, home-based services for a particularly challenging population in the child welfare system—families with substance-abusing parents. In many ways, this program, one of many the Department has adopted, offers the ultimate example of integrating TANF and child welfare to provide comprehensive services to at-risk families in a family-centered and community-based manner.

Michelle⁴ is a young mother who's been arrested on drug charges. Following Michelle's arrest, her six-year-old daughter is placed with Michelle's mom. Michelle is referred to Direct Link. The program provides in-patient services to parents and their families *in their own homes*. In this case, there is a team comprised of a child welfare caseworker, a mental health worker, a substance abuse counselor, a TANF worker, a former probation officer, and the mom. They meet as a team at least weekly, and Michelle works with individual team members 14 to 20 hours per week. Michelle is able to see her daughter daily, while she attends substance abuse treatment and complies with the conditions of probation. Michelle noted that she'd recently been in court on her child welfare case and had come in and sat down at the table with her team members. Her lawyer

arrived and told her to sit at the other table and not talk to the folks with whom she has been working. She was truly puzzled by this and said, "But they're my team. They're helping me. Why can't I talk to them?"⁵ Michelle clearly saw her team, including the child welfare worker, as allies. Typically parents involved with the child welfare system see child welfare workers as adversaries.

Tim and Susan have three children. Parental rights on the oldest child were terminated a number of years ago, and that child lives with his aunt. The other two children live with Tim and Susan, who have been frequent methamphetamine users and who were thought to be neglecting their younger children. Tim and Susan were referred to Direct Link for services. Both spoke highly of their TANF worker and their child welfare worker and all the things they'd done to help them. The children are in protective day care for eight hours a day, giving mom and dad time to address their substance abuse issues. The team working with Tim and Susan decided that the two of them should prepare a draft case plan. The parents spoke proudly of their work on the plan—having located an available computer to make the plan look "more professional" for the presentation. The other team members said that Tim and Susan were "much tougher on themselves than we would have been, and because they designed the plan they felt ownership of it." With this very independent-thinking family, who didn't want to accept help or have government in their lives, this approach appeared to work well.

4 The names and other identifying details have been changed to maintain the confidentiality of the families discussed.

5 Concerns about confidentiality are discussed in the section of the paper entitled "Challenges and Lessons Learned."

Around the country, child welfare agencies are taking steps to implement family group decision-making or family group conferencing models as a way to involve families in the case-planning process.⁶ Tim and Susan's experience with Direct Link provides an example of how to engage a fairly high-risk family in a meaningful way, while still ensuring the children's safety. Direct Link also offers an example of how to combine a family group decision-making approach with an interdisciplinary approach.

Finally, Bill and Liz, a young unmarried couple who have just had a baby with serious medical needs, have been referred to Direct Link. Bill has gone to in-patient substance abuse treatment—expressing to the team that he thought this was the only way things would work for him. Liz has been in a rehabilitation center recovering from a head injury and figuring out how to function with that injury and her substance abuse issues. The baby has been placed with a foster family that can handle her extensive medical needs, about an hour from Colorado Springs. The team feels frequent visitation is critical. They want mom to see and hold the baby at least twice a week. The child welfare worker notes that her schedule is making it difficult to facilitate those visits, so the TANF worker offers to handle one of the visits each week, which entails driving out and picking up the baby, monitoring the visit, encouraging Liz to bond with the child, and then returning the baby to her foster home. The program director marvels that the TANF agency has provided such a worker to help with any number of issues, from child care and Medicaid, to job training and cash assistance,

to providing transportation for visitations believed to be crucial to successful family reunification.

The intensive efforts to help Liz bond with her daughter demonstrate how the Department has used the flexibility of TANF to offer meaningful reunification services very early in a child welfare case. The hope is that these services will shorten the time the newborn spends in foster care—either by speeding the process of reunification or by moving towards adoption more quickly by accurately assessing the viability of reunification early in the process.

These three examples capture the essence of the integration and collaboration that the El Paso County Department of Human Services has created. How did this happen? How did families come to see child welfare workers, TANF workers, mental health service providers, and substance abuse counselors as allies rather than adversaries? How did TANF and child welfare workers come to see themselves as *working together* to help a family meet *its* goals? How did individual roles and responsibilities become so flexible? And how did the focus of everything turn towards what the family really needed to succeed—to keep the children safe while helping the parents build the skills and develop the resources to care for the children appropriately?

As the Department developed and refined its initiatives, it became clear that eliminating poverty and family violence requires comprehensive, family-centered, community-based service. This approach has been discussed in

6 See the American Humane Association's website at <http://www.americanhumane.org> for more information about family group decision-making.

child welfare circles for a number of years, but real implementation of such an approach is not common. Following the creation of TANF, public assistance agencies also began to discuss providing more comprehensive services to families to help them move towards greater independence. Again, true implementation of these concepts has not been widespread. What makes El Paso County stand out is that the Department has actually implemented the philosophies it articulates. This required cultural change within both the child welfare and the TANF agencies and also collaboration across agency lines and traditional areas of “turf.” To accomplish both of these things at once may seem impossible, but El Paso demonstrates that it is not.

In El Paso County, those involved initially focused on changing the culture within each agency. For example, TANF workers needed to alter the traditional role of “eligibility technician” to one of job coach and social worker. Similarly, child welfare workers needed to alter their often adversarial roles to adopt the roles of coach, motivator, and social worker. While the child welfare and TANF agencies collaborated immediately in obvious places (e.g., coordinated case planning for families in both systems), they seem to have worked up to the more challenging forms of collaboration and integration as they achieved culture change within their own agencies. In reality, the El Paso approach was more nuanced. Cultural change was undertaken on both sides of the Department, and collaboration within each agency was pursued. 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, child welfare and TANF moved along parallel, yet frequently intersecting, tracks.

Following a snapshot of El Paso County, the Department, and the Department’s leaders, this paper separately examines the TANF initiatives, the child welfare initiatives, and then the cross-agency efforts at collaboration. Finally, the paper concludes with a set of lessons that can be drawn from El Paso County’s experience.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an outsider’s view of what the Department is doing and how they have been able to do it. Readers looking for a step-by-step set of instructions about which policies to adopt, what regulations to impose, and which structures to create and which to dismantle may be disappointed. The critical lesson of this paper is that no single set of steps will lead another community to the same result. Instead, it is the philosophical approach, “the vision,” to use the Department’s words, and the leadership that has brought El Paso County to its current, ever-evolving system of human services delivery. This statement is not meant to suggest that other communities and states cannot adopt the El Paso approach. In fact, there is much to learn from El Paso County. The point is that El Paso County’s success is less about particular structures and policies than about the overarching vision and leadership.⁷

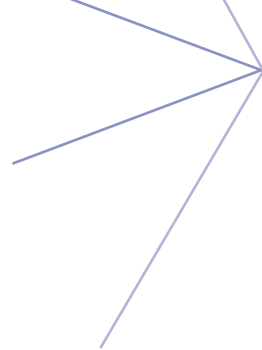
The study upon which this paper is based was conducted over an 18-month period. The findings are based upon site visits, interviews, review of Department documents, and analysis

7 See Kotter, J.P. (1995, March-April). Leading change: Why transformation efforts fail. *Harvard Business Review*, for more of a discussion of the central role of leadership in institutional change.

of other outside reports about certain aspects of El Paso County’s new approach. This study is not a formal evaluation with a random assignment design. Instead, the study is meant to provide a comprehensive look at reform

efforts that have been underway for a number of years and to extract lessons and guidance from El Paso County’s experience that will assist others who hope to accomplish similar reform.⁸

8 The Appendix contains more detail on the methodology of this case study.





A Snapshot of El Paso County, the Department, and Its Leaders

In 2000, El Paso County had about 510,000 residents or 12 percent of the state's population. Nearly 28 percent of these residents were 17 years or younger. A little over 14 percent of children lived in poverty—about 2 percentage points less than the national proportion of children living in poverty.⁹ El Paso County lies in east-central Colorado and encompasses more than 2,158 square miles (slightly more than twice the area of Rhode Island). While the western portion of El Paso County is extremely mountainous, the eastern part is prairie land where dairy cows and beef cattle are the main sources of ranchers' income. The county seat is Colorado Springs. The U.S. Air Force Academy is located there, and the military is a major employer throughout the county.¹⁰

In terms of human services, approximately 1,900 families in El Paso County received cash assistance from the TANF program in an aver-

age month in 2001. Data for the first half of FY 2002 suggest the number is increasing, perhaps to about 2,100. In 2000 and 2001, the Department received about 9,300 referrals for child maltreatment; about 2 percent of these referrals led to placements in out-of-home care. In 2002, preliminary numbers suggest that referrals increased to almost 9,700, but the placement rates appears to have remained just under 2 percent, compared to a placement rate of nearly 3 percent in 1998.¹¹

Colorado has several distinctive funding structures. Counties receive their TANF, child welfare, and child care funds in block grants from the state. Counties also receive an administrative fund block grant that is extremely flexible. In addition, El Paso County participates in the state's Title IV-E managed care waiver. Finally, Colorado has a waiver from the federal government that allows it to provide Medicaid mental health services through managed care

9 Mercer Government Human Services Consulting. (2002, July). *Colorado child welfare evaluation: Third interim implementation status report*. Phoenix, AZ: Author. Available at <http://www.cdhs.state.co.us/cyf/cwelfare/Training/Third%20Interim%20implementation%20report.pdf>.

10 See the El Paso County webpage at <http://www.elpasoco.com/epchome/default.asp>.

11 *Semi-Annual Report, Department of Human Services, El Paso County* (2002, August 15). Available at [http://www.co.el-paso.co.us/humansvc/Semi\(6mo\)DHSreport02.pdf](http://www.co.el-paso.co.us/humansvc/Semi(6mo)DHSreport02.pdf).

contracts. Along with these funding structures, much decision-making around spending and program design has been delegated to the counties.

Colorado Springs is a very conservative community. Registered Republicans outnumber Democrats by nearly 2 to 1. Colorado Springs also has a Libertarian streak; rugged individualism is widespread. Nonetheless, the Department's vision, typically considered progressive, has been widely embraced by the community—from the County Commissioners and community service providers, to the managers and frontline staff of agencies within the Department, to the families who participate in the programs and services available under the new vision.

