

Building Evidence for Family First Programs and Services: *Telehealth-Enhanced Multisystemic Therapy (TE-MST)*



Background

The [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) incentivizes child welfare approaches that prioritize keeping kids safe and families together. This legislation authorizes federal reimbursement to states for the delivery of evidence-based programs and services that prevent the need for foster care. In October 2022, the Administration for Children and Families approved Colorado's bold [Five-Year Family First Prevention Services Plan](#) (Colorado's Plan) to maximize prevention investments in child welfare that help Colorado's children, youth, and families thrive, together.

The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) partnered with the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab (Colorado Lab) to serve as the [Family First Evidence-Building Hub](#). In this role, the Colorado Lab ensures strategic investments in evidence building for Family First programs and services. The Hub coordinates evaluations that are designed to both meet Colorado-specific learning goals and advance [Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse](#) (Clearinghouse) evidence designations.

Why TE-MST?

[MST](#) is an intensive treatment for youth that aims to reduce criminal activity, mental health symptoms, out-of-home placements, and illicit substance use. It addresses the core causes of delinquent and antisocial conduct by identifying key drivers of the behaviors through an ecological assessment of the youth, their family, and school and community. MST is considered an anchor service within Colorado's [mental health service array](#). Eight organizations provide MST services to approximately 400-500 youth and families each year across Colorado. MST is a costly model to fully deliver in-person in rural communities due to significantly increased commute times for therapists. Telehealth-Enhanced MST (TE-MST) is an adaptation to the delivery method with potential to reach more Colorado families.

Evidence Building for TE-MST

TE-MST is an adaptation that has not yet been rated by the Clearinghouse. Before conducting a causal study to examine its effectiveness, the [Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus](#) (Kempe) assessed the feasibility and acceptability of a telehealth-enhanced service delivery model of MST. The study used mixed methods to compare outcomes to typical in-person delivery of MST in Colorado. The evaluation began in March 2022 and was completed in May 2024.



Researchers found that TE-MST was feasible, acceptable, and delivered with fidelity. All outcomes, including youth living at home, youth in school or working, and youth with no arrests, were commensurate with typical MST delivery.

In collaboration with the [Rocky Mountain MST Network](#), the evaluation was conducted by Kempe on behalf of CDHS, under the coordination of the Colorado Lab's Family First Evidence-Building Hub. It was also associated with a Transition Fund Act-resourced contract for implementation of this innovative model