



Timothy Montoya Task Force | Meeting Five

April 12, 2023, Meeting Recap

Overview

The Timothy Montoya Task Force to Prevent Children from Running Away from Out-of-home Placement is legislatively charged with analyzing the root causes of why children and youth run from out-of-home placement to help develop a consistent, prompt and effective response to responding to children and youth who run from care. It is also charged with assessing how to address the safety and well-being of children and youth upon their return to care.

Summary of April 12, 2023, Meeting

Directive Discussed: *Is current statewide, quantitative data regarding the experiences of children who have run away from care sufficient? (See C.R.S. 19-3.3-111(5)(a))*

Use of the Term "Runaway"

The intention of the discussion was not to change use of the term within existing systems, as the discussion is not a directive included in statute. However, the group sought to define the language used by the group and in the Task Force's reports. In addition to being brought up by multiple task force members, presenters from the University of Nebraska highlighted issues with data on youth who run from out-of-home placement that does not differentiate such incidents from the myriad of reasons youth leave care. One suggested replacement term for runaway is "children missing from care." Trace Faust, with Keystone Policy Group, found that the larger context and language used by national organizations is around a child being "vulnerable and missing" -- regardless of the reason why they went missing. Research emphasized the importance of understanding the vulnerability of missing children and treating them equally, regardless of the reason for their absence.

Points brought up in the group discussion included:

Negative Stereotypes

Using the word "runaway" when referring to children leaving care reinforces negative stereotypes about these children, portraying them as troublesome or bad children. These misconceptions make it difficult for the community to deter these kids from running away or relocating them. The stigma associated with the word "runaway" can



cause people to assume that the child does not want treatment. This can also affect how law enforcement responds to the situation.

Dr. Renée Marquardt agreed and pointed out that terms are neutral until stigma gets attached, so using a new term may take on its own bias as well without efforts to change the stigma itself.

Understanding Why a Child Left Care

Lynette Overyer shared a recent situation in Mesa County where a 9-year-old boy with autism was labeled a "chronic runaway" by law enforcement, implying that he has control over his behaviors. Lynette suggests that the label of "runaway" limits our understanding of the complexity of the situation.

Brandon Miller brought up the issue of two types of runaways in out of home placements: one where the child or youth is in an irrational state of mind and crisis, and their reaction is more of a walk away or exit rather than a premeditated attempt to run away; the other where the child premeditated a run. The solutions for these two types of runaways are different and should not be lumped into one category.

Focus on Specific Set of Children

The phrase "runaway" is appropriate because it helps to focus efforts on understanding the child's experience and finding ways to help them stay in placement. The phrase does not diminish the child's vulnerability or the risks they face while missing.

Need for Education and Training

Janelle Goodrich suggested that instead of changing the terminology, statewide training and education on language should be provided to officers who respond to runaway calls in order to provide them with preventative strategies, without making assumptions or negative judgments about the child or youth.

Brian Cotter emphasized that the group should be specific in its recommendation on training and education to address the preconceptions of law enforcement responding to runaway events.

Conclusion

Based on the discussion, the group decided on a middle ground regarding person-first language and will use language that prioritizes the child as an individual, for example, "a child who has run away." This approach will be reflected in the report and the group's discussions.



Sufficiency of Quantitative Statewide Data

Doris introduced the second part of the meeting, addressing the group's first legislative directive to assess the sufficiency of statewide data that measures the quantitative experiences of children who have run away from out-of-home placement.

Among the ideas brought up by the group were:

- Collecting quantitative data on a county and facility level so that data could be compared to see what works and doesn't. Collecting qualitative data on tools and interventions used by facilities could complement the quantitative data and help to spread effective practices.
- Collecting baseline data is crucial.
- Collect data on how long children are gone and where they go when they leave.
- Differentiating between kids in child welfare custody versus those in family custody to understand the differences in experiences and reasons for running away.
- Gathering data on why children or youth are running is important for prevention and developing protocols to keep them safe and get them to come back.
- Extracting missing youth data from the Trails database system and reporting it in a more understandable and accessible format is necessary to utilize the data. (Versus extracting data from a narrative form.)
- Creating a "missing from care" page in Trails would be a useful addition to gather useful data for in-depth research on runaways.
- Conducting chart reviews and data collection from various sites could provide necessary information to develop effective interventions for different groups of children in foster care.
- It is important to act quickly to develop interventions and improve data collection, rather than waiting for data systems to be built.
- The potential impact of the Family First Act on the number of runaways was discussed, and it was suggested that further research is needed to determine whether there has been an increase in runaways since its implementation.
- Acknowledging different types of placements have different needs and challenges, making it difficult to come up with a one-size-fits-all solution.

Lynette offered another solution to address one of the limitations of the current data system. She suggested obtaining more accurate information about the number and duration of runaway episodes of children who are missing from care through Trails by creating a category for the run bed hold, which would create the ability to differentiate between paying for the bed and an actual missing episode. This would enable help to assess the actual



duration of runaway episodes. (Now, child welfare can only pay for a bed for up to seven days and cannot change the status to runaway in Trails until after that time.)

Task Force Determination

Is current statewide, quantitative data regarding the experiences of children who have run away from care sufficient?

The majority of the members present stated that the current quantitative data is not sufficient.