How did this vision gain such broad acceptance? The Director and Deputy Director gave people opportunities and time to make the vision their own. This patient, inclusive approach to change is critical. According to one scholar of institutional change, “The change process goes through a series of phases that, in total, usually require a considerable length of time. Skipping steps creates only the illusion of speed and never produces a satisfying result.”¹²

In the mid-1990s, after many years working in the child welfare field, Barbara Drake became Acting Director of the Human Services Department.¹³ 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

demand. 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 the course of 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 TANF recipients receive. 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 Department staff and who is a community partner.

In 1997, David Berns retired from his job as Michigan's Child Welfare Director and became the Director of El Paso County's Department of Human Resources. Berns brought with him a broad vision of reform and lots of energy. During his interviews for the position, Berns utilized the significant changes in state and federal laws dealing with welfare and the County's rapidly increasing expenditures for foster care to demonstrate the need for a new approach to human services delivery. Berns and the County Commissioners agreed that the goal of welfare reform should not be

12 See Kotter, note 7.

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

the reduction of TANF caseloads, but the reduction of poverty, which would in turn reduce caseloads. Similarly, he 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 objectives of child welfare services, would ultimately reduce costs. 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 also brought together members of the community, including providers, clients, and other citizens, and asked them to come up with themes they thought were critical in helping move 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.

The work with community partners, County Commissioners, clients, and other community members conveyed a compelling sense of urgency that a new approach was needed, which provided the momentum to initiate the long process of change. Berns and Drake took this initial momentum and helped spread it to Department staff. According to an expert on institutional change, “Sometimes executives underestimate how hard it can be to drive people out of their comfort zones. Sometimes they

grossly underestimate how successful they have already been in increasing urgency. Sometimes they lack patience: ‘Enough with the preliminaries, let’s get on with it.’”¹⁴ Berns and Drake continually conveyed a sense of urgency, which was key to building and sustaining the necessary momentum.

They first 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 those things just weren’t enough if the person had a substance abuse or mental health problem or was experiencing domestic violence. TANF staff noted that those issues have to be resolved too, but that they didn’t have the resources to help. 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 staff was accustomed to providing.

Following these discussions, Berns and Drake charged their staff (frontline workers, supervisors, and managers) from both sides of the

14 According to Kotter, see note 7, more than 50 percent of organizations seeking to change fail in the initial phase of change because they do not take the time to create a great enough sense of urgency.

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.



TANF Developments

The TANF initiatives developed in El Paso County over the last several years reflect the changing agency culture. For example, staff began to realize that it was essential to fully understand the strengths and needs of a family to connect them to appropriate services, and this recognition led to improved assessment procedures. Similarly, it was evident that innovative staff training was critical to changing philosophical orientations to working with families, so a new training curriculum was developed. It was also clear that if the Department wanted to help people move towards work and greater independence, work supports needed to be available, and it had to pay to work. Finally, there was a recognition that not everyone would be able to work, or work enough to support her family, so services needed to be developed to help those with barriers reach their maximum potential. This section of the paper examines several of the critical TANF initiatives that have been developed to meet the Department's vision.

Assessments

TANF agencies throughout the country have begun to recognize that many families who continue to receive cash assistance face barriers to employment. El Paso County has been at the forefront of addressing the needs of families facing such challenges. One of the initial

staff recommendations was to improve the assessment process to better identify and address the needs of families on an individualized basis. The starting point was recognition that a faulty assessment can create problems for families and for the agency. Such assessments often result in inappropriate or inadequate services, which in turn lead to unmotivated, uncooperative, or simply unsuccessful clients.

According to Department training materials, an assessment is “an opportunity to look at the family; its support systems, education and training, social and economic factors, potential skills, interests, personal traits, and physical capacities.” The assessment technician provides information on TANF assistance, diversion programs, Medicaid, Food Stamps, and the Low-Income Child Care Program. The technician's role is to help the family clearly explore its circumstances and options. The Department training materials state, “The ultimate goal is to design a program with the family to meet their specific needs, not to require that families meet specific criteria for [a] program.” In the end, *families decide* which programs and options they would like to pursue, which services meet their needs and are also consistent with their value systems. While a number of TANF programs around the coun-

try have begun to offer better assessments of their client's needs, El Paso stands out with a very family-centered process in which decision-making rests largely with the family.

The assessment is not a one-time occurrence, but rather is an ongoing process that allows for readjustment of the plan as needed. Training materials explain that “[a]ssessment is not something done to clients. It is a complex process consisting of sub-processes carried out with the client's consent and cooperation.” For example, clients will be advised of on-site domestic violence service providers and asked if they want to consult them. Based on the client's requests, the domestic violence provider may become the coordinator for developing an appropriate plan of action—otherwise known as the Individual Responsibility Contract (IRC). If the client does not express interest in meeting with the domestic violence worker, she is reminded at subsequent meetings that she can consult with this worker at any time. Similarly, if mental health or substance abuse seems to be an issue, on-site mental health counselors and substance abuse treatment providers are available to help with the assessment and IRC development.

One of the early realizations from this assessment process was that TANF assessment technicians could benefit from the expertise of child welfare workers. A concern frequently raised when families are given a meaningful role in case plan development is whether children will be safe. Historically, many working in the social service field have doubted the ability of a family that is facing significant need or crisis to come up with an appropriate plan of action. Those concerns also arose in El Paso

County, and, to respond to them, Berns and Drake reassigned several experienced child welfare workers to the TANF team. These workers helped ensure that child safety was addressed as families developed their IRCs. They also made sure preventive services were incorporated into plans as needed. The addition of child welfare workers to TANF teams and the inclusion of preventive services in TANF case plans are much less common in other TANF agencies around the nation.

Training

A second critical recommendation for change involved developing comprehensive training and cross-training to equip staff with the skills and motivation to carry out the Department's vision. This recommendation stemmed from the recognition that having a talented and dedicated staff is essential to implementing the El Paso approach to human services delivery. The initial training was developed in consultation with all levels of staff, and the training continues to evolve. In addition, ongoing training opportunities are continually being developed.

One of the first components of the training was called “Mission Possible.” New workers were asked to appear at the office in casual clothes. They were given a “mission” similar to something they might ask future clients to do (e.g., pay a utilities bill, arrange child care, travel to a food bank, seek housing, etc.) along with a 20-pound bag of flour, to simulate carrying a small child. The day was spent trying to fulfill the “mission,” riding the bus, donating the flour to a food bank, and then finding a creative way to present experiences and thoughts about the “mission” to other staff members. According to Levetta Love, a TANF

manager who was instrumental in developing the training curriculum, this has been a very useful tool for helping staff members empathize, rather than sympathize, with their clients. Some have recommended that all policymakers be required to undergo such training before being able to work on policy affecting low-income families.

In addition to helping staff appreciate the day-to-day lives of their clients, the training program is designed to help staff appreciate the challenges faced by their colleagues. A new staff member may shadow someone through every job in the agency, a period that initially lasted six months, but has now been shortened to six weeks. The goal is not to make new employees experts in every program and service, but to ensure that they are familiar with what the agency and its partners have to offer and that they have a greater understanding of the challenges inherent to certain jobs. Lori Sims, a TANF worker who works closely with child welfare workers, reports that this has been a critical component of the integration of TANF and child welfare. As TANF workers observed the pressures felt by child welfare workers who must answer to their supervisors, to the court, and ultimately to themselves about children's well-being, they gained a greater appreciation of the gravity of these workers' daily decisions. Similarly, as child welfare workers began to understand the number of income-supporting and employment-related programs and the varying eligibility criteria for such programs, they gained a new perspective on the complexity of TANF workers' jobs and learned what valuable allies these workers could be.

Another component of the training curricula deals with diversity and its value within the Department and the community. The program offers training to staff throughout the Department (including community partners) about different cultures and how to find the strengths within those differences. On its face, this training is designed to develop cultural awareness among staff members. However, it appears to do much more. At the core of the Department's philosophy lies a profound respect for human beings, whatever their circumstances. This philosophy is evident in the diversity training's focus on respecting the different backgrounds of clients and families. However, the lessons learned about dealing with clients also seem to be applied to dealing with other staff—those from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds and those from different educational disciplines. In this way, the training program continually communicates and supports the vision of the Department¹⁵ and the vision guides the development of the training curricula.

The Department's approach to training is creative and evolving. Senior management is committed to ensuring that staff members receive the training they need to better serve their clients. These managers are also dedicated to providing training that prepares staff for greater leadership roles and advancement. In essence, the current leaders are ensuring that their replacements are gaining the skills they need to keep the momentum of change going.¹⁶ The commitment of time and resources for training is what sets the Department apart from many training efforts in other parts of the country. The training is also truly

15 See Kotter, note 7, for a discussion of the risk of under-communicating the vision.

16 See Kotter, note 7, for a discussion of the need to make sure the next generation of top management personifies the new approach.

multi-disciplinary—with staff from different agencies training on various issues together and sharing experiences and perspectives.

In El Paso County, a second factor besides training contributed to the development of a dedicated workforce. Many TANF workers left as it became clear that the job of a TANF caseworker was being changed dramatically. A number of workers went to other jobs within the Department that deal with more technical eligibility criteria (e.g., Food Stamps and Medicaid) than the casework focus of the new position. The turnover rate for TANF workers in El Paso County within the first year was 85 percent.

This initial turnover allowed for a new focus in hiring. As Drake explained, “We began hiring for heart.” The Department began looking for social workers *and* those with similar training and interests—those who really wanted to work with families to empower them to help themselves. As Department materials clarify, “Agencies do not serve clients—they help them to serve themselves.” After the high turnover rate during the first year, the rate stabilized and is now about 11 percent.

Other communities may not have such a substantial initial staff turnover (or be able to handle one); however, the tenor set by the Department leaders and the comprehensive training seem to have contributed substantially to the culture change within the El Paso County Department. The change may have happened more quickly because of the initial turnover rate, but it appears that vision, leadership, and training can bring about cultural change as well.

For example, there was less initial turnover on the child welfare side of the Department, but

the cultural change is occurring there as well. Change appears to be taking longer on that side of the Department, but the broad vision of ending poverty and family violence seems to be taking hold among child welfare managers and caseworkers. It may also be that change is occurring more slowly on the child welfare side because the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, while bringing change to the child welfare system, did not turn the system upside down in the way the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 did when it transformed AFDC into TANF.

Make Work Pay

In addition to improving the assessment process and the training curricula, staff recommended a series of policy changes that would make work pay. If one expects people to work instead of receive cash assistance, working has to be more advantageous than not working. If work expenses such as child care, transportation, or clothing mean that families have less money if they work than if they receive cash assistance, it may be difficult to convince parents that working is in the family’s best interest. Similarly, if families have to receive cash assistance in order to receive other needed benefits and services, families may rely upon cash assistance in order to receive those services and benefits.

