

Timothy Montoya Task Force | Meeting Five

May 3, 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 care to help develop a consistent, prompt and effective response for when children and youth do run. 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 May 3, 2023, Meeting

Directive Discussed: *Is current statewide, qualitative data regarding the experiences of children who have run away from care sufficient? (See C.R.S. §19-3.3-11(5)(a))*

Qualitative Data

During its previous meeting the Task Force considered the sufficiency of quantitative data. Members highlighted the need for improved data entry methods and the inclusion of information about interventions attempted or available, especially because there is no existing method to extract the needed data from the statewide database, Trails. The Task Force then began to discuss *qualitative* data. Qualitative data focuses on the experiences and narratives of individuals rather than numerical counts.

During this discussion, the idea was raised of the importance of clarifying the meaning of "why" when analyzing the qualitative data related to children and youth who have run away from care. Dr. Renee Marquardt suggested using "precipitants" or "antecedents" instead of "why" to better capture the surrounding circumstances and factors that contribute to the behavior. Terms like "underlying causes" or "contributors" were also suggested to provide a broader understanding of the circumstances.

Commissioned Report: Why Youth Run, Prevention and Ensuring Safety and Wellbeing

Dr. Kristin Myers from the University of Denver's Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab presented highlights from the commissioned report aimed at providing a more comprehensive understanding of the issue of youth running away from care. The report captures the experiences of youth who run away, including their reasons for running and why they returned. It was a collaborative effort involving staff at residential child care facilities and youth currently residing at such facilities. The data and findings aligned with ongoing discussions within the Task Force. The research involved providers and youth from different regions in Colorado, with interviews being recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The report identified several factors contributing to youth running away, including trauma triggers, the search for familiarity or connection, and impulsive adolescent behavior. Efforts to locate the youth after running incidents were often constrained by protocol-driven approaches, leading to frustrations among providers who desired more autonomy. Post-run services prioritized physical and psychological safety, including debriefing and restoring a sense of calm. Programmatic and systemic barriers included ambiguous terms, concerns about consequences, limited staffing and the need for improved connection.

Dr. Meyers emphasized the significance of understanding the complex reasons behind running incidents and the role of connectedness in prevention, intervention and aftercare. She highlighted the dysregulation experienced by youth during runs and their desire for autonomy. Collaboration between state agencies and providers was emphasized to define imminent danger and develop effective prevention strategies.

In the discussion that followed, members expressed their lack of surprise regarding the report's findings but highlighted the absence of emphasis on peer pressure and group runaway tendencies among youth. Dr. Meyers acknowledged this observation, explaining that while peer pressure was mentioned, it wasn't a major theme in the conversation. Members also commented on the report's organization and appreciated the inclusion of the unexpected behavior of adolescents. They raised questions about the types of placements discussed and the potential influence of gangs, which Dr. Meyers addressed by explaining the focus of the study and the challenges of obtaining complete honesty from youth.

Breakout Discussion

During the breakout discussion, members shared insights on juvenile arrest reports, substance use disclosure, staffing issues, fear of consequences, anonymous data collection, engagement skills and the importance of a trusted staff member. They discussed funding constraints, staff-to-youth ratios, the examination of staffing in certain facilities, and the importance of resources. The conversation also highlighted the need for differentiated data capture, quality control standards, outcome measurements, and a shift towards quality-focused approaches. Recommendations included free-flowing information, individual patterns and behaviors, addressing physical boundaries, and increasing facility responsibility.

In public comment, urgency was stressed regarding the protection of runaway children, proposing increased facility responsibility for off-campus situations to enhance child safety and reduce runaways.