



Timothy Montoya Task Force | Meeting 14

February 14, 2024, Meeting Recap

Intervention 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.

Discussion of Survey Results

The subcommittee portion of the task force meeting opened with a discussion of survey results capturing support levels for policies to create statewide standardized responses. This included components for developing multi-tiered categories to differentiate youth at particularly high risk, and creating a framework statewide response that would create distinct timelines for response protocols statewide. The survey results indicated strong support for intervention, with a majority answering "yes" to both main questions. These questions concern creating different categories for youth and establishing standardized responses based on youth characteristics. There was consensus among the members surveyed that Colorado should pursue similar initiatives. The focus now is on identifying the specific elements to include in both aspects: the classifications of youth based on characteristics and the corresponding response strategies.

Jenelle Goodrich asked for access to Arizona's form so the task force could compare it to Colorado's HRV tool, which is used when children return to facilities.

Elizabeth Montoya's main priority is ensuring that response times for high-risk children, particularly those in facilities, are immediate rather than delayed. She stressed the importance of swift action within the first few hours of a child going missing; waiting 24 hours or going through bureaucratic processes is too slow. She emphasized the need for active response, such as deploying search teams immediately, rather than just filling out forms or convening meetings. Her focus is on practical, on-the-ground efforts to locate and ensure the safety of at-risk children.

Doris Tolliver guided the subcommittee through the notecatcher, proposing members start with identifying opportunities or benefits for Colorado, particularly regarding risk assessment based on youth characteristics and state response protocols. After discussing the opportunities, she suggested addressing the challenges. This approach ensures that positive aspects are highlighted before moving on to potential obstacles.

Tiered Categories of Risk of Running from Care

Potential benefits to Colorado of implementing a risk assessment based on youth characteristics.

- Resource implications for law enforcement in responding to runaway incidents, distinguishing between low and high-risk cases.
- Importance of efficiently allocating resources, particularly in situations where youth leave facilities frequently for non-serious reasons versus those where there is a higher risk.
- More targeted and appropriate responses to runaway incidents.

Necessary components for implementing such an approach in Colorado.

- Need for standardized protocols and rules to ensure consistent implementation across the state.
- Establishing standardized procedures could enable the streamlining of responses to runaway incidents.
- The identification of specific characteristics or thresholds to determine the level of risk for each youth.
- Category examples include susceptibility to sex trafficking or high suicide risk.
- Further consideration is necessary on how to address the challenge of differentiating between low and high-risk youth who frequently leave the facility effectively.

Beth McNalley discussed the tiered response system in Denver, which categorizes runaway cases as low, moderate, or high risk. She emphasized the importance of consistent information gathering across all cases, as situations can quickly escalate. Considerations such as substance use, gang affiliation, and potential sexual exploitation are important when determining the level of risk. She noted that the response protocol includes partnerships with organizations like the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) for immediate referrals and collaborations with the police to distribute missing youth flyers. She also underscored the significance of detailed documentation, notifying schools and trusted adults, and providing safety planning for high-risk youth. She mentioned implementing a "run run" protocol to prepare youth for future runaways and identifies potential support networks for them.

Bryan Kelley raised a critical point regarding the task force's role in making policy recommendations based on the high-risk classifications discussed. He suggested considering whether facilities should be required to use these designations during intake processes, or if their use should be suggested or modeled. He emphasized the task force's responsibility in crafting policy recommendations that may eventually become part of statutes or regulations. This aspect will require careful deliberation and consideration of the best approach for implementing and enforcing the proposed mechanisms.

There was broad agreement regarding the need for categorizing youth based on characteristics.

Run Response Requirements/Protocols

The subcommittee weighed the merits of creating more explicit requirements for responses that are consistently applied and that distinguish between boots-on-the-ground actions and administrative functions.

Important components to keep in mind for these response protocols, as discussed by the subcommittee, include the following:

- Developing a protocol or checklist to determine when immediate reporting is necessary.
- Distinguishing between cases that require immediate reporting and those that can wait for 24 hours.
- Potential for differing perceptions among involved parties.
- Developing a protocol that ensures consistent and prompt reporting.
- Need for a tiered response system that includes immediate action to locate the youth, with different levels of urgency depending on the situation.

Beth clarified that her agency has an immediate response system for runaways, which involves contacting law enforcement for cases involving children aged 11 and under or situations where the youth is in danger to themselves or others, and when the youth would require immediate medical attention or medication. She underscored the importance of a partnership between their agency and law enforcement to ensure a swift response and the importance of collaboration between law enforcement and DHS to provide immediate support and follow-up services for runaway youth, including providing basic needs and conducting screenings.

Beth acknowledged that the approach in Denver differs as it is voluntary. She pointed out a potential flaw in implementing a checklist immediately after locating the youth, as often the youth may not be willing to disclose information at that time. She suggested that there should be a follow-up component, perhaps a week later, to give the youth power and choice in disclosing information and recognize that they may need time before feeling comfortable enough to share.

Elizabeth emphasized the importance of having a standardized response or checklist for runaway incidents, particularly for youth like her son Timmy who may have a history of running away and expressing suicidal ideation. Caregivers need to understand the severity of the situation, including both the runaway behavior and the associated suicidal risk and need to be able to communicate this information effectively when reporting runaway incidents to ensure appropriate responses and interventions.

Norma Aguilar-Dave expressed concern about the subjectivity involved in assessing whether a child is at high risk, particularly when relying on individuals to make that judgment call. She highlighted the need for consistent and objective criteria for assessing risk and determining appropriate interventions.

Beth discussed the challenges with subjective assessments of risk, particularly when professionals minimize reported risks. She acknowledged the limitations of existing tools, such as the HRV tool which is being revised and may not always provide a clear picture due to reliance on limited information or lack of engagement from the youth. There is a need for tools that can be used consistently and effectively to evaluate various risks, including suicidal ideation, medical needs, and susceptibility to exploitation. The importance of standardizing the practice of distributing missing flyers to law enforcement and attempting direct communication with the youth in every case was also discussed.

Norma echoed the sentiment of consistency in information gathering but she is unsure of the existence of a specific tool for this purpose, speculating that providers may have their own methods.

Beth mentioned Tennessee as having a potentially good example to tailor information-gathering, but expressed concern about their mandate to immediately take youth to the hospital in cases of sex trafficking concerns, even without their consent. She highlighted the potential harm in this approach, particularly in terms of consent. Jenelle agreed and suggested including additional questions and factors in the response protocol to account for these complexities.