Diversion Programs

El Paso County has developed several initiatives to make work pay. First, the Department offers two diversion programs that provide alternatives to ongoing assistance that can address a family’s unique needs. Under these diversion programs, families can receive the supports they need without enrolling in the cash assistance program.

The first diversion program is Colorado's statewide diversion program—60-Day Empowerment. To participate in this program, a family must be eligible for TANF and must be considered job ready, with employment likely to be obtained within 30 to 60 days. The family waives the right to TANF assistance during the 60-day period, but receives flexible assistance with child care expenses, housing, utilities, transportation, and other employment-related support services, so long as the adult recipient is engaged in job search, employability assessments, and other work activities described in the IRC. If the individual complies with the plan and is still unemployed at the end of the 60-day period, the case is converted to a regular assistance case. If the individual does not comply with the plan, further assistance may be denied or a new plan may be developed before assistance begins.

The second diversion program is county-designed and -operated. This program provides alternatives under three different circumstances. The Colorado Works component of the county diversion program is aimed at those facing a short-term crisis. A family may receive a one-time payment to remedy an immediate need, which will permit the family to maintain "self-sufficiency" without additional assistance. The family will be ineligible for TANF assistance for up to 12 months following a payment, although the Director can waive this provision based on special circumstances. A payment in excess of \$1,000 must be approved by a manager, but other amounts can be

approved by a TANF supervisor. The family need not meet the eligibility criteria for TANF but must have income at or below 185 percent of poverty.¹⁷ The family also fills out an application that permits the technician to determine eligibility for other programs.

The post-employment component of the county diversion program is aimed at those who are working but need help sustaining their employment. Low-income families are able to receive employment-focused services and financial assistance to sustain employment or upgrade skills that enhance job retention and career development. Payments under Post-Employment Diversion may not exceed \$1,000 in a 12-month period, unless approved by a manager. The family need not be eligible for regular TANF assistance but, as with Colorado Works Diversion, must have income at or below 185 percent of poverty¹⁸ and must have a dependent child.

The family preservation component of the county diversion program is aimed at stabilizing families at risk of involvement with the child welfare system. An array of crisis-oriented services is available to families who meet the emergency assistance criteria of the state's pre-TANF IV-A plan.

Neither county nor state diversion payments count towards the 60-month lifetime limit for TANF assistance. Both programs are voluntary and in addition to other community resources available. TANF is intended to fill gaps, not

17 Technically, the eligibility calculation is a bit more complicated than whether the family's income is at or below 185 percent of poverty. The family's income is calculated, appropriate disregards are applied, and then the adjusted income is compared to the "needs standard," which is 185 percent of the federal poverty level. If the needs standard is less than the income, the family is not eligible for assistance. If the needs standard exceeds the income, the family is eligible, under regular TANF, for a payment equal to the difference between the two amounts, multiplied by 0.8475.

18 Technically, the needs standard is set at 185 percent of poverty. See note 17 for more detail.

replace existing resources. Unlike diversion programs in other places, these options are not used to create hoops for families to jump through to obtain assistance. Instead, they are designed to offer alternatives to ongoing assistance when appropriate. About half of all applicants choose one of the two diversion programs. In 2002, El Paso County diverted an average of 175 cases per month.¹⁹ In fact, El Paso County accounts for the bulk of Colorado's diversions—64 percent in 2001.²⁰ The vast majority of these families are able to avoid receiving ongoing assistance because of the diversion programs. According to the Deputy Director, in a typical six-month period, only five or six families who had been participating in the state diversion program (60-Day Empowerment) converted to the ongoing cash assistance program. Additionally, since its start, almost no families have sought to enroll in the ongoing cash assistance program from the county diversion program.

Earned Income Disregards and Retrospective Budgeting

In addition to these diversion programs, El Paso County provides earned income disregards. With the recognition that there are costs associated with employment, earned income disregards allow families to ignore a certain portion of their earned income when the county determines whether and how much cash assistance the family is eligible to receive. The Department's policy offers families greater earned income disregards than those required by the state. This policy is particular-

ly helpful as parents begin working while on assistance and have employment start-up costs—such as purchasing uniforms or special tools. El Paso County also provides an employment bonus for those who become and remain employed for a period of time.²¹

The Department also utilizes retrospective budgeting to determine continuing eligibility and payment amounts after a family has received assistance for two months (initial eligibility is determined prospectively). Under this policy, a parent who increases her income in January would not see a change in her benefits until March. Her February benefits would be determined based on her December income. As with earned income disregards, retrospective budgeting helps minimize the “cliff effect” of immediately losing assistance income due to employment income and gives families time to cover the start-up costs of employment and get stabilized in their employment situation. Of course, retrospective budgeting can be difficult for families who lose income while receiving assistance, but the hope is that families will be increasing earned income and moving towards greater independence.

Work Supports

As part of the effort to make work pay, Department staff recognized the need to ensure that families had adequate supports, such as transportation assistance, child care assistance, access to health services, and the like. This recognition is not unique to El Paso

¹⁹ See *Semi-Annual Report*, note 11.

²⁰ *Report of the State Auditor, Colorado Works Diversion Program: Department of Human Services, Performance Audit*. (2002, August). Available at <http://www.state.co.us/auditor/2003/2003perf/1455.pdf>.

²¹ Technically, once a family has worked long enough or earned enough to become ineligible for assistance under the County's earned income disregard system and becomes eligible for Transitional Medical Assistance, the Department makes a one-time bonus payment, up to \$500, to help the family maintain financial stability.

County, but the Department developed some novel approaches to ensuring work supports are available.

For example, the Department worked with local child care providers to develop a resource and referral service, something a number of TANF agencies have done. Then the Department created a system through which families could enroll in the child care subsidy program at child care sites, rather than the Department's offices. In addition, the Department worked with local child care providers to address what they saw as a significant growing problem of *toddlers* being expelled from child care because of their behavior (see box on page 22).

In an effort to ensure that those leaving cash assistance are able to maintain access to needed work supports, the Department also developed a Transition Team. The Transition Team helps ensure that families access all benefits for which they are eligible—for instance, Food Stamps, Medicaid, child care subsidies, and further education and training. Families may also be eligible for additional “supportive payments” from the team if they have a dependent child and can demonstrate a specific need for services that are likely to enable the family to obtain, maintain, or upgrade employment. The Transition Team is housed at the local workforce center and is available not only to those transitioning from welfare to work, but also to all low-income families that want to improve their employment prospects. This approach is in keeping with the Department's motto: “Get a Job, Get a Better Job, Get a

Career.” While some other communities and states offer one-stop shopping to help people advance in their careers, El Paso County's approach is novel in that the Transition Team is proactive. When someone leaves TANF for employment, they are automatically assigned to a team that follows up to ensure that the individual and family are aware of the support services and benefits available to them. The Transition Team provides ongoing case management to families and continues to work with these families as long as they remain eligible for Food Stamps, Medicaid, child care, or similar services.

About 35 percent of adult TANF recipients in El Paso County are employed.²² While this figure cannot be definitely tied to the earned income disregard and retrospective budgeting policies or the work supports the Department makes available, it does serve as an important indicator that families are moving towards the vision of increased economic stability.

Addressing Barriers

“Countable” Activities

In addition to developing policies and programs that help make work pay, the Department staff believed it was critical to address the needs of those not currently able to work or to work full-time. For example, the Department includes a variety of services to address barriers to employment among the list of “countable work activities” under TANF. Under federal law, states are required to have a certain proportion of their TANF caseloads engaged in a specific set of work-related activities. The

22 Calculations made by Matthew Caywood, Research and Evaluation Coordinator, and Barbara Drake, Deputy Director, based on FY 2002 data. In FY 2002, the average monthly number of adult recipients who worked was about 451. The caseload of adults subject to work requirements ranged from about 1,150 to 1,275.

Working with Child Care Facilities to Avoid Expulsion

It came to the Department's attention that a number of toddlers were being expelled from child care. There was great concern about the consequences of these child care expulsions on the children. What would it mean for their education and school experiences in the forthcoming years? There were frequently referrals to child welfare to assess whether circumstances at home might be contributing to the child's behavior. Similarly, there was concern about the consequences to the family. How would a single mother be able to work and provide for her family if her child was expelled from every child care facility in which she enrolled him? How would it affect her feelings about being away from the child to work? Would she be able to fulfill her responsibilities at work while she worried about the care her child was receiving?

To respond to this situation, the Department and the community created a team of child development and mental health experts who began working with child care providers and parents to understand the origins of each at-risk child's behavior and then implement solutions. Sometimes the child's behavior was a flag for problems at home and allowed the Department to intervene early. Sometimes the behavior appeared to be the result of unrealistic expectations on the part of child care providers or parents. The Child Care Response Team would then work with the family and child care workers to increase understanding of child development and to alter the interactions between adults and the child so that the expectations were more age-appropriate. Sometimes, the child's behavior seemed to stem from a lack of appropriate stimulation and interaction with the child. In these cases, the Response Team would work with the child care providers to change the environment. They might, for example, provide developmentally appropriate toys and make suggestions about how to physically structure the child care area. Not only did this approach prevent the expulsion of a number of children from child care, but the approach also enriched the experiences of the other children in the child care centers or homes.

This child care initiative was supported through a variety of funding sources. The initiative utilized Title IV-B (Promoting Safe and Stable Families funds), private donations, and TANF funds. They also took advantage of community resources (e.g., mental health services) to meet particular needs of families. TANF funds were utilized to cover staff costs and to provide services and supports that could not otherwise be provided.

Department allows individuals to engage in "county-defined activities," which are broader than those that count toward the federal requirement. The county-defined activities include: participation in domestic violence services, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, vocational rehabilitation, services to address medical disabilities, faith-based

mentoring, and counseling. The Department may also count activities associated with involvement with the legal system or child welfare system. By allowing individuals to count their participation in these activities, the Department makes it easier for families to obtain the services needed to address their barriers to employment and adequate parenting.

The philosophy of the Department is that all of these challenges can interfere with a family's ability to achieve self-sufficiency and that working on these challenges should be considered working towards greater independence. The expectation is that most parents will become successfully employed if caseworkers do their jobs well and identify and provide needed services and supports. Department training materials and Berns' statements to staff offer evidence of this approach when they explain: "Federal mandates for work activity regulate agencies—not families—and are not used as an IRC standard or measure of success."

