Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

5 YEARS

Colorado Lab Newsletter
June 2023

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In this month's newsletter, we feature work underway through two evaluation "hubs." The Colorado Lab coordinates a cross-system strategy through each hub, managing multiple rigorous evaluations by external research partners. This innovative approach provides the ability to accelerate progress by reducing silos and promoting alignment, reducing evaluation burden and duplication for the state, translating findings into policy and practice actions, and informing smart state investments and resource decisions that strengthen the full ecosystem. You can learn more in our latest **blog post**, or contact us to explore how the Lab can serve as a coordinating hub for a suite of evaluations or a funding stream at **admin@ColoradoLab.org**.

Family First Evidence-Building Hub

Colorado's 5-Year Family First Prevention Services **Plan** advances evidence-based programs and services to support child welfare-involved families with the goal of keeping children safe and more families together. The Colorado Lab leads the Family First Evidence-Building Hub on behalf of the Colorado Department of Human Services. We work with cross-system prevention partners to co-create a strategic vision, coordinate rigorous evaluations by activating the external research network, and build evidence for programs toward a "well-supported" evidence designation by the Title IV-E Prevention Service Clearinghouse.

Building Evidence for Effectiveness and Tailoring Approaches to Community Needs

Under the Family First Evidence-Building Hub, the Colorado Lab coordinates and oversees evaluations to build evidence of effectiveness for four interventions as part of the state's strategy to support children and families and prevent foster care placement. Additional evaluations will be added under the Hub as new programs and services are prioritized. Evidence-building for the current set of interventions focuses on:

- whether an innovative approach works and for whom;
- whether an evidence-based program or service prevents the need for out-of-home care;
- when a program or service needs to be adapted to be culturally responsive; and
- how to deliver intensive programs or services in rural communities to expand reach and access.

Our newly released *Family First: Rigorous Evaluation Annual Report* shares evidence to date for programs and services that are either currently in the Prevention Services Plan or were recommended by the Lab as programs to consider including in the Plan. Six services already rated by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse (Clearinghouse) are featured: (1) Child First, (2) Fostering Healthy Futures for Preteens, (3) Fostering Healthy Futures for Teens, (4) SafeCare Colorado, (5) Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and (6) Colorado Kinnected Kinship Navigator. The report also provides information on evidence-building for three programs that have not yet been rated by the Clearinghouse: (1) Colorado Community Response, (2) Fostering Opportunities, and (3) Multisystemic Therapy Telehealth-Enhanced.

External Research Partner: Colorado Implementation Science Unit

The Colorado Lab is partnering on this work with the new Colorado Implementation Science Unit (CISU). Positioned within the Office of Children, Youth, and Families at the Colorado Department of Human Services, CISU is the first of its kind in the United States, providing dedicated expertise to help historically under-resourced communities develop and implement prevention programs that fit their needs.

"For example, in a rural area with workforce shortages and larger distances between communities, we may consider adding telehealth options to a program. This would warrant additional evidence-building because it's not the model that was studied," said Tiffany Madrid, CISU Director of Strategic Research. "Our focus is to be sensitive to cultural norms and geographic realities, and to work together with communities to ensure programs are positioned to help serve them most effectively."

Tiffany Madrid

Another core tenet for CISU is to intentionally demonstrate how government agencies can best apply evidence-based policymaking. "We know that rich information is available to help improve outcomes for individuals in need. Yet some studies suggest there's a 17-year gap from when an idea is first generated to when it is incorporated into practice. Our aim is to significantly shorten that process and ensure government is using the best available information in its policy development. This matters deeply," Madrid says, "because we can improve people's lives, save money and time, provide citizens with confidence in evidence-based, government-supported programs and, I believe, also influence other governments to follow suit."

For more information about the Family First Evidence-Building Hub, please contact Dr. Elysia Clemens.

Early Childhood Evaluation Hub

Between 2021 and 2022, the Colorado Department of Early Childhood received over $700 million in stimulus funding to strengthen Colorado's early childhood sector. The Colorado Lab is coordinating the Early Childhood Evaluation Hub, contracting with multiple evaluation teams to conduct high-quality evaluations of more than a dozen prioritized stimulus-funded activities to ensure the goals of the activities are being met. Over the next several newsletters, we're highlighting these stimulus activities and the selected evaluation teams.

