



WORKING TOGETHER IN THE SAN LUIS VALLEY

Mary Anne Snyder, Colorado Department of Human Services

The poverty, limited educational achievement, unemployment, homelessness rates (10 times the national average), and health and well-being data on the San Luis Valley combine to provide a compelling reason to direct innovation dollars to support these communities.

THE TOP BARRIERS RESIDENTS AND SERVICE WORKERS IDENTIFIED TO FAMILIES WITH LOW INCOMES COMPLETING THEIR EDUCATIONAL TRAINING AND SECURING EMPLOYMENT:

- Lack of transportation;
- Inability to access child care;
- Lack of knowledge of resources available; and
- Emergencies such as illness in the family or a broken-down car that cause students to stop coming to class and making progress toward career goals.

Additional barriers include the inability to cover the costs associated with books, fees, or materials that exceed federal Pell grant limits; inability to navigate the academic system; anxiety around failure in school; and sabotaging and other unsupportive family situations.

Working Together applies a 2Gen focus to support families enrolled in evidence-based home visiting to increase their self-sufficiency. The goal is to enable 110 families in Alamosa, Saguache, and Costilla counties to successfully return to school and work. Families will participate in evidenced-based home visiting and financial literacy education and have access to high-quality child care, connections to counseling, public assistance such as child care subsidy, basic needs support, and ongoing case management. Caregivers may choose to enroll in GED classes, short-term college certificate programs, or a bridge curriculum to prepare for community college classes. Caregivers will also enroll in targeted employment readiness skills and career placement services.

Working Together is an innovative approach based on theory and research that streamlines and augments existing programs that support vulnerable families. Sustainability is possible by supporting families and the larger community through improved local coordination across higher education, GED services, financial literacy, workforce services, and home visiting. Doing so creates social mobility and a path to the middle class for families currently experiencing disproportionately high rates of poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment.

If this pilot initiative is successful, it will demonstrate a model for reimagining health and human services through shared strong leadership with demonstrated vision in tackling complex social problems, ongoing investments in creating pathways out of poverty, and commitment to successful and sustainable system collaborations.

Working Together will shift mindsets and behaviors using four theories: collective impact, the 2Gen approach, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "An Integrated Approach to Fostering Family Economic Success," and the social ecological model (SEM).

Additional research from the Department of Labor's Evaluation Report and a White House report on increasing education for students with low incomes also support Working Together's strategy.

La Llave Family Resource Center will serve as the backbone agency for data collection and will ensure that results are measured consistently for alignment and accountability. The mutually reinforcing activities include drawing upon the expertise of each partner to support families in reaching the common goal, whether that is child care options for high-quality care while the parent is in school, transportation to help the parent get to school, mental health counseling to support challenges that arise through the process of change, access to basic needs and public assistance support, financial literacy to build a foundation for long term success, or educational experiences that are tailored to the high-risk population. Each partner will lend expertise to support client success. Open and continuous communication will occur through regular meetings with the Implementation Team as they work steadily toward helping families achieve their goals. Their commitment to the proven collective impact approach sets the initiative up for success, as key leaders in the San Luis Valley will work together to create change. Use of this model will support replication in other communities interested in helping families move out of poverty.

To launch the effort, state Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program staff facilitated full-day meetings in the San Luis Valley with community leaders representing local family support agencies, resulting in a community vision and the formation of a local Collective Impact Implementation Team to co-create this initiative. The community has numerous strong, committed leaders that frequently collaborate, but the current system relies on individual relationships that may change as leaders retire or change jobs.

Working Together provides an opportunity for formal collaboration using a collective impact approach to ensure that success is rooted in a strong and sustainable system. Through a common agenda, common progress measures, mutually reinforcing activities, communication, and a backbone of agency support, the Implementation Team is developing seamless referral processes, sharing resources, and improving systems that support families to become increasingly self-reliant. The local team includes home visiting programs, the Early Childhood Council of the San Luis Valley, Trinidad State Junior College, the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), the San Luis Valley Behavioral Health Group, the South Central Colorado Workforce Center, the San Luis Valley Small Business Development Council, and La Puente, an organization that provides basic needs and homelessness prevention services. Two foundations also offered matching funds for expenses that are necessary but not

allowed under the federal grant. The Temple Hoyne Buell Foundation will purchase a modular child care room to serve enrolled families, and the El Pomar Foundation will support the provision of basic needs such as auto repair or utility assistance.

GOALS INCLUDE:

Goal 1: Increase the short, medium, and long-term earning capacity of MIECHV families via formal education and training programs.