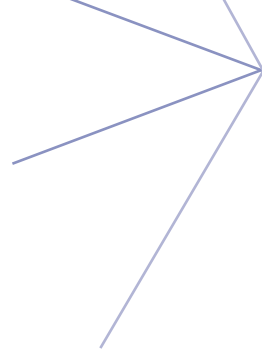
Sanction Prevention Team

Similarly, the Department has developed a Sanction Prevention Team. The notion behind this team is that the need to impose a sanction often reflects a failure of the team to develop an appropriate IRC or the need to modify the IRC to address needs and concerns not previously identified. Before a sanction can be imposed, the IRC must be reviewed by a supervisor for completeness and to ensure that the activities are specific, measurable, attainable, and realistic. Every family is sent at least two letters before the first-level sanction can be imposed, and every client is given an opportunity to demonstrate compliance or good cause for non-compliance. The family may also renegotiate the IRC, without penalty

or consequence, if changes to the IRC are appropriate.

If the family does not "cure" the first-level sanction, the family is referred to the Sanction Prevention Team, which is composed of consumers, TANF case managers, child welfare caseworkers, other human service providers, clerical support staff, on-site community partners, and staff from other work groups such as Food Stamps and subsidized child care. TANF and child welfare workers try to contact the family by phone to discuss the situation. A staffing is scheduled with the team, the family, and the original TANF caseworker. A team member also checks to see if there is an open child welfare case, which may be interfering with the family's ability to comply with the IRC. If contact cannot be made with the family by phone or letter, a TANF worker and one of the child welfare workers assigned to the TANF agency schedule a home visit. Child welfare issues must be explored if the family is at risk of losing all financial assistance. Throughout this process, the family is given the opportunity to *redevelop the IRC without penalty or consequence*. The Department's stated goal is to prevent sanctions, and workers boast of low sanction rates (3.3 percent)²³ as evidence of success. Department materials explain that sanctions are a failure on the part of the agency to engage a family.

23 Calculations made by Matthew Caywood, Research and Evaluation Coordinator, based on calendar year 2002 data. In 2002, 2,963 unique individuals received TANF assistance, and, during that time, 98 sanctions were imposed on 72 unique individuals.





Child Welfare Developments

As with the TANF initiatives, the child welfare initiatives in El Paso County developed over the last few years reflect the growing cultural change within the agency. For example, to facilitate collaboration between the child welfare agency and its community partners, Department Director David Berns restructured the managed care contracts with child placement agencies and with Medicaid providers to ensure that all parties coordinated on individual cases. While managed care in child welfare is not unheard of, and managed care for mental health is common, the unique aspect of the Department's approach was to combine the two to better serve children in foster care.²⁴

As the child welfare staff began to value the attributes of community-based services, the Department began to out-station child welfare

workers at schools and community centers and worked to avoid court involvement in all but the most serious cases. Finally, the need for training became apparent to help facilitate cultural change within the agency. The Department partnered with the local community colleges to offer more educational opportunities to staff members, foster families, and adoptive families. This section of the paper reviews these key initiatives.

Managed Care and Performance-Based Contracts

Consistent with the Department's approach to working with community partners, a significant portion of child welfare services are provided by private entities through performance-based managed care contracts.²⁵ The Department believes this public-private structure pro-

24 Portions of the managed care structure were in place in El Paso County before Berns took over as Director. What seems to be critical to the Department's success with the child welfare system is not so much the use of managed care, but the creation of a system that offered flexibility and resources to workers (from the frontline through management) and also held all actors accountable for the outcomes experienced by children and families.

25 When Berns arrived in El Paso County in 1997, the state was imposing a cap on foster care costs. Berns, along with other county human service directors and county commissioners, negotiated with the state legislature and obtained permission to negotiate performance-based contracts and case rates directly with providers as part of the legislation capping foster care allocations. Berns wanted the Child Placement Agencies, which had traditionally been responsible for finding suitable foster homes, to take on additional responsibilities. He also wanted to make better use of the state's Medicaid managed care program and involve the local mental health center in coordinating and overseeing the provision of needed mental health services.

vides better coordinated, more appropriate, cost-effective services for children and their families. The Department holds the contractors accountable for results by requiring them to meet certain performance criteria. The Department also holds contractors accountable for costs by providing a set payment within which contractors must meet the needs of the children and families in their care. As a result of these contracts, the Department and its partners share the responsibility for children at risk of maltreatment.

Differential Response to Reports of Maltreatment

The Department assesses families for whom child abuse and neglect referrals are received and then determines an individualized course of action, such as the provision of in-home services, family supports, or foster care. The Department has adopted a “differential response” approach in which only the most serious cases involve Juvenile Court. Most of the cases are handled in a less adversarial manner—by “assessing” the family’s strengths and needs, designing a plan of action in conjunction with the family, and providing needed services and supports.

Under the Medicaid managed care contract, Access Behavioral Health Care (ABC) and Pikes Peak Mental Health (Pikes Peak) provide mental health professionals on-site at the Department.²⁶ These professionals participate

in the initial case review and help identify alternatives to foster care that may be more appropriate. The mental health staff can also arrange assessments and services for parents if needed.

Intensive Home-Based Services

Whenever out-of-home placement can safely be avoided, the Department provides intensive in-home services to families. These families may be either court-involved or receiving voluntary services. Services may include mental health and substance abuse treatment, crisis intervention, emergency financial assistance, and concentrated assistance in the development of skills to improve parenting, stress reduction, problem solving, household budget management, and utilization of community resources. Many of these “core services” are provided through a managed care contract with a local network of providers who work with Department caseworkers to connect families with appropriate services. The contractors must report certain indicators, and improvements in these indicators are tied to incentive payments. For example, contractors must provide information on the disposition of each child (e.g., did he or she remain at home or move into foster care?); or client satisfaction with services; and on Department caseworkers’ satisfaction with services.

Since 1998, the total number of children in out-of-home placements has declined by about

²⁶ When the state solicited bids for Regional Mental Health Administrative Services Agencies (MHASAs), the entities responsible for the Medicaid managed care contract, Pikes Peak formed a limited partnership with a behavioral health care organization and won the regional contract for the area covering El Paso County. Included within the contract was the responsibility to manage mental health services for children in foster care. When the state re-bid the MHASA contracts in 2001, the contract was awarded to Access Behavioral Health Care (ABC). Through subcontracts with ABC, Pikes Peak continues to manage mental health services for children in foster care. ABC is responsible for credentialing its providers, reviewing service utilization, processing claims, and maintaining a management information system that can track service utilization, costs, and outcomes. ABC also maintains an oversight and overall management role for issues relating to mental health.

Case Rates for Child Placement Agencies

Under their managed care contracts, the Child Placement Agencies (CPA) in El Paso County receive two basic monthly case rates for each child. The first is a maintenance rate, which is determined according to the difficulty of care needed for the child in question. These funds are passed on to the foster family or group home caring for the child. The second rate is an administrative rate, which covers services provided by the CPA. CPAs receive a modified administrative rate for three months after a family reunifies to provide support for the family during this often rocky period.

In addition to the case management rate, CPAs have two options regarding payment for mental health services. First, they can choose to become providers by including a therapeutic component in their program or maintaining a contract with private providers. These CPAs (three at the current time) receive a therapeutic case rate as a mental health managed care provider, under the supervision of Access Behavioral Health Care (ABC). As a provider, they are expected to deliver or purchase appropriate services for the children in their care. These CPAs are responsible for the cost of providing mental health services to the children and families assigned to them. CPAs that choose not to become providers in the ABC network do not receive a therapeutic case rate, but they assist in selecting appropriate providers, who are paid via Medicaid or private insurance.

22 percent, while nationally the number of children in foster care appears to be about where it was in 1998.²⁷ Over this same time period, the Department also decreased the number of children in residential placements, such as group homes or institutions, by approximately 25 percent.

Foster Care Services

If the Department's initial review of a maltreatment allegation suggests a need for foster care, the Department generally utilizes the services of one of the 12 Child Placement Agencies (CPA) that have a performance-based managed care contract with the Department. A CPA accepts responsibility (under the Department's oversight) for placing the child in an appropriate foster home or facility, pro-

viding case management services, complying with court procedures and paperwork, and otherwise ensuring that the child's needs are addressed and that permanency is obtained as soon as safely possible. Under the Medicaid managed care contract, a therapist from Pikes Peak conducts a full assessment of the child's mental health needs within a week of placement. Mental health staff continues to serve as care coordinators throughout the life of the case. As such, they meet weekly with CPA staff. They also participate in joint meetings with the birth family, the foster parents, the child(ren), the CPA staff, the Department caseworker, the guardian ad litem, and any other relevant parties to help develop and then monitor an appropriate treatment plan.

27 See Children's Bureau website at <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/dis/afcars/cwstats.htm> for the most current estimates available through the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System.

The CPAs are responsible for reporting on a set of indicators, and achievement of these outcome measures is part of the overall program evaluation and decisions to award the annual contracts the following year. The indicators include measures of safety and permanency and, beginning with FY 2002, also include measures of improvement in family functioning. These measures were developed and continue to be refined by the CPA Outcomes Committee, which includes staff from the Department, CPA personnel, foster parents, and the Department's administrative data manager.²⁸

Much of the day-to-day casework is handled by the CPAs; however, the Department maintains oversight responsibility for the CPAs. Each CPA is assigned a Department caseworker who serves as a consultant and monitor for the Department. These workers meet frequently with CPA staff and attend staffings, foster care reviews, and court proceedings. In addition, the Department provides intensive, team-based family reunification services through The Family Reunification Program.²⁹ The model begins with intensive in-home contacts (12 to 14 hours per week). Available services include: 24-hour access to support, parenting education, economic supports, self-sufficiency services, parent advocacy, respite care, household services, transportation, and assistance accessing community services. These services are intended to be coordinated with and enhance services provided by the CPAs.

Adoption Services

A number of changes have also been implemented to facilitate the adoption process.

First, the Department contracts with Pikes Peak and ABC to provide services to adoptive families and to families seeking to adopt children whose parental rights have been terminated. Among the services available are: mentoring, parent advocacy, resource materials, consultation, and respite care. Second, in late 1998, with the encouragement of the Department and an Adoption Opportunities grant, some of the CPAs began taking on a new role as licensed adoption agencies. The Department now pays nine CPAs to conduct adoptions of children who cannot be returned to their birth families. Half of the payment (\$900) is made when the adoption subsidy starts and the other half when the adoption is finalized by the court. If the subsidy starts within three months of the termination of parental rights, the CPA receives a 50-percent bonus (\$900). From 1996 to 1998, El Paso increased the number of annual adoptions from 49 to 230. Since the peak in 1998, the annual number has declined to 140 (FY 2001), although Berns attributes this to the decreased backlog of children waiting for adoption. Between 1996 and the end of FY 2001, only one of the 891 finalized adoptions had dissolved.

