



## Timothy Montoya Task Force

### June 12, 2024, Meeting Recap – Prevention Subcommittee

#### 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.

#### Foster Care Training

After briefly convening as a whole for introductory matters, the task force then broke into its two continuing subcommittees on Prevention and Intervention.

The Prevention Subcommittee meeting began with an acknowledgment of the subcommittee's progress and the announcement that this is the final subcommittee meeting. Future meetings will be full task force sessions and will involve reviewing and providing feedback on recommendations for the final report, which is due by September 4th.

The Prevention Subcommittee will focus on the unique considerations and challenges of foster care placements, particularly focusing on foster care training. Historically, many discussions have focused on facilities and the issues faced by youth running from those environments. However, there is a need to address the different challenges associated with youth running from foster homes and kin placements.

Trace Faust shared a personal experience as a foster parent with a 17-year-old who ran away multiple times. This highlighted the lack of protocol and guidance for foster parents compared to the structured procedures in facilities. The difference in handling the return of a youth who had run from care in facilities, which have protocols for screening and questioning, versus foster homes, which often lack such structured responses, was emphasized. The following key discussion points emerged from this conversation:

- *Training for foster parents on handling youth who have run:* What training do foster parents receive regarding youth running away, and how can it be improved?
- *Resources and information:* What information and resources are available to foster care providers about the dangers of running away, prevention strategies, and what to do when a youth runs away?

- *Identifying gaps and needs:* The meeting aims to identify gaps in current practices and discuss what additional conversations and resources are necessary to support foster care providers.

## **Panel Presentation**

The main goal of the convened panel was to gather insights from the panelists and identify existing gaps in foster care training and resources. The session aims to build a comprehensive understanding of how to better support foster care providers and improve protocols for handling youth who run. The panel was made up of the following individuals:

- Renee Bernhard is the Founder and Executive Director of Foster Source. She is also a former foster parent from Adams County. Her organization provides statewide support to foster and kinship parents in Colorado. Services include ongoing education, relief services (e.g., bunk beds, mattresses, car seats, weighted items), and therapeutic services (funding for therapy for foster and kinship parents). Their goal is to ensure stability in foster placements and support children to remain in their first placement until they achieve permanency.
- Stacey Sanders is the Founder and Executive Director of Elevating Connections which reunites siblings separated by foster care or out-of-home placement. They also support older youth aging out of the foster system by helping them find their voice and feel part of a community.
- Jenna Coleman is the Executive Director of Specialized Alternatives for Families and Youth (SAFY) based in Fort Collins, with foster homes extending down to Colorado Springs.

### **Insights from Renee Bernhard**

Renee shared insights and feedback from foster and kinship parents regarding the training and support related to youth running away from care. Some of the themes that emerged from their feedback are as follows:

1. *Lack of Initial Training:* Many foster parents reported receiving little to no training on handling situations where a youth runs away during their initial training. This echoes Renee's personal experience as a foster parent.
2. *Lack of Ongoing Support:* There is often minimal support provided to foster parents once a youth runs away. The support system, including county resources, appears to lack comprehensive knowledge on effectively managing and supporting both the child and caregiver in these situations.
3. *Early Intervention Deficits:* Foster parents struggle with accessing appropriate services early in a case. Delays in matching youth with suitable therapists can take months or even years.
4. *Inadequate Case Information:* Foster parents frequently lack crucial background information about the youth, including reasons for removal and diagnoses. Despite legislation (e.g., House Bill 18-1348) allowing foster parents to access

this information, it often does not trickle down to them effectively, requiring continuous advocacy and education.

5. *Support During Crises*: When a child runs away, it often happens during evenings or weekends, times when support is typically less accessible. Call centers, which foster parents rely on during such crises, may not be equipped or trained to provide adequate guidance.
6. *Challenges in Child Welfare System*: Caseworkers face significant vicarious trauma and lack adequate support, contributing to high turnover rates. This high turnover leads to inconsistencies in case management, with foster parents often dealing with multiple caseworkers throughout a single case.
7. *Continuity of Care*: Maintaining the same caregiver for the child is ideal but not always possible due to systemic issues.

Renee mentioned that experienced foster parents have developed their own methods for handling situations where youth have run, often without formal support or guidance from county resources. This highlights a gap in formal training and resources, suggesting a need for improved protocols and support systems.

The real issue may not lie solely in creating new policies but in ensuring effective implementation and support mechanisms for existing policies. Recommendations might need to focus on enhancing the training, support, and continuity within the child welfare system to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

In the current foster care model, support services are typically provided by the county or the child placement agency. The initial training for foster parents is generally conducted by the county.

The initial training for foster parents is extensive but cannot cover every possible scenario, including the issue of youth running away. There is a concern that discussing such scenarios in detail during training might discourage potential foster parents from committing.