- **Objective 1:** Within one year of enrollment, 75 percent of enrollees pursuing additional education will further their education by passing a general high school equivalency test, completing a bridge education program that gets the caregiver ready to engage in post-secondary education, or completing and passing credit hours toward a short-term certificate program at Trinidad State Junior College.
- **Objective 2:** Within one year of enrollment in Workforce Center services, 50 percent of enrollees will secure employment.

Goal 2: Increase the competency and knowledge of MIECHV caregivers around financial planning and budgeting via financial literacy training.

- **Objective 1:** Within one year of enrollment in financial literacy programming, 75 percent of families will have utilized a spending plan (budget).
- **Objective 2:** Within one year of enrollment in financial literacy programming, 75 percent of families will improve at least two measurements on an evidence-based financial capability scale, such as the Mpowered Financial Capability Scale.

Goal 3: Improve coordination of the early childhood, economic security, and higher education systems in the San Luis Valley.

- **Objective 1:** The Collective Impact Implementation Team will form a partnership based on the five components of collective impact: common agenda, common progress measures, mutually reinforcing activities, communications, and backbone agency.

WORKING TOGETHER HAS BUILT A HIGH-FUNCTIONING MULTI-SECTOR TEAM THAT COLLABORATIVELY IMPROVES THE LIVES OF VULNERABLE FAMILIES.

- The project has referred 152 families to the program.
- Seventy families have been enrolled in the program.
- At least 19 families have passed college credit hours, and seven have completed a certificate program.
- Several families have successfully obtained and sustained employment.
- Local expertise around supporting the whole family in a coordinated way has been built.
- CDHS is sharing findings widely via conference presentations, Aspen institute, etc.
- The federal MIECHV Team Lead for Policy and Technical Assistance is traveling to Colorado in October to review project findings and identify ways to integrate this work into future programs.

Utilizing the collective impact model with a multi-sector team has vastly improved the state's ability to serve families holistically and reduce barriers for families. Evaluation data on this partnership has shown drastic improvements in relationships, trust, and cohesion. We continue to see positive evidence of how this improves services to families.

Helping families access child care has been the most significant challenge and has greatly limited the ability to enroll families. Despite foundation support and funding for four additional classrooms, Working Together has not yet been able to expand child care capacity.

FOUR STRATEGIES TO FIND A SITE THAT IS LICENSED OR COULD MEET LICENSING REQUIREMENTS HAVE FAILED TO SUCCEED.

- Installing modular classroom at Children's Garden failed because the county surveyor could not document ownership of the land.
- A second site for modular classrooms was abandoned due to new zoning regulations that required an additional \$70,000 to pave the existing parking lot to eliminate dust.
- A third site for modular classrooms at the Boys and Girls club was abandoned due to lack of water access on the parcel of land in downtown Alamosa and the cost of tearing up the state highway to install water access.
- The fourth strategy of licensing care in church basements was abandoned due to an inability to get long-term commitments for the space and capacity of the Early Childhood Council.

LESSONS

- Families' ability to meet their basic needs dictates their ability to be successful in education and workforce programs. When families experience crises, such as becoming homeless, they cannot focus on non-essential programs such as higher education.
- Effective collaboration is essential to achieve wraparound services (collective impact).
- Funding flexibility is helpful because many needs fall outside of existing programs.
- Allowing participants to start and stop programming provides maximum reach. Reach out and re-engage those who have stopped making progress so that they can re-engage.
- Leveraging existing programs is vital to this work.
- Time, patience, and perseverance are important in this work.

Looking forward, we seek to continue and build on the success of the Working Together Initiative, which has an 85 percent job placement rates in certificate programs such as administrative medical assisting, automotive tech, diesel tech, EMT, basic law enforcement, welding, infant/toddler nursery supervisor, director of education, and child development. We also seek to have enough high-quality child care slots to begin to meet the demand in the San Luis Valley, resulting in more

children entering kindergarten ready to learn and succeed. By addressing the needs of families holistically, we hope to build family prosperity and well-being in the San Luis Valley.



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Mary Anne Snyder is the director of the Office of Early Childhood at the Colorado Department of Human Services. The Office, which brought together the Division of Early Care and Learning with the new Division of Community and Family Support, provides child care licensing, subsidy, and quality initiatives, and houses early intervention, early childhood councils, Children's Trust Fund, home visitation programs, infant and toddler mental health programs, and child maltreatment prevention.

"The Aspen Fellowship was an incredible opportunity to refine leadership skills, space to envision bold change and created a cohort of trusted colleagues and thought partners."