Community-Based Services

Out-Stationing Workers in Schools

The Department has also begun implementing a community-based service provision model. Initially, a child welfare worker was assigned to four elementary schools in a neighborhood that frequently referred children to child protective services, primarily for neglect. The

28 The indicators and targets include, for example, no new confirmed incidents of maltreatment while a case is open; no new confirmed incidents of maltreatment during the six-month period following permanent placement; 90 percent of children will be moved no more than twice after an initial placement; and 90 percent of children will achieve legal permanency within 18 months of the initial removal.

29 This program is modeled after the Homebuilders initiative utilized in Michigan.

worker attended weekly meetings with school staff to discuss high-risk families and to help the school and other community members to identify resources (such as food banks or clothing drives) that could help families keep their children safely at home. The caseworker also made contacts with local police officers and many area apartment complexes to have a better sense of families' needs and the risks children faced. The purpose of this community-based service provision is to have families, school staff, police officers, and community members view the child welfare worker as a family's ally, rather than an enforcer whose job is simply to remove children from their homes.

This service delivery approach also allows for greater continuity of care for families. Whenever a problem or issue arises with a family, the same caseworker is there to address it. Under the more traditional service delivery model, each time a new complaint comes into the child welfare agency, the case is assigned to a new worker. Having the same caseworker—one who is familiar with issues at school and at home because she is there—makes it easier for the caseworker and family to put all the pieces together and come up with an appropriate plan.

Co-location of Services in a Community Center

Following the positive reception of the school-based project, the Department developed a multi-agency collaboration to offer a range of services in a somewhat isolated community within the county. The Department houses a child welfare worker in a community center. The worker provides child protection assessments and offers preventive services, much like the worker at the schools. Again, the goal is to create a non-threatening, helpful presence in the community and to connect families with

needed resources. In addition to the child welfare worker, 30 service providers are involved in the community center, including the police department, the Community Partnership for Child Development, the YMCA, Head Start, the community health department, Army Community Services, the local school district, Project Redirect (described below), the workforce development center, the Family Independence Program (which handles applications for diversion payments and regular TANF assistance), the Salvation Army, St. Joseph's and God's Pantry, and the School to Work Alliance.

Community-Based Forensic Child Protection Teams

The Department also utilizes three community-based forensic child protection teams, made up of local professionals who provide a multi-disciplinary approach to assessing allegations of maltreatment. One of the teams is based at various hospitals in the community and reviews all cases in which a child presents with a serious injury alleged to have been caused by abuse or neglect; an infant has been exposed to drugs in utero and has been referred to the team by the hospital; a child has been sexually assaulted; or further review is requested by a team member. The other two teams meet at the Department twice each week and review all cases in which there are serious or high-risk concerns of maltreatment; there are significant changes in family dynamics that call for reevaluation of an existing case plan; there are new allegations regarding a child under age six or a child with a developmental disability; there is a new teenage mother or the teenage mother's behavior appears to be putting her child at risk; there are allegations of sexual abuse in an already open case, where there are allegations that the non-offending parent is not protecting the child, or the perpetrator is non-compliant;

or where any team member requests additional review.

Multi-Systemic Approach to Adolescents

An additional example gives a flavor of how the child welfare system began to take a more holistic, collaborative approach to working with families. Project Redirect began in 1994 and targeted the 100 most difficult juveniles involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice system. A team of members from the Department, a local school district, Pikes Peak, the Department of Health and Environment, and Goodwill Industries uses a multi-systemic model³⁰ and provides intensive wrap-around services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. One team member described getting a call from one of his families on a Friday evening. The mother reported that the teenager had been acting out and had climbed into the crawl space under the house and refused to come out. So, the team member drove over to the house, wriggled into the crawl space with the young man, and talked to him until he would come out.

Project Redirect was also instrumental in using Medicaid funds to hire several young people in the program to do outreach following welfare reform. Thus the program served two purposes with one fund by (1) providing meaningful employment and a sense of purpose for adolescents who had experienced a difficult time and (2) getting critical information about Medicaid changes out into the community.

Mini-Grants to Community Groups

Finally, the Department has awarded mini-grants to eight neighborhood and community groups to help them expand services for fami-

lies that do not meet the threshold for regular child welfare services. The intention is to make voluntary, community-based child welfare services more available to the families throughout the county.

Limited Court Involvement, Less Adversarial Options

It is important to note that the Department's efforts to provide more family-centered, community-based services coincided with a more community-focused approach by the Juvenile Court and a change in the relationship between the Court and the Department. A number of years before welfare reform, Judge Richard Toth, the presiding judge, ordered the Department to pay rent and similar costs in a child welfare case. In his view, the only thing that was preventing reunification of the mother and her five children was her inability to cover the rent, security deposit, and other start-up costs associated with providing a home for the children. Judge Toth's order caused quite a stir—the Human Services Director at the time initially refused to comply and contended that the Department could not pay the family's rent. Under the current integrated approach to human services, that order would not pose any challenge. In fact, the Community Programs Manager who oversees the Family Empowerment Team, Roni Spaulding, hopes that today the rent would have been paid in such a case and never would have gotten to court.

As the Department has focused more on prevention and early intervention services—both through child welfare and TANF—the child welfare agency has made a concerted effort to

30 See Henggler, S.W., Mihalic, S.F., Rone, L., Thomas, C., & Timmons-Mitchell, J. (1998). *Blueprints for violence prevention, book six: Multi-systemic therapy*. Boulder, CO: Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, for more information about this model.

avoid going to court in all but the most serious cases. Between 1998 and 2001, the number of court filings decreased by about 50 percent and the number of families provided services while the child remained in the home tripled.³¹ Only 2.7 percent of cases of confirmed maltreatment have additional cases of confirmed abuse after the case is closed—whether the children are served in their homes or in foster care. This compares to a state average re-abuse rate of 3.5 percent and a national re-abuse rate of 11 percent.³²

The Juvenile Court has also taken a very proactive stance in promoting mediation as a better alternative than trial. Under this approach, everyone involved in a child welfare case (caseworkers, therapists, birth parents, foster parents, extended family members, friends, lawyers, guardian ad litem, court appointed special advocates, and children, depending on their age) meet with a trained mediator and try to come to agreement on outstanding issues—such as visitation, appropriateness of services, termination of parental rights, or adoption.

When Judge Toth ordered the first case to mediation in 1995, all parties were skeptical. Since then, however, the process has been embraced. Seventy percent of child welfare cases are settled completely through mediation. An additional 20 percent reach agree-

ment on some, but not all, issues in the case.³³ This approach complements the growing trend of family group conferencing or decision-making, which the child welfare agency is also using to try and avoid foster care placements.³⁴

Training

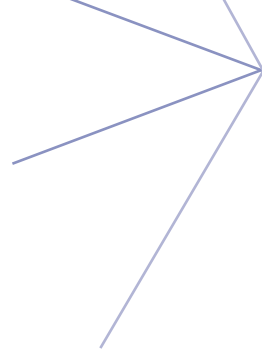
In addition to the structural and functional changes within the child welfare system, the staff requested additional training for themselves and for families caring for children in out-of-home placements. As a result, the Department entered into an agreement with Pikes Peak Community College to provide training for foster and adoptive parents, kinship caregivers, and Department staff. In certain cases, college credit is available to those who participate in the training. In addition, the Department provides 75 percent tuition reimbursement for child welfare workers and other staff who want to further their education. These workers are permitted to attend classes during work hours—50 percent of the education must be on the worker's own time and 50 percent can be on Department time. Well over 100 staff members have participated, including staff from all parts of the agency. Classes help to provide career ladders for clerical staff, technicians, caseworkers, supervisors, and managers.

31 Calculations by Lloyd Malone, Director of Children and Family Services.

32 See Mercer Government Human Services Consulting, note 9.

33 Thoennes, N. (1999). *Dependency mediation in Colorado's fourth judicial district*. Denver, CO: Center for Policy Research.

34 For example, Direct Link uses family decision-making to avoid the need for foster care or facilitate reunification if removal is necessary. In addition, the best practices provisions incorporated into the CPAs' contracts include such decision-making and the significant family involvement in all aspects of the process.





Cross-Agency Developments

At the time some of the new initiatives in TANF and child welfare were being developed in El Paso County, the Department began to experiment with cross-agency collaboration. According to TANF Manager Levetta Love, these efforts grew out of an increasing recognition that both parts of the Department were “serving the same families, but that where you meet them is different” depending on which agency got there first.³⁵ Initially, the value of coordination was most obvious for families who were being served by both areas of the Department. In these cases, for example, the agencies could develop 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 provided continuity to those families who moved back and forth between the two.

Teens are another group with members served by each agency who have quite similar needs that could be better met by coordination across the agencies. Families who have received

TANF for more than two years frequently face significant barriers to employment and were 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 families’ strengths and needs and offer voluntary services.

Finally, 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. The Department developed two programs to help improve child support collection and relationships between fathers and their children. The TANF agency (which had developed a reputation for helping families) began to offer prevention and early intervention services so that less stigma would be attached to seeking such services.

The latest development in the cross-agency integration is the Direct Link project (described in the introduction to this paper), 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

35 Levetta Love, TANF Manager. (2001, April). Personal communication. This phenomenon is described frequently by those who work with kinship care families.

continue the momentum, the Department has created a cross-agency committee to look for new opportunities to link the services of the two agencies. This section of the paper examines these critical steps in the development of cross-agency collaboration and integration.

Coordinated Case Planning

Initially, the Department engaged in coordinated case planning for families who were participating in both the TANF and child welfare systems. Child welfare workers were assigned to TANF teams and vice versa. The goal was to ensure that families did not have conflicting case plans. When the TANF agency defined its set of “countable” work activities, it included complying with provisions of the child welfare plan. As the importance of this coordination became evident, the Department developed best practices that called for using the development of every IRC in TANF to “assess the opportunities to strengthen and preserve families.” Similarly, best practices call upon those developing every child welfare plan to “assess the economic and self-sufficiency needs of the family and appropriately link them with internal and external resources.” The coordination may lead to a single plan for a family or for two plans that complement each other. The bottom line is that TANF and child welfare staff work with each other and with the family to develop a comprehensive coordinated set of services. Department Deputy Director Barbara Drake believes that most caseworkers are adhering to these practice standards, but the Department recently developed a formal poli-

cy that details how these practices are to be put into effect. The hope is that the policy guidance will make such practices a part of every worker’s routine.

