



## Mandatory Reporting Task Force

### September 20, 2023 Mandatory Reporting Task Force Meeting Summary

#### Overview

The meeting has two parts: a presentation and a panel discussion. The task force has already heard from members and external individuals regarding those who initiate calls (make the calls). They are now shifting their focus to engage in conversations with those who receive the calls.

#### Trace introduced representatives from Arapahoe and Mesa counties as well as the Hotline County Connection Center:

**Hope Pfalzgraff:** is a specialized assessment and outreach worker in Mesa County. Her team has four main tasks, with a focus on the hotline and reports. They also investigate cases of child abuse involving severe injuries or fatalities, which requires specialized training. They also investigate issues within licensed facilities and engage in community outreach, educating about child abuse reporting and services available.

**Carrie Gillit:** from Arapahoe County explained that they have a unique dual hotline system that handles both child protection and adult protection reports. They follow a RED team process (read, evaluate, direct) to determine whether reported maltreatment meets the statutory threshold and assess the response time and track assignment. In 2022, they received over 26,000 hotline calls, with over 13,000 referrals, and assigned approximately 39% of them. They successfully mitigated safety in 94% of assessments.

- The county places great importance on oral reporting. While they can accept reports through online forms or email, they encourage reporting parties to provide information verbally. This approach allows for more detailed and comprehensive information to be gathered, enabling better decision-making.
- Arapahoe County also employs an enhanced screening tool, which includes questions tailored to their specific county. This tool helps them gather critical information for assessing cases and making informed decisions about interventions.
- Arapahoe County fully implements a differential response system. This allows them to determine the level of risk associated with a family or allegations, enabling them to choose an appropriate response, which can range from a forensic approach to a family assessment response.
- In cases where the allegations do not meet statutory thresholds for abuse and neglect, Arapahoe County offers a prevention program. They categorize this program into "before," "during," and "after" phases, focusing on providing education, removing barriers, and preventing families from re-entering the system.

**Ron Trowbridge:** manages the Hotline County Connection Center (HCCC) which started in 2015. They currently handle calls from 56 counties and have experienced a significant increase in call volume, with over 67,000 calls received and 30,000 reports generated in the previous year. They handle both child abuse and neglect reports as well as adult protection reports, with the latter becoming increasingly

common. The HCCC operates 24/7 and has backup systems in place to ensure uninterrupted service even during emergencies. Their call volume follows certain patterns, with peaks during specific times of the day, especially when school staff are available to make reports. They struggle with providing uninterrupted training due to the constant call demands but are willing to assist other counties by taking their calls temporarily to support their training and meetings.

Ron emphasized that training new staff is a challenge, as it takes approximately a year and a half for them to become proficient in handling calls. They provide mandatory state-required training, shadowing experienced call takers, and gradually transitioning new staff into taking calls themselves with guidance and support. Overall, Ron discussed the challenges they face in terms of maintaining a trained workforce, managing varying county needs, and accommodating increased call volumes.

Yolanda Arredondo from CDHS explained the state certification requirements for hotline workers in Colorado: to become certified, individuals need at least a high school diploma. Additionally, they must complete a fundamental course, which includes training specific to hotline and Red Team functions. After meeting these requirements and undergoing some on-the-job training, individuals can request certification as hotline workers from the state. Once certified, they are qualified to take calls at the Hotline County Connection Center (HCCC). Hotline workers must then complete 10 hours of ongoing training annually.

Laura Hobden introduced herself as a supervisor at HCCC. Laura emphasized the importance of understanding the purpose behind the questions asked during calls and ensuring that call takers recognize the significance of addressing sensitive topics, even if they are difficult to discuss.

Question: what happens to calls that come in but are not routed out to any services, or when they are deemed not credible or not necessary. Is there any contact with the reporter or the family in such cases, or are the reports simply discarded.