### **Insights from Stacey Sanders**

Stacey works with siblings separated by foster care and older youth aging out of the system, providing a sense of belonging and community. Stacey highlighted that children often run away to seek connections with their siblings or family members. Foster parents need better training to understand and support these critical relationships.

Although the Sibling Bill of Rights (2019) mandates prioritizing sibling relationships, it is poorly implemented. Key stakeholders (judges, caseworkers, guardians ad litem) often do not understand or follow this law. Children in foster care crave a sense of belonging and family. Denying contact with siblings or family members can lead to behavioral issues, truancy, and running away.

Stacey recommended the following training and policy changes:

1. *Foster Parent Training*: Foster parents need comprehensive training on the importance of sibling relationships and how to safely facilitate and support these connections. Policies and training should emphasize creating a sense of belonging for foster children by supporting their relationships with siblings and family.
2. *Implementation of Existing Laws*: Better enforcement and education around the Sibling Bill of Rights are needed. All parties involved in foster care must understand and prioritize maintaining sibling connections.
3. *Collaborative and Holistic Support*: Foster parents often piece together support from various sources. There needs to be a more collaborative approach involving caseworkers, child placement agencies, guardians ad litem, and support organizations like Foster Source and Elevating Connections. Foster parents need holistic support and training, not only on the logistical aspects of fostering but also on emotional and relational aspects, particularly concerning sibling relationships.

Stacey emphasized that cutting off sibling relationships can have severe long-term consequences. This can lead to failed adoptions, strained relationships, and a lack of connection after the child turns 18. These issues need to be addressed proactively.

### **Insights from Jenna Coleman**

Jenna acknowledged that initial foster parent training often lacks comprehensive coverage of all potential scenarios, including how to handle youth who run from care. Similar to the issues raised by Renee and Stacey, Jenna noted that support services are inconsistent and often inadequate. Foster parents are left to navigate these challenges with little guidance.

She suggested the following approaches:

1. *Holistic Training*: Foster parent training should be more holistic, covering a wider range of scenarios, including running behavior, sibling relationship support, and trauma-informed care.
2. *Continuous Support*: There should be ongoing support and training opportunities for foster parents, not just at the initial stage but throughout their fostering journey. This can help them handle emerging challenges more effectively.
3. *Collaboration*: There is a need to emphasize the importance of a collaborative approach among all stakeholders, including caseworkers, child placement agencies, and support organizations. This ensures a unified effort in supporting foster children and their families.
4. *Protocol Implementation*: SAFY employs detailed protocols for responding to incidents of youth running from care, tailored to the specific circumstances of each child. This includes immediate actions based on weather conditions and individual histories.
5. *On-Call Staff Support*: Foster parents are educated to call SAFY's on-call staff first, enabling swift intervention and guidance in crisis situations. This support

extends to understanding when to involve law enforcement or notify case workers.

6. *Customized Responses*: The SAFY system uses a shared online notebook to track specific details about each child, including behaviors and preferred locations if they run. This aids in crafting personalized strategies to prevent incidents and manage risks effectively.

One of the innovative initiatives Jenna spoke about was the FAIR Assessment. SAFY collaborates with the University of Southern Florida on the Functional Assessment of Internal Runaway (FAIR) assessment to understand the underlying reasons why children run away. This approach has shown promise in reducing Absent Without Leave (AWOL) incidents by addressing root causes such as the need for belonging or substance abuse.

By identifying why children run away, such as seeking familial connections or coping with trauma, SAFY aims to tailor interventions that address these underlying needs effectively.

### **Standardizing Best Practices in Foster Care Training and Support**

There is recognition that SAFY implements strong practices, especially in understanding the reasons behind youth running away (“the WHY piece”) and addressing them proactively. The concern is whether these best practices are widely accessible to all foster parents and kin providers across the state, not just those connected to SAFY.

The subcommittee aims to ensure that high-quality training and support are provided as a baseline to all foster parents and kin providers statewide. This includes addressing gaps in current training programs to equip caregivers with essential skills and knowledge to handle complex behaviors and support children effectively.

### **Behavior Analysis Service Project**

Ken Winn is involved in a Behavior Analysis service project in Florida that focuses on understanding and addressing the challenges of youth who run away. He highlighted the success of Florida’s Behavior Analysis system in addressing challenges like illicit drug use, police involvement, and foster youth who have run from care. He emphasized the comprehensive training foster parents received, initially mandated statewide and now managed through Community Based Care (CBC) contracts. Ken noted ongoing support and individualized services provided to foster parents through this system, recognizing the importance of understanding each child’s motivations and needs to prevent run incidents effectively. His experience underscores the effectiveness of combining structured training with personalized support to enhance outcomes for foster youth in managing safety and relational dynamics within foster care settings. The project explores preventive measures, root causes analysis, and strategies for safe returns, aligning closely with the discussion’s focus on managing run incidents among foster youth.