Kinship Care Program

Across the country, an increasing number of grandparents are raising their grandchildren. In 2000, an estimated 2.16 million children lived in relative-headed households with no parent present.³⁶ While the majority of these kinship caregivers care for the children without special assistance from federal, state, or local governments, many rely upon either the child welfare or TANF system for help.³⁷

El Paso County is no exception. The Department recognized that kinship care providers were served by both its TANF and child welfare agencies and that whether the child welfare agency or the TANF agency had the case “often depended upon whether grandma got there first.” If the grandmother (or other relative) stepped in to care for children at risk of maltreatment, she might seek help from the Department through the TANF door. On the other hand, if child protective services investigated a claim before the grandmother learned of the problem, the case would likely be handled through the child welfare agency. The level of support available to kinship caregivers often varied according to which door they entered. Similarly the level of supervision and intervention varied depending on whether the kinship care family was a child welfare case or a TANF case. The Department

36 U.S. Census Bureau. (2001, June). Detailed tables for current population report. *America’s families and living arrangements, March 2000* (pp. 20-537). Washington, DC: Author. Available at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/p20-537/2000/tabC2.pdf>.

37 For an overview of the issue, see Hutson, R. (2002, October). *Reauthorization issues: TANF and kinship care*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy. Available at http://www.clasp.org/Pubs/DMS/Documents/1016040235.94/doc_TANF_and_kinship_care.pdf.

leaders believed this structure sometimes led to poor outcomes for children and frequently led to arbitrary decisions about how to work with families. So, they charged their staff with developing a kinship care program that would provide support for kin regardless of the door through which they entered.

Initially, the Department's staff decided to address the needs of such families "on the front end," before they ever entered the child welfare system. The Family Empowerment Team³⁸ used TANF funds to provide kinship families with flexible support and financial assistance. In addition to a basic child-only grant, kinship caregivers could be eligible for additional financial assistance on a case-by-case basis.

After developing the program to help kinship families on the front end, the staff designed a subsidized permanent custody program to help older children living with relatives exit the foster care system. If reunification has been ruled out and the relative caretaker is willing to provide for the child on a permanent basis, but the relative does not want to change the legal relationships through adoption, the Department is willing to provide ongoing subsidies, up to the amount of foster care payments, to that relative to help care for the child. The relative must become the child's permanent custodian through Juvenile Court, and then the child welfare case is closed. To ensure that any safety issues are properly addressed, the kinship care staff, who help assess the appropriateness of the living arrangements and continue to be available to the family on a voluntary basis, is comprised of both TANF and child welfare workers.

The kinship care program supervisor, Chris Garvin, provided the following illustration to demonstrate how the program works. A grandmother came into the Department after her daughter dropped four young grandchildren on the doorstep of her one-bedroom apartment. The grandmother did not want "welfare," but she needed help getting started caring for the grandchildren. She needed a larger apartment, additional furniture, money for school clothes, and the like. When she wrote down the specifics of what she needed, the total was nearly \$3,500. Garvin was concerned about giving out that amount of money, so he went to Department Director David Berns for approval.

According to Garvin, Berns asked if the family needed the items listed and if they would help the grandmother take care of the children without the need for foster care. When Garvin answered, "Yes," Berns said, "Then, why are you here asking me about this? That fits within our vision—you didn't need to check with me." As an afterthought he said, "You know how much it would cost to place those children in foster care. Not only is this the right thing to do in terms of helping the family, but it's also cost effective."

In addition to financial support, the Department discovered that kinship caregivers need other supports. For example, they often need child care subsidies to continue working or need respite care to have a short break from raising a second family. They usually need legal assistance to obtain guardianship so they can more easily enroll children in school and authorize needed medical treatment. Finally, many caregivers, especially grandparents, need

38 The Family Empowerment Team serves kinship care families, families where a parent is receiving Supplemental Security Income and a child-only grant, and families headed by teen parents.

someone in a similar situation to talk with. Many grandparents end up caring for a toddler or a teenager when they thought they would be enjoying retirement. Drake reports that the support groups established under the TANF kinship care program are in high demand. TANF funds are flexible enough to provide such services and supports, and El Paso County has taken advantage of that flexibility.

The need for legal assistance led to the creation of an initiative to help relatives who want to obtain legal guardianship. The process is voluntary and must be agreed to by the child's parent(s). The State District Court has jurisdiction to grant guardianship and uses hearings on such petitions to bring about consensual planning on the part of the family. The child welfare agency does not take custody of the child or oversee the case. Minimal oversight is maintained via the District Court, which receives reports from or meets with the families on an annual basis to see how things are progressing and whether any changes need to be made. In addition, the family can receive supports and services through the Family Empowerment Team (the front-end kinship care initiative).

E. David Griffith, who served as District Court Magistrate and handled all probate matters during the initial years of this program, described the guardianship initiative as “a brilliant concept, brilliantly executed.” According to Griffith, the program was appealing to everyone because it met the needs of families in flexible ways, it helped avoid the intrusiveness of the child welfare system and the juvenile court whenever possible, and it allowed for a true focus on families. At first some parties, including Griffith, were skeptical that it could work in a broad array of situations. However, Griffith reports that in his four years

of hearing such guardianship cases, he dismissed only four or five that had to be turned over to the Department to open a formal child welfare case.

While the ability to serve kinship care families without involving them unnecessarily in the child welfare system is an exciting development, in some cases kinship care families may be better served in the child welfare system. The ongoing supervision by the agency and the court may be necessary. Sometimes grandparents (or other relatives) want to be able to point to the child welfare agency or the court as the entity responsible for restricting visits or requiring parents to engage in substance abuse treatment or similar activities. While participation in the child welfare system is sometimes necessary, the Department recognized that even in these circumstances, kinship families have unique needs. To help these families, the Department developed a specialized Kinship Assessment Team comprised of both TANF and child welfare workers. The team members are familiar with the unique needs of kinship care providers. They also work to expedite foster parent licensing for the relatives. In the meantime, they ensure that TANF assistance is available to the caregivers until they are eligible to receive foster care payments. The goal here is to prevent placing a child in non-kin foster care temporarily until the relative can be licensed. To help stabilize placement with the relative, the kinship unit utilizes a combination of TANF and child welfare funds, providing seamless support to the family from the very beginning.

While other communities and states offer varying support to kinship care providers, El Paso County's model is notable for its comprehensiveness and for the manner in which the services are delivered. The Department pro-

vides financial services, such as subsidy payments, and supportive services, such as respite care and support groups, and it does so no matter which door the kinship caregiver enters. The Department provides kinship families a seamless set of supports and services and figures out, behind the scenes, which funding source to utilize to pay for particular services and supports.

There are a number of indicators that these supports and services are helping children. For example, a survey of Family Empowerment program participants (primarily kinship families) found that nearly 80 percent of the children resided at the same address while living with the relative and nearly 70 percent remained in the same school. Again, while these figures cannot be attributed to the kinship care program in a causal way, they offer encouraging signs that children in kinship care have stable placements.

At the same time, there is some indication that not all families are aware of the Family Empowerment initiatives. A review of the narrative responses to the survey suggests that while most respondents who knew about services were quite pleased with them, some families simply did not know what supports and services were available to them. One respondent indicated that she had “no dealings with Kinship or Family Empowerment,” despite the fact that the survey was distributed to those who were participating in the program. This suggests that the Department faces a continuing challenge of communicating its vision to all staff, who can in turn implement that vision with families.

Teen Self-Sufficiency Program

In addition to kinship care families, the Department also realized that older at-risk youth often move between the two systems. As a result, the staff developed the Teen Self-Sufficiency Program, which seeks to provide 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 program utilizes funds from the federal Independent Living Program³⁹ and TANF to provide a broad range of services. Many of the services are available to any youth in the community, regardless of whether he or she is eligible for other services provided by the Department. The services are available at a variety of locations, including Teen Resource Centers, which are located in community center space donated to the Department by the City of Colorado Springs.

37

Addressing Barriers

The Department also recognizes that many of the families participating in the child welfare system and in the TANF system face similar challenges. Substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health issues often create obstacles to both employment and adequate parenting. As a result, the Department created a TANF-funded, in-home family assessment of all families who have received TANF for more than 24 months. The caseworkers (both TANF and child welfare workers) provide *voluntary* services, screenings, coordination of IRC activities, and other support for these long-term recipients to help them move towards greater self-sufficiency and to

strengthen families to ensure that children are not at risk of maltreatment. The twin goals of ending poverty and family violence are evident in this program.

Working with Fathers

The Department staff also developed programs targeted primarily at enhancing child support collections and improving the relationships between fathers and their children. The first, the Center on Fathering, seeks to enhance fathers' parenting skills by offering classes on fathering and conflict resolution; ongoing support groups; a resource library; and, when appropriate, referrals to other community services. The Center is available to all fathers in the community regardless of their financial circumstances. In addition, the Parent Opportunity Program (POP) is designed to assist non-custodial parents with incomes at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level to meet both the emotional and financial needs of their children. A variety of services, including training and employment services, mediation services, and referrals to legal counsel, are available.

Prevention and Early Intervention Services

In 2001, the Department moved two family preservation and early intervention units out of the child welfare agency and into the TANF agency in a new unit called Team Success. The purpose of this team is to provide services that strengthen and support families who may be at risk of child maltreatment.

There were three primary reasons for this structural change. First, staff believed that they would be able to provide families a more comprehensive set of services, including economic supports, if they were part of the TANF

agency. Second, staff hoped that more families would take advantage of these voluntary services if they were not housed within the child welfare agency. The rationale was that there would be less stigma attached to receiving services from the TANF office because of all the changes the TANF program has undergone. Finally, the decision to move the units was financially motivated. The Department's child welfare budget was in the red but Berns and Drake felt it was critical to provide services that might help more families stay together safely and avoid the need for foster care. TANF funds are flexible enough to provide the services that had been provided by the child welfare agency, and, because of declining caseloads, the Department had TANF resources that it lacked in the child welfare budget. While TANF funds could have been used to provide these services without shifting the units to the TANF agency, the desire to serve more people and provide them with a more comprehensive set of services suggested that the move was a logical one.