Creating & Expanding Child Care Programs

A portion of the stimulus funding supports the construction of new child care facilities and the expansion of existing programs to **increase the availability of licensed early childhood programs** for families in Colorado. This includes employer-, home- and faith-based early childhood care and learning centers. While most of the funding is being directed to building new spaces to serve more children, funding may also be used for allied purposes like training teachers on a new curriculum as a center expands to include a new age group or purchasing supplies for a new program.

As reported in a recent **Colorado Sun article**, more than 80% of these funds have been directed to areas in Colorado designated as "day care deserts," where there are more than three children for every one child care slot. The most dire day care deserts in the state have eight children for every one child care slot.

External Research Partner: Schultz Patel Evaluation

The evaluation of this undertaking is being led by Dr. Maggie Schultz Patel in collaboration with Dr. Debbie Gowensmith. Together, they have nearly 30 years of experience conducting evaluations in program areas, including early childhood education and workforce development.

"We're conducting a social network analysis of outreach to understand who is being targeted to receive information about these grant opportunities and who is applying," said Dr. Gowensmith. "The intent is to help the Colorado Department of Early Childhood and the state learn more about how to successfully reach people who are largely eligible in areas of greatest need."

Debbie Gowensmith

Maggie Schultz Patel

"It's pretty common for state governments to have a short timeframe to disperse funding to address existing needs like this," said Dr. Schultz Patel. "It's an intensive process to manage and this provides the state with the opportunity to learn what works and to then apply learnings to future efforts. This process evaluation also lays an important foundation for future outcome evaluations that can explore links between quality early child care and the ability for parents to participate in the workforce and for children to be prepared for kindergarten."

Both evaluators are personally and professionally passionate about this project. Dr. Gowensmith notes her struggles to secure child care when her children were small. "I ended up balancing care through neighbors and friends because I don't have family here. It was really difficult to access and it was expensive. I had a desire to contribute to my household economic security, but was limited because of that struggle." She also worked with schools in Southeastern Colorado where she heard "over and over again about the difficulty of recruiting teachers in those rural areas because of a shortage of child care."

Dr. Schulz Patel, who was trained as a social worker, says she always wants to focus on efforts that strive to change social conditions. "I started my career focused on workforce development, and the more you learn about it you can see that it's easiest and most efficient to try to get in at the early childhood level. This approach offers the opportunity to get kids started on the right track, allows parents to work and businesses to be well staffed, and strengthens the state's economy."

To learn more about the Early Childhood Evaluation Hub, visit our **website** or contact **Dr. Whitney LeBoeuf**.

Welcome New Colorado Lab Staff!

Erik Holmberg - Senior Data Analyst
Erik has a background in quantitative and qualitative analysis, as well as data analysis, and a passion to find data-driven solutions for complex problems. He previously worked as a data analyst for the Minnesota Department of Human Services and the Minnesota Department of Health, and with state government legislative and executive bodies. Erik holds a bachelor's degree in History and in Political Science, both from the University of Minnesota Twin-Cities, and a master's degree in Public Policy concentrating in Advanced Policy Analysis from the University of Minnesota Twin-Cities' Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

Erik Holmberg

Shane McIntyre

Shane McIntyre - Data Analyst
Shane has a background in data wrangling, data analytics, and statistical analysis. He is passionate about working with data to help improve people's lives and decision-making, and was drawn to the Colorado Lab because its work focuses on advancing marginalized communities. Shane has a bachelor's degree in statistics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is currently working toward his master's degree in Data Science at the University of Denver.

Gionna Pembroke - Executive Assistant & Project Coordinator
Gionna joins the Colorado Lab with the aim of streamlining administrative procedures to eliminate distractions to experts as they focus on data-driven work for the public good. She supports the Early Childhood Evaluation Hub and the work of the Lab as a whole. Gionna previously worked as the READ Act Program Assistant for the Colorado Department of Education and for a refugee and immigrant services organization. She earned her bachelor's degree from Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Gionna Pembroke

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