- In Arapahoe County, due to their high call volume, they don't have the capacity to contact every reporting party or family for reports that are not routed out to services or are deemed not credible or necessary. While they provide the opportunity for reporting parties to call back and check the disposition if they leave their name, they generally do not proactively contact reporting parties or families in these cases. The report is typically screened out in their statewide database and may be retained for future reference, but no further action is taken on it.

Kathy Wells asked a two-part question during the discussion:

1. She expressed the importance of field experience in the context of the statewide hotline, emphasizing that early decisions in child welfare often depend on the initial information collected. Kathy highlighted the value of hotline workers having a skill set similar to 911 operators or healthcare professionals, which includes the ability to ask discerning questions. She also praised the introduction of training requirements for hotline workers and inquired about feedback on this.

2. Kathy mentioned that there's a requirement for feedback to be given to mandatory reporters who have an ongoing relationship with the child or family involved. However, she noted that there might be challenges in implementing this requirement due to limited funding. She expressed curiosity about the difficulties and potential solutions related to providing this feedback.

- Michelle Dossey, Child and Adult Protection Services Division Manager at Arapahoe County Human Services, provided insights on the value of field experience for hotline caseworkers. Arapahoe County requires their hotline caseworkers to have Bachelor-level qualifications and often hires caseworkers who have previously worked in the field, bringing valuable experience to the hotline.

Michelle also explained the process for providing feedback to specified mandatory reporters, emphasizing that it's not an automatic process. Mandatory reporters must request information, and once they identify themselves and their role, they receive a document to certify their status. If they meet the criteria, they are entitled to receive relevant information during the first 90 days of the Department's involvement. Michelle acknowledged that communication about this process may vary among counties and hotlines.

Stephanie Villafuerte, task force chair, inquired about the post-closure outreach process mentioned in Carrie and Michelle's presentation and how families react to receiving services from an agency that previously investigated allegations that were not substantiated.

- Michelle: post-closure outreach is designed to provide support to families who may need booster services or additional assistance after their cases have been closed. Families can reach out for support if they face challenges or if the services initially set up for them didn't work out. However, Michelle noted that some reporting parties who make multiple referrals might not fully understand the agency's actions or the services offered during the assessment phase. In such cases, the outreach work includes clarifying what happened during the assessment, where the agency left off, and how community partners can support families. The goal is to improve communication and engagement to ensure families receive the necessary support.

Jessica Dotter, a representative from the Colorado District Attorney's Council, raised a question about the primary function of the hotline system. She wanted to clarify whether the hotline primarily serves as a means of data collection and routing calls to the appropriate counties, without necessarily screening the appropriateness of the calls.

- Ron confirmed that the hotline's primary responsibility is to collect data, take reports, and ensure every call is answered seriously, without discretion or screening. Yolanda further explained that the screening decisions are made through a structured process involving the red team or a minimum of two certified caseworkers, one of whom must be a supervisor. These decisions are made to ensure that a call's validity or credibility is not determined in isolation, preventing one call taker from making unilateral decisions about the reports.

To clarify the process:

1. The Statewide hotline primarily gathers information and ensures calls are routed to the appropriate counties. Their main role is data collection and referral generation.

2. The decision to screen a referral (i.e., determine if it's credible and requires assessment) is made by the individual counties. They may use the initial information gathered during the hotline call as part of their screening process.

3. Counties have the discretion to decide whether they need to gather additional information from the reporting party before making a screening decision. This varies from county to county, and they may contact the reporting party for clarification or further context.

4. The Hotline County Connection Center does not make screening decisions; that responsibility falls on the individual counties. Callers may not always be aware of who they are speaking to (state hotline, a specific county), but the hotline's role is to collect information and pass it on to the relevant county for further assessment or screening.

In summary, while the hotline's primary function is information gathering and routing, the screening decisions are made by the counties, and they may choose to contact reporting parties for additional details when needed.