In late 2001, the Department staff developed and began implementing Direct Link. This program—described in the introduction—aims to provide substance-involved families with the resources they need to address the challenges before them while keeping their children safe. The program involves collaboration not only between child welfare and TANF, but also mental health and substance abuse providers, and often the courts. The hope is the intensive services will prevent the need to move children into foster care, but, when that cannot be accomplished, the goal is to quickly reunify the family, if that can be safely accomplished. When reunification is not a viable option, the intensive nature of the Direct Link program makes that evident sooner and allows other permanency options, such as adoption, to occur more quickly.

With these last two initiatives, Drake believes the Department is on the cutting edge of serving families in a different way, by safely serving children in their own homes and in the community. She is pleased with the approach so far and is excited about what is being accomplished. The Department's leaders' prior child welfare experiences help explain how the Department has been able to push family-centered, home- and community-based services so far. Their understanding of the strengths and needs of the most troubled families and how to safely structure home- and community-based services and provide appropriate training and supervision to workers probably helped minimize resistance, from a variety of sources, to these initiatives.

Linkages Committee

Early in the process of change, Berns and Drake worked with a small group of powerful leaders who were committed to the vision. The guidance of this group was undoubtedly critical to the success in changing the old way of operating. While this group was initially informal, the Department has now taken steps to institutionalize a sort of steering committee—the Linkages Committee.⁴⁰

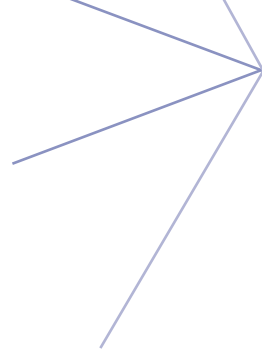
In order to maintain the momentum and continually look for new ways to enhance the Department's "processes to incorporate family-centered practice across systems"⁴¹ a commit-

tee of supervisors, managers, and administrators meets monthly. The goal is to identify and implement "linkages" that promote and support collaboration between agencies in the Department; encourage and facilitate the inclusion of families in the development and evaluation of programs and service delivery; identify training needs and facilitate training opportunities regarding the day-to-day application of family-centered practice; and promote effective communication throughout the Department.

To further ensure the evolution and refinement of the Department's approach to human services delivery, the Linkages Committee has developed three feedback groups. The first is an Implementation Team, comprised of staff from all areas of the Department who explore ideas raised by the Linkages Committee and whether and how those ideas can be implemented into day-to-day practice. The second is the Policy and Procedure Group, again comprised of staff from across the Department, which refines best practices learned through the implementation process and translates them into Departmental policies and procedures. The final feedback group is the Consumer Group, which is comprised of both staff and families receiving services from the Department. This group identifies areas where improvement may be needed and then makes recommendations to the Linkages Committee.

⁴⁰ See Kotter, note 11.

⁴¹ This comes from Department material describing the Linkages Committee.





Challenges and Lessons Learned

As El Paso County transformed its Human Services Department, 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. This section of the paper describes the challenges El Paso County faced, the efforts they made to overcome those challenges, and the lessons that can be learned from El Paso's experience.

Building Widespread Support and Overcoming 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. This is particularly true in the TANF arena where caseworkers now inherently have a great deal of discretion and in the child welfare arena where much decision-making is necessarily devolved to the caseworker level. If the people involved in the activities are resistant, changing the way people interact with each other is unlikely to happen despite the best ideals and goals. In the case of 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 part of what seemed to help overcome the resistance in El Paso County. As one domestic violence provider explained, "It's all about relationships and making time for the relationships."⁴² Another provider said, "There has to be time to build the trust to say, 'I disagree.'"⁴³ 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 Department Deputy Director Barbara Drake developed good working relationships with numerous community partners.

Staff and other partners began to understand how the new approach to serving families

42 Detective Howard E. Black, DVERT Program Director. (2002, April). Personal communication.

43 Cari Davis, TESSA Executive Director. (2002, April). Personal communication.

could be valuable to each of them. This was especially helpful in overcoming resistance to change. Child welfare workers began to understand that they could better do their jobs if the TANF workers had the information and access necessary to help their families with various economic supports. TANF workers realized that their efforts in helping parents find and keep work would be more fruitful if any underlying problems or challenges, such as substance abuse or domestic violence, were addressed. As staff from both agencies worked together with families, they realized that the families had extremely complex, challenging lives. They also acknowledged that the Department could not meet all of the families' needs on its own. As staff recognized the value of holistic services, they appreciated the need to work together with community providers. At the same time, community providers recognized the benefits of partnering with the Department. Each had something unique to offer families as they pursued *mutual goals* of ending poverty and family violence. Finally, working together in this way created an appreciation of families that allowed them to become true "partners," rather than simply "clients." The framing of the vision by Drake and Department Director David Berns provided the base upon which these partnerships could be built.

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 the process of 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's 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 earlier example of the kinship care program supervisor's interactions with Berns about providing a grandmother \$3,500 illustrates this point. Berns trusted the supervisor and the family to determine what was needed, and he was also prepared to stand behind his decision to use TANF funds in this flexible manner (see p. 39).

The Department also benefited from a substantial change in personnel in the TANF agency. The dramatic initial turnover there meant that fewer workers had to change their approach to working with families. New TANF employees who already embraced the Department's vision could be brought onboard.

As the various initiatives evolved, the Department developed a set of best practices about how to integrate and coordinate across programs and agencies. Drake believes that most staff members adhere to these practices, but she acknowledges that there are still a few

“holdouts.” Only now, when there is widespread acceptance and pride in the new approach, has the Department incorporated the philosophy and best practices into formal written policy. 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).

Address Issues of Confidentiality Directly and Flexibly

Historically, when TANF and child welfare workers try to work together, issues of confidentiality arise. In particular, child welfare workers are often uncomfortable sharing information about the challenges a family faces with TANF workers. The child welfare staff might, for example, feel that there is no need for the TANF worker to know that the mother has a substance abuse problem that she developed in response to domestic violence.

In El Paso, this issue arose for some workers, but for most it was not a big concern. Since the two agencies are housed within the same Department and since all contracts with outside providers require adherence to the Department’s confidentiality provisions, there were no statutory or regulatory changes that had to be made to permit information sharing among the various service providers. 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 seems to have made staff from all agencies and com-

munity partners more comfortable with the information sharing. Once again, the vision provided a guiding force to lead people around a potential pitfall.

Attorneys representing parents often raise another concern related to information sharing. These attorneys 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. This concern is captured in the introductory section of this paper by the comments of Michelle’s attorney that she should not sit with or talk to her team from Direct Link (see p. 6).

While this concern is certainly valid—agencies could combine forces and information to make life difficult for the families with whom they work—that does not appear to be the experience of El Paso County. The presiding Juvenile Court judge and one of the Juvenile Court magistrates observed that child welfare workers were very clear with families about their primary responsibility being the safety of the children. They described Direct Link as a somewhat novel situation because so many different professionals were working intensely with the family and sharing information. But even there, they thought parents were clearly informed about the precedence of child safety and about what was confidential and what was not.

In El Paso County, the fear of combining forces against parents does not seem to have materialized because the entire focus of the collaboration is to combine forces to *assist* families. For example, workers appear to believe that their efforts to address a parent’s substance abuse problem helps promote the safety of the children and that the goals of various agencies and providers need not conflict. In

the case of Michelle, she seemed to understand that her child's safety came first. She voluntarily reported a relapse to the team, which responded by increasing the frequency of services and contacts, not by limiting her visitation with her child. Another mother explained that, at first, she wasn't sure whether to trust the new approach and believe that the workers were there to help her, not "snatch her kids." However, after a couple of visits, she decided the workers' intentions were sincere and she began to trust them and work with them to resolve the challenges before her.

There is always an inherent tension in working with families. Sometimes those 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.

Collaboration between two agencies that often play such important roles in the lives of vulnerable children and families is not necessarily positive. It is important that the collaboration be for the right reasons (e.g., helping families) and that all participants understand the impact of the collaboration. For example, in another state, TANF administrators expressed concern about the well-being of children in families that were approaching the state time limit. To address this concern, they developed a policy that required TANF caseworkers to refer all cases approaching the time limit to child protective services for investigation. TANF workers used the forms to report suspected maltreatment to make these referrals. As families

learned of this, they began dropping off the TANF rolls before nearing their time limit.

What may have been a well-intentioned effort on the part of TANF administrators to help families find other resources and supports before they lost their TANF benefits had the opposite effect. Families were suspicious and fearful of a child protective services investigation and as a result forwent potential help and perhaps placed themselves and their children at greater risk of harm. The state has since stopped using suspected abuse and neglect referral forms to involve child welfare, but suspicion and fear appear to remain because the role of child protective services—as an investigator and enforcer—has not been changed. In El Paso County, however, the roles of both child welfare workers and TANF workers appear to have changed so that workers really are looking at working with families, identifying their strengths, and empowering them to address their own needs—with support from the Department and community providers.

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. For example, Colorado state law requires the development of an IRC when TANF funds are directly used to provide child care. For families who do not otherwise need TANF assistance, the Department prefers to pay for the subsidy out of its child care funds rather than paying for it directly from TANF, which would require the development of an IRC for a family seeking simply child care assistance. Therefore, the Department makes the maximum transfer of TANF funds to its Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) every

year. Nonetheless, the head of the Contracts Management Division of the Department, Christine Schmidt, reports that it's increasingly difficult to meet the child care needs from CCDBG, even with transfers. Berns continues to work with the state legislature to change the state statute, which is not required under federal law for employed families, but so far the provision remains in effect.

On the other hand, funding silos have created few insurmountable problems in El Paso County. In part, that is because of El Paso County's funding structure. 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." Schmidt 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."

The kinship care initiatives developed in El Paso County offer good examples of this approach. While it is perfectly legal to use TANF funds to provide prevention and early intervention services and financial supports in this flexible manner, such an approach runs counter to the AFDC tradition of providing assistance according to a detailed set of eligibility criteria and rules. Yet the Department took advantage of this flexibility even before the federal government issued guidance that suggested such uses of funds are permissible. On the other hand, administrators in other states express concern that providing such services and supports allows families to avoid

the work requirements and time limits for which TANF is famous. Even after walking through the legal analysis, which demonstrates that this spending is allowable and furthers TANF goals, some express reluctance to make waves.

El Paso's funding creativity did make waves and catch the attention of many people. Schmidt notes that the Department has been audited by both the state and the federal government on numerous occasions. However, she reports that none of the investigations have concluded that the Department's spending is inappropriate or that the county used federal funds to supplant previous state/county spending.

