

HHS Master Plan Advisory Committee Children, Youth and Families Study Group

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Overarching Goal for Children, Youth and Families Division:
Helping Children, Youth and Families be Healthy, Self-Reliant, and Successful

Study Group Focus

The Children, Youth and Families Study Group, composed of five members from the Housing and Human Services Master Plan Advisory Committee, met three times over the course of the summer to focus on the work of the Children, Youth and Families (CYF) Division. As background material, the study group reviewed the two documents produced in the first phase of the master plan project – the demographic profile of Boulder and HHS programs and services – as well materials presented by committee members. The study group’s work included an examination of the history, purpose, principles, themes, roles, goals and objectives of the CYF Division. Further, the group identified gaps in current service delivery and system-wide issues affecting programs for children, youth and families.

Background

The increasing complexity of modern life is impacting families and children in significant ways. As a result, demands on community human services delivery systems are outpacing service delivery capacities. The long-term demographic, economic, social and political trends shaping the community reveal a declining rate of population growth, but also an increasing need and demand among all families as well as among traditionally high-demand human service client groups such as working parents, the working poor, new Latino immigrants and youth engaged in high-risk behaviors.

Self-sufficiency and economic sustainability for many families in Boulder are becoming increasingly challenging. Employed mothers are now the norm, whether they are in one- or two-parent homes. As a result, the majority of our youngest children spend significant time in non-parental care and early care and education programs. Addressing child care financing and system issues of cost, quality, availability and accessibility are paramount to ensuring the safety, health, educational and social success of children. Human services agencies and schools are struggling

to provide culturally competent services and programs to address the needs of a rapidly growing immigrant Latino population.

Youth cope with the pressure and need for social acceptance and academic achievement in diverse and sometimes maladaptive ways. The prevalence and accessibility of drugs, alcohol, weapons and other high risk factors in the environment shape the milieu of everyday life for teenagers. Many families find themselves struggling to assist their children through this time of life. Family support services that are financially and otherwise accessible are increasingly necessary to meet the needs of working parents.

Evolution of the Role of CYF

Many of the services of the Children, Youth and Families Division have developed to fill needs that have arisen in the community rather than having been developed as a result of a long-range plan. In general, other community agencies have core, and in some cases mandated, responsibilities for dealing with the most basic, broad or acute needs, such as food and shelter, child abuse and neglect prevention and education. For example, Boulder County Social Services is responsible for Child Protection and Child Welfare and the school district is responsible for education. However, mandated services alone do not completely meet needs or address them in a way that realizes community values regarding the importance of children and youth.

Historically, the role of the Children, Youth and Families Division has been in filling service gaps, particularly in prevention and early intervention services for children and youth. Additionally, the Division has worked to strengthen the capacity of community agencies to meet these needs.

Themes and Approaches of CYF

The themes and approaches that underlie services provided by the CYF and its role in service provision were reaffirmed by the study group, with some adjustments recommended.

Early Care and Education: Research clearly establishes that the early years in life play a crucial role in shaping a people's lifelong ability to realize their potential. High quality early childhood programs should provide a safe and nurturing environment that promotes the physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of young children. The potential client population that could benefit from these services is not monolithic. To be most effective, therefore, services need to be affordable, accessible, developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive. Similarly, the array of services needed should encompass before-, during- and after-school care, crisis and emergency care, and support for children with special needs. Increasingly, there is a gap between the cost of quality care and what many parents can afford.

Prevention and Early Intervention: The division emphasizes services that prevent or reduce problems from occurring, and intervention programs to modify or reverse problems in their

earliest stages. Preventing problem behavior or minimizing its impact reduces future trauma and treatment costs. The value is more than financial, representing an investment in building healthy and successful children and youth. Services should assist families in meeting the developmental needs of their children in order to lay the foundation for their ability to become successful and self-reliant as adults. Though many services are targeted to populations such as low-income families and at-risk youth, all families may benefit from these programs.

