

## Timothy Montoya Task Force | Meeting Six

### June 14, 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 June 14, 2023, Meeting

##### Directives Discussed:

- *Identify and analyze behaviors that constitute running away from out-of-home placement, analyze differences between runaway behavior and age-appropriate behaviors outside of the home or out-of-home placement, and identify behaviors that should lead to a person or facility filing a missing person report about a child. (See C.R.S. 19-3.3-11(5)(c))*
- *Analyze best practices statewide and nationally for preventing and addressing runaway behavior, including identifying methods to deter children from running away from out-of-home placement. (See C.R.S. 19-3.3-11(5)(f))*
- *Analyze how entities responsible for the care of children who run away from out-of-home placement can coordinate a thorough and consistent response to runaway behaviors. (See C.R.S. 19-3.3-11(5)(g))*

#### Analyzing National Work and Current Processes

The primary directive for the current meeting is to identify and analyze behaviors that constitute running away from care, best practices for preventing and addressing runaway behavior, and how entities can coordinate a thorough and consistent response to youth who run away from care. The conversation addressed the importance of differentiating between “runaway behavior” and age-appropriate behaviors, and the need to determine which behaviors should prompt the filing of a missing report about a child.

Stephanie Villafuerte, Chair, acknowledged the importance of understanding individual characteristics of youth who run away in order to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies. She expressed

gratitude to Elizabeth Montoya and Kevin Lash for sharing their experiences with their children, which highlight the need for personalized responses and reinforce the notion that every youth is different.

Stephanie presented research across all 50 states regarding how they address the issue of children who run away from care. The federal government requires states to develop a runaway plan, covering five specific areas from reporting the runaway incident to ensuring the safety of returned youth.

### ***Initial Phase of Reporting to Law Enforcement***

While Colorado law simply requires immediate or 24-hour reporting, other states have more specific requirements, particularly regarding youth vulnerability. As previously discussed, immediate reporting does not necessarily lead to an immediate response from law enforcement due to resource constraints. However, some states have absconder units within human service departments, such as the District of Columbia and Tennessee, which prioritize locating youth who have run away from care based on specific criteria, including low, moderate and immediate priorities depending on the youth's status and history.

Examples:

- Low Priority – An older youth or situations where the child left due to family circumstances.
- Moderate Priority – Requires additional actions from human services staff, such as social media checks and regular contact with parents.
- High Priority – Involves actively locating the child or youth through various means, including visiting malls, athletic fields, and family residences.

While a few states have this extra layer of response, Colorado does not. Some states also have detailed human service manuals dedicated to runaway protocols which are worth looking at in more detail. Lynette Overmeyer pointed out that creating a manual alone will not solve the problem, and Brandon Miller asked about success rates for the absconder units and how many people are in those roles.

Doris Tolliver highlighted two points regarding the characteristics of youth who run away from care. She noted that trauma is a recurring theme mentioned by task force members, but it was not explicitly identified in the criteria for response. Additionally, she noted considering prior behavior as a basis for distinguishing between normal age-appropriate risky behaviors and behaviors that indicate a higher risk. She also emphasized that repeat runners should not be considered less at risk but rather potentially more at risk due to their pattern of behavior.

Stephanie suggested that categorizing unusual behavior as a missing person case or potential kidnapping aligns with the perspective of law enforcement and highlights the need for swift action, such as issuing an Amber Alert. Doris agreed and added that repeated running behaviors also increase the potential risk, potentially making youth more vulnerable to human trafficking. They acknowledged that both categories carry risks, and Stephanie recognized the importance of considering the criminal context in understanding the potential dangers faced by runaway youth.

Kevin appreciates the concept of an absconder unit as it establishes a single point of contact when prioritizing and locating missing youth. The current lack of a coordinated approach emphasizes the

need for collaboration among providers, family members, human services workers and law enforcement to address the vulnerability and safety of runaway youth.

Lynette suggested an important intervention strategy that is currently missing in the process of placing youth in care: gathering information from parents about where their child would go if they were to run away and documenting it in Trails. This would enable caseworkers to easily access the information and prioritize checking those locations. Collecting this information could also allow for proactive discussions with youth about safe places to go. She suggested adding this topic to the agenda for future discussions.

The task force discussed that, law enforcement may not have a deep understanding of trauma and its various manifestations in individuals. It is important to document observable behaviors that are relevant to law enforcement, such as poor self-regulation or impulse control, rather than diagnoses.