According to Berns, even without the state block grant funding stream, the Department would have been able to do the things they've done because TANF funds are so flexible. Similarly, Berns views the flexibility of performance-based managed care contracts as extremely helpful, but not essential, to fulfilling the Department's vision. In his view, the key is looking for opportunities within whatever funding structure exists and carefully reviewing existing law and regulation to determine how innovative approaches to helping families may be undertaken within the boundaries of the law. Berns has worked under other systems and structures and maintains a kind of "where there's a will, there's a way" philosophy, but he also acknowledges that you have to be willing to take risks and be innovative to make this happen.

Berns believes that the approach of El Paso County can be followed elsewhere. In large part, this approach was made possible by the flexibility of TANF. Even in a state that does not provide funds to counties in a block grant format, even in states that are not county-

administered, TANF funds can be used to provide the prevention and early intervention services that have been 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.

Even beyond the flexibility of TANF, Berns' ability to work within the funding structures before him is evident. Take, for example, the redesign of the mental health managed care contract for children in foster care. The Department's revised approach to providing mental health treatment services nearly doubled the resources available for such services, without making use of TANF flexibility or increasing the county's budget. Rather than pay Child Placement Agencies (CPA) to take children to service providers who participated in Medicaid managed care contracts with the Department, the Department retained these payments and used the funds to draw down additional state Medicaid funds for the mental health managed care contract. CPAs still receive compensation for providing case management. However, by using some of the money previously paid to CPAs to draw down additional Medicaid funds, the Department was able to maximize the funding available for mental health services for children in foster care.

The ability to step back and look at the big picture and creatively maximize federal funds earned Berns the moniker "double down Dave." This approach appears to work because Berns is using the creativity to provide more and better services to children and families rather than maximizing federal funding simply to reduce county spending. The vision that

guides his actions and the Department's programs seems to help others accept the "envelope pushing" in which Berns engages. In addition, Berns demonstrates outcomes. As Schmidt explains, "You get to flexibility by being clear on the outcomes and holding people to them."

Manage the Scope of the Change

One question that frequently arises as agencies consider collaborating or integrating is, "How big of a bite should we take?" Should one try to restructure everything at once or should one take it a little bit at a time? During the site visits, individual staff members and community partners repeatedly stressed that it was important not to take on too much at one time. On the other hand, some noted that the momentum of making lots of changes at once helped propel the institutional culture change necessary to make anything happen.

Berns believes it is essential to start big—for example, to implement the 70-plus recommended changes in three or four months. However, when asked about the recommendations from others not to take on too much, Berns said the key was to not have any single player feel overwhelmed by the change. In his view, the critical balance lies in making manageable changes in each initiative or program, while simultaneously moving everything towards the final goal. Not having change occurring everywhere may stifle change anywhere.

For example, if the TANF program hadn't been able to increase access to preventive services for families, it is unlikely that the child welfare program's efforts to reduce out-of-home care and court involvement would have been so successful. As Child Welfare Director

Lloyd Malone explains, “We had to put money into prevention first to reduce the need for deep-end services.” On the other hand, if the child welfare program had not been willing to move towards more family-centered, community-based prevention services, the TANF prevention services might not have been well received or utilized. Both changes were needed for either to work effectively.

Undoubtedly, administrators in large cities, like New York and Los Angeles, or administrators wanting to adopt the El Paso County approach on a statewide basis have a more substantial challenge. They must find ways to build partnerships and facilitate change among many more people (agency staff, community providers, and family members). At the same time, they must somehow manage to keep everyone (including themselves) from feeling overwhelmed by the extent of change.

There is nothing inherent to 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. Remember the comments of community providers that “it’s all about relationships.” It will necessarily take longer to build solid working relationships when there are many more players involved. But, there is no reason that strong leaders with energy and patience cannot create the vision and philosophy of El Paso County elsewhere and achieve a similar level of collaboration and integration.

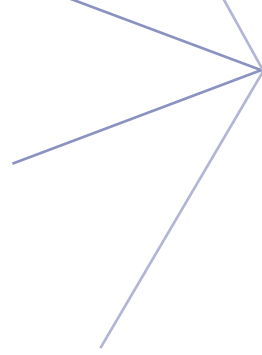
Another aspect of managing the scope of change deals with how many community partners and sister agencies to involve in the effort. In several places considering coordinating services, advocates and administrators raise concerns that there will never be agreement—

that each provider, advocacy group, or agency will be fighting for their own turf. For example, assuming an administrator is able to get buy-in from both the TANF and child welfare managers, for the El Paso County approach to work, domestic violence service providers, mental health providers, substance abuse treatment providers, child care providers, and a range of others to all come together to form a common vision. Many will tell you that such agreement among different constituencies is rare. Again, the answer in El Paso County seems to have been 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 the vision.

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. Major restructuring was not required, but it was essential to remove such impediments to change.⁴⁴ The Department overcame this challenge in several ways.



First, to have access to data necessary for program management, the Department required private contractors (e.g., the CPAs and ABC) 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. The county chose not to install both data systems on everyone's computer for two reasons: space and time. Not only are the two data systems incompatible, they apparently cannot be run on the same computer at the same time. So, the people who have access to both systems have two computers on their desks. In addition, the two systems are both complicated and not particularly user friendly. Thus, the Department did not want to spend significant time and resources training lots of workers on the two systems.

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During the 2002 site visit, only one person interviewed reported that computer access was a problem. She reported that she did not know that there were designated people to help her access whatever information she needed. All other staff members reported that access to computer information was not a significant problem.

Finally, the Department began collecting some of its own data and hired a doctoral student, Matthew Caywood, to analyze this data. For example, the Department conducted a survey

of clients in the Family Empowerment Program to assess families' knowledge about available services, their satisfaction with those services, and additional needs. They also began collecting child well-being indicators, such as number of moves and number of school changes. The Department has little pre-program baseline data with which to compare these indicators and demonstrate causal effect. However, the indicators are helpful in monitoring program development and in flagging any potential problems children and families are facing. These indicators also help the Department identify short-term wins. Since the process of change can take time, people can easily become discouraged and give up before full implementation. To avoid this, leaders can identify milestones along the way and celebrate the achievement of each one.⁴⁵

For example, El Paso County identified that out-of-home placements and foster care were decreasing, while adoptions were increasing. The Department could also determine that the vast majority of families who elected a TANF diversion were able to avoid turning to ongoing cash assistance. The Department then made this information available, so that workers, families, and community partners would see signs of progress. While the indicators cannot be causally linked to the new vision and the programmatic changes, they do at least suggest that the county is moving in the directions it desires.

44 See Kotter, note 7, for further discussion of the importance of removing obstacles to change.

45 See Kotter, note 7, for more information about planning for and creating short-term wins.



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, but then, involved staff, community partners, and clients put the vision in place.

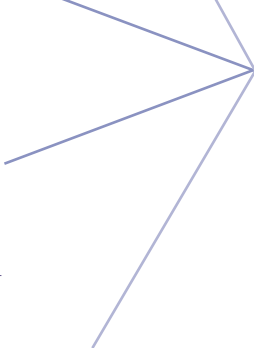
The narrative results of the Family Empowerment survey, as well as interviews with client families and a review of case records, suggest that not all families are aware of what the Department has to offer—particularly with regard to child welfare services. The experience of Tim and Susan mentioned in the introduction offers evidence that information about changes in the Department have not gotten to everyone. Although Tim and Susan were participating in one of the newest initiatives to implement the Department’s vision, they did not fully appreciate that changes had been made to the child welfare system; they seemed to think they were participating in another program, rather than child welfare.

On the other hand, Tim and Susan were benefiting from the new approach and were pleased with how things were progressing. They repeatedly stressed how they wished the program had been in existence when they had

problems caring for their older son. In fact, Tim described the referral to Direct Link as a “blessing in disguise.” Similarly, when asked if the Family Empowerment program helped children remain in the home, some relatives replied with statements such as, “Absolutely. Our only alternative would have been foster care.”

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 who are willing to put forth the time and effort it takes 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.

One of the most critical components of the process is keeping focused on the vision. As Becky Jacobs, Assistance Payments Manager, Family Independence Program, explained, “It is often tempting to skip over the ‘fuzzy’ stuff, such as defining a vision and communicating it consistently throughout the Department and the community. But the vision guides everything we do. Whenever we face a challenge, we look to the vision for direction.”



Communicating the vision is, by definition, an iterative and evolving task. Department Deputy Director Barbara Drake explained that the Department and its partners have to keep moving to where families are. As their needs change, the programs must adjust. Rather than declare victory too soon and stop the momen-

tum for continual transformation, it is essential to build upon the interim successes, the short-term wins, and tackle new and more challenging problems.⁴⁶ This is precisely what El Paso County is doing. As the Department's training materials explain, "We're not perfect, but we're not done yet."

46 See Kotter, note 7, for further discussion of the danger of believing the change is complete before it sinks deep into the institution's culture.



Appendix

The information contained in this report comes from a study of El Paso County's Department of Human Services, particularly its child welfare and TANF divisions. The study involved two site visits, one in April 2001 and a second in April 2002. During the site visits, CLASP met with senior management—including the Department Director, Deputy Director, and Child Welfare Director—and with managers, supervisors, and frontline staff throughout the Department. CLASP interviewed families receiving services from the Department and reviewed a random selection of case records. CLASP also met with two County Commissioners, the Presiding Juvenile Court Judge, a Juvenile Court Magistrate, and the recently retired District Court Magistrate who handled probate matters, including guardianships. CLASP sat in on several case staffings and observed interactions between staff and families and among staff members—spending some time just hanging out in the main waiting room and in other areas of the Department. CLASP met with a number of community partners, both on-site and off-site.

In addition, CLASP reviewed policy documents, program summaries, training materials, survey results, data reports, and a range of other materials prepared by the Department. CLASP also reviewed reports on various aspects of El Paso County's endeavors conducted by other researchers and state officials. Finally, CLASP engaged in numerous phone conversations with senior management and the research and evaluation coordinator to stay apprised of new program developments and new data available on the various programs.

The report synthesizes CLASP's observations and experiences to offer an outsider's view of what the Department has done, how they did it, and what appear to be the effects on families. When information comes from a specific source (e.g., a conversation with a particular individual or a particular report), CLASP has cited the appropriate source. Otherwise, the observations and conclusions offered are based on the overall experiences of the case study.

The background is a solid purple color. A white rectangular box is positioned in the upper left quadrant, containing the CLASP logo. To the right of this box, a white rectangular box contains contact information. Several thin, light blue lines radiate from a central point on the right edge of the white boxes, extending across the purple background. The lines create a starburst or compass-like effect.

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