### **Panel Discussion: Process and Impact Once Report is Made – Michelle Dossey, Yolanda Arredondo, and Nikki Surad**

**Confusion among mandatory reporters when it comes to identifying child abuse and neglect.** Around three-quarters of the reports received by the panelists come from mandatory reporters who want to help but may not fully understand what constitutes child abuse or neglect.

Michelle spoke about Arapahoe County's prevention program. Michelle explained that community partners sometimes misperceive concerns as child protection issues and may make reports to the child protection hotline even when the situation doesn't meet the statutory threshold for abuse or neglect. Teachers are mentioned as professionals who may encounter children with problems but struggle to identify the root causes.

To address this issue, Michelle developed a prevention program focused on coaching community partners on how to engage with families, ask the right questions, and avoid making assumptions. Overall, Arapahoe's prevention program aims to enhance the capacity of community partners to serve families effectively without immediately involving the child protection system and formal investigations. It encourages collaboration and support based on the specific needs of each family while also maintaining proper documentation.

Nikki discussed the prevention program in Mesa County, highlighting its voluntary nature. She mentioned that when reports initially come in as requests for prevention services or family empowerment, they are screened out but then reach out to the family to offer help. Nikki emphasized that families often turn down these services, resulting in a nuanced situation where the community sees families struggling and wants to help, but the families may refuse assistance.

Yolanda highlighted the impact of the pandemic on mandatory reporters and the child welfare system. The pandemic led to a decrease in hotline reports, especially from school staff and medical professionals who had limited in-person contact with children. Instead, reports increased from neighbors, family members, and friends who were more likely to have eyes on children during the pandemic.

Yolanda emphasized that mandatory reporters, including family and friends, have a core desire to see families receive support and resources rather than being punished or held accountable.

### **Challenges and opportunities related to mandatory reporter training.**

- The need for more clarity in the definitions of abuse and neglect and the importance of providing tangible examples in context to help mandatory reporters better understand when to make a report.
- The importance of educating mandatory reporters about what the child welfare system can and cannot do.
- Providing information about the child welfare process after a report is made.

Overall, the panel emphasized the need for more comprehensive mandatory reporter training that goes beyond legal obligations and includes self-reflection on biases and a better understanding of the child welfare system's role. Michelle's approach of consulting with mandatory reporters to determine the appropriate response was seen as a valuable strategy.

Doris highlighted recommendations related to the discussion:

- the need to explore cultural and personal preferences for parenting and how these differences can sometimes be mistaken for abuse or neglect
- the importance of offering training that goes beyond a single session and emphasizes the value of ongoing training opportunities for mandatory reporters

Donna expressed her thoughts on the conversation about mandated reporting and how it connects to broader issues related to parenting, classes, and support for families. She stressed the importance of moving away from a surveillance-oriented approach and towards one that focuses on providing families with the resources and support they need to be safe and effective parents.

Doris highlighted the challenge of CPS shifting from an investigative role to a supportive one, highlighting the potential negative consequences that can arise from this dual relationship.

Nikki spoke to the challenge of rebranding Child Protective Services (CPS) or child welfare agencies as more supportive rather than punitive organizations. In caseworker training, the focus is on engaging with families and offering help rather than being punitive. However, in practice, it can be difficult to shift from an investigative or authoritative mindset to a supportive one, especially when child safety concerns are present. The community's perception of child welfare agencies as solely focused on removing children, even though the actual removal rate is low. This perception creates a no-win situation for the agency, where they are criticized for both being too involved and not involved enough in cases.

Jade: the dual role of child welfare, both investigating and providing support, has complicated the perception of these organizations as sources of help in the community. She suggested that it might be more productive to acknowledge the current community perspective and find alternative ways to provide support to families.

Doris: changing the community's experience with the agency is key to shifting perceptions about its role and purpose.

In closing, Doris mentions that the discussions and ideas shared during the meeting will help inform strategies for training, refinement, potential changes to the neglect definition, and exploring alternative paths for families that don't necessarily involve reporting to the child abuse and neglect hotline.