Dave Lee and Elizabeth expressed concerns about prioritizing run away events because all missing children are high risk. Labeling them low, medium and high risk is too subjective.

### ***Denver County's Runaway, Outreach, Notification, and Intervention (RONI) Tools and Approaches***

Beth McNalley discussed the tools and approaches used in Denver's RONI program, noting what the tools are supposed to do versus what they actually do. Beth's team engages in outreach and works with the Denver Anti-Trafficking Alliance multi-disciplinary team. They utilize the High-Risk Victimization (HRV) tool to identify high-risk youth for potential trafficking. However, there are barriers to using the HRV tool, including a lack of training in using and administering the tool, and when the information is put into Trails, some answers only allow yes or no, not unknown, so there is a need for careful administration to ensure accurate results. For example, whether a youth has tattoos only allows for yes or no. Without a description of the tattoos, it's not very helpful.

Also, the source of the information is important because Beth's team might not want to bring up information the youth didn't personally disclose. Her team prefers a youth-led conversation with the youth, so it can take multiple visits to fill out the tool. The Council is also looking at the harm caused by administering the tool multiple times to the same youth, forcing them to relive their trauma and preventing the team from building rapport and trust with the youth. Doris encouraged the group to think about how the tool could be more deeply integrated into practice.

### ***Use of Social Media to Track and Locate Missing Youth***

Beth provided insight into the social media presence utilized by her team in engaging with runaway youth. They have a dedicated Google number for communication, ensuring the safety of their team members. They also have accounts on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat (less so on Facebook because kids don't use it as much) as it remains consistent even when phone numbers change frequently among runaway youth. Each department may have different policies regarding social media usage, but it plays a significant role in their efforts to engage with and support runaway youth.

## **Task Force Member Survey and Discussion**

A survey was sent to task force members ahead of the meeting to gather insights and perspectives as they discuss potential strategies. Using a summary of a survey that was sent to task force members, they

went into breakout groups. In the breakout groups, they focused discussions on specific criteria related to runaway behavior and differentiating it from age-appropriate behavior.

The breakout groups utilized a Note Catcher which had the initial categorization of immediate response, moderate response, and non-emergent response as a framework for discussions. The essence of what the group is trying to achieve is analyzing behaviors and determining the appropriate level of urgency to help determine which individuals or systems should be involved in responding to different situations.

Lynette's group: Their discussion focused on different age groups and considerations when determining the appropriate response to runaway situations. The group acknowledged that there is no circumstance where a non-emergent response would be suitable. They established parameters for immediate and moderate responses, with an immediate response involving three or more officers assigned to search for the youth, while a moderate response would include at least one officer. For children aged 12 and under, an immediate all-hands-on-deck approach was deemed necessary, while teenagers may require a slightly more moderate response due to their access to resources. Medical history, specifically life-saving medications, was identified as a factor necessitating an urgent response, while other medications would still require some level of urgency. The discussion also addressed behavioral health concerns, recent traumas, and historical victimization, which would require a more urgent response. The placement history of the youth was deemed irrelevant to the level of response needed. Lastly, the team discussed the training and techniques employed by DYS in locating runaway youth, highlighting it as a potential learning opportunity for DHS. Overall, the group emphasized the importance of recognizing the urgency and individual circumstances of all runaway youth.

Beth's group: The group shared similar struggles and concerns about categorizing the response into specific boxes, particularly with the non-emergent category. They recognized that factors beyond age could influence the level of response needed for youth older than 12. They also discussed distinguishing between children incapable of self-protection and those with intellectual or developmental disabilities. Further breakdowns were made regarding high-risk factors for human trafficking and drug addiction, considering specific substances like fentanyl or methamphetamine versus experimentation with marijuana. Standardizing the required information and communication with the response team was emphasized to ensure a trauma-informed approach and provide appropriate care and support, whether by law enforcement or other service providers. The group also highlighted the importance of addressing trauma, accommodating autistic youth, and considering additional resources for pregnant individuals.

### **Public Comment**

Pam Treloar from Shiloh House, a provider of residential and continuum of care services, shared some insights from a clinical perspective. She mentioned that different law enforcement jurisdictions often use their own criteria to determine whether to respond to a call, which can lead to concerns and inconsistencies. She emphasized the importance of not underestimating the potential risks, as even one instance can escalate the danger for the child. Standardizing the approach was highlighted as crucial.

Pam also discussed the distinction between chronological age and developmental age when assessing the appropriate response. She also stressed the importance of utilizing updated clinical assessments to inform the response.