Strengthening Families: Families – both traditional and non-traditional – are the basic structure that society invests with the responsibility of nurturing and socializing its members. Families provide basic needs, such as food and shelter, as well as emotional support, primary social values, and a sense of continuity and belonging. Providing services and support for the community's families to increase their ability to develop healthy, self-reliant children and youth is an essential component in program development and the delivery of services.

Promoting Positive and Healthy Youth Behaviors: Youth cope with pressures and the need for social and academic acceptance in diverse ways, some of which can be very successful, and some of which can be detrimental. The prevalence and accessibility of drugs, alcohol and other high risk factors in the environment is a challenge for youth and their families. Services should be targeted to improve youth social functioning, assist youth in acquiring life and coping skills, and remove barriers to education.

School-Linked Services: As a primary and essential environment for children and youth, schools are a prime access and entry point to link school-aged children, youth and families to a variety of services.

Strengths-Based Model: In the provision and planning for all services, the emphasis should be to positively impact the lives of children, youth and families in the community by focusing on building and maintaining strengths. While efforts may be made to prevent or intervene with problems, one of the most successful ways of doing so is to build on assets.

Community Partnerships: Collaboration with other community agencies is essential in planning and providing services and serves to leverage funds and strengthen the system of services. Efforts to build the capacity of community agencies are also essential to a system capable of meeting community needs.

Gaps and Issues

Community and Policy Issues

Community Vision, Awareness, and Involvement: There is a need for a shared community vision about the priority of children and family issues, even among community members without children. This may require a significant social marketing effort involving many aspects of the community-wide human services system.

Broader Systems and Planning: There is a need to increase CYF efforts in the area of broader systems changes and planning.

CYF Role in the Community: CYF should continue its emphasis on building partnerships, filling gaps and leveraging funds. There is strong consensus among study group participants that CYF has been very effective in building partnerships with other community agencies and filling important gaps in services. Additionally, CYF has been very effective in leveraging funding that substantially increases investments in local services.

Community and Civic Engagement: There is a need to find ways to engage diverse members of the community in feeling connected. Families need more places to go locally. In the schools and throughout the community as a whole, people of different backgrounds and incomes tend to be separated, with limited opportunities for shared experiences and a sense of inclusion in community life.

Private Sector Involvement: Partnerships with the private sector could help businesses become more involved with children and youth issues important to their employees and, ultimately, to their productivity on the job. An entrepreneurial approach that appeals to businesses and the “bottom line” could be effective. Also, there is a need for efforts to work with businesses to be more youth-friendly, so that youth feel welcomed in local business establishments.

Regional Strategies and the Role of the County: Boulder is not an island; issues affecting children, youth and families do not end at city limits. Additional regional planning and strategies are needed beyond jurisdictional boundaries.

Service Delivery Issues

Services Across the Age-Continuum: There is a need for increased efforts for youth – particularly middle school youth and their families – without moving away from the emphasis on early childhood.

Services Early in Life – Prevention and Early Intervention: Working with children and their families early in children’s lives is critical. Every child and every family should have access to early child care services and parent education.

Services for Families/Parenting Education: More emphasis is needed on parenting skills. Many of the issues related to youth can be traced back to parenting skills.

School-Based Services: It is widely recognized and supported by research that delivering services in schools is effective.

Access to Services and Service Options: Families need equal access to diverse service options.

Services for Children with Disabilities: Many families find it difficult to navigate the system of services, often complicated by poverty or cultural concerns. Children are being identified early, but appropriate services are not always available. Increasing child care providers’ ability to

understand and work with children with disabilities is important to the efficacy of the child care and helps prevent children from being denied services for behavioral issues.

Latino Immigrant Families: Trust is very important in working with immigrant Latino families. There is very little failure to thrive before 18 months in the Latino population, but additional assistance with older infants and toddlers is needed. Immigrant Latino parents are very involved with young children, but this can break down as children move into preteens and teen age years, often complicated by language and cultural issues. As with the general population, some parents may lose control as their children get older.