### **Comprehensive/Enhanced Training for Foster Parents**

Renee emphasized the critical need for enhanced training for traditional foster parents, highlighting disparities between therapeutic-level training and what traditional foster parents typically receive. She underscored the impact of placing high-acuity children with inexperienced foster families, stressing that comprehensive training across the board is essential for successful placements. Renee also noted the importance of fostering connections among foster and kinship parents to provide mutual support and validation, citing this as a significant factor in improving outcomes and caregiver satisfaction. These efforts, she believes, are crucial for addressing systemic challenges and improving care across the state.

Jenna highlighted the distinction between training for immediate responses to AWOL situations and preventive training aimed at de-escalation and trauma-informed care. She emphasized the importance of providing foster parents with tools to prevent run incidents through building connections and avoiding behaviors that might trigger escalation. Jenna also noted the need for standardized, comprehensive training across all facilities and agencies, ensuring that both types of training—response and prevention—are prioritized to support foster parents effectively.

In response to the question about whether the issue is funding, resources, or both hindering the accomplishment of training and support goals for foster parents and kin providers, Stacey emphasized that she views the primary issue as a lack of awareness. She pointed out that there is insufficient awareness among foster parents, kin providers, and professional teams about the available resources and training expectations. Stacey attributed these challenges to the fragmented nature of the system, where different departments and stakeholders operate in silos rather than collaboratively. She advocated for a more unified approach to training and support across the state to address these systemic issues effectively.

Renee reminded the subcommittee that Colorado is a state run, county administered foster care system so we have 64 different foster care systems in the state. Families are taking cases in different counties and the policies and procedures are different in each county so there's not consistency across the board.

Stephanie Villafuerte sought confirmation that there is currently no standardized statewide foster care training in place. She specifically inquired about AWOL training, highlighting the absence of uniform guidelines or programs. Additionally, Stephanie noted the varying responses among counties regarding AWOL incidents, citing differences in law enforcement involvement and how caseworkers handle such situations based on local practices and protocols.

Trace highlighted the issue of inconsistency across the state's 64 foster care agencies. This inconsistency impacts families taking in children from different counties and children moving between counties. They mentioned their experience with a teenager who started in Douglas County and ended in Adams County, emphasizing the difficulties in navigating available resources and advocacy for youth aging out of foster care due to these inconsistencies.

### **The Subcommittee's Vision for an Improved System**

Some of the ideas that surfaced as far as what the subcommittee envisions for a system that works better for youth and families were:

- Foster parents understanding their roles and available resources.
- The existence of a support network for foster parents. Currently, there is a lack of reliable support when needed, especially during off-hours. A standardized support number connecting foster parents to knowledgeable professionals.
- Better dissemination of information about available resources and support networks. Many foster parents are unaware of the resources available, such as child placement agencies like SAFY.
- A universal support system available to foster parents in various situations (e.g., urban/rural, different ages of children, different numbers of placements). Foster parents need clear guidance on actions (e.g., hospital visits) and legal allowances, accessible even during non-working hours.
- Assurance that foster parents' decisions, especially in emergencies, are supported by the county or caseworker. Foster parents often feel blamed for children's behaviors (e.g., running away) and lack support in making decisions.
- Learning from the practical experience (v. formal training) of seasoned foster parents. These practical approaches align with Jenna's training methods, emphasizing the importance of trust-building and realistic coping mechanisms.
- Establish small cohorts of on-call staff in counties to provide personalized support. This could involve assigning specific on-call workers after hours to ensure continuous, knowledgeable support.
  - Recognizing the current shortage of caseworkers, Jenna suggests a practical approach where on-call duties are rotated, ensuring caseworkers have off-time while still providing necessary support.
- Develop a system for understanding why children run away, using root cause analysis to create targeted prevention plans.

By incorporating these elements, the aim is to provide consistent, reliable support and training for foster and kinship parents across Colorado, ultimately improving the care and stability for the children involved.

### **Public Comment**

Steve Fisher, a civil engineer and board member of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health Colorado chapter, addressed the task force regarding the issue of secure perimeters at residential care facilities and facility schools. He began by sharing photos of secure perimeter measures at various schools, contrasting them with the lack of such measures at the Tennyson Center, which he lives near. Steve argues that secure perimeters are necessary to prevent children from running away and facing potential dangers such as traffic accidents or encounters with gangs and drugs.

Following Steve's comments, Lynette Overmeyer raised another critical issue regarding the use of GPS tracking systems like AngelSense for lower-functioning youth in foster care, highlighting that current Colorado licensing regulations prohibit their use. She emphasized the safety risks this poses for such vulnerable children and suggests it as a topic for future discussion.