

Alignment of Early Childhood Programs in Colorado: Review of a Legislative Response

Samantha Brown, MA, LPC

Abstract

A dearth of coordination and collaboration among early childhood services can have negative consequences for children and families. Alignment of developmental programs for young children is shown to mitigate adverse outcomes and improve access to early childhood care and education. Several policies have been introduced that help to ensure children receive adequate resources in an effort to improve their physical and mental health, development, school performance, and family environment. On May 7, 2013, Colorado Governor Hickenlooper signed House Bill 1117 (2013), which requires the alignment of several early childhood programs under the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS). This article describes problems associated with fragmentation of early childhood programs, Colorado's mission to address these problems through more effective and streamlined systems of care, and how such an approach has promise for implementation in additional states. Implications for social work professionals are also discussed.

Keywords: alignment, Colorado, early childhood, policy, service coordination

Coordinating and streamlining early care for children and families is fundamentally important. In the United States, the system of early childhood services is generally fragmented (United States Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2003), often resulting in adverse consequences for children and families (Bai, Wells, & Hillemeier, 2009). Historically, fragmentation of these services at the national level has introduced challenges for states trying to develop effective and efficient early childhood systems to better serve young children (USDHHS, 2003). However, recent efforts to improve partnerships among early childhood organizations show promise both nationally and statewide. The State of Colorado is at the forefront of coordinated systems of care among early childhood programs through the implementation of House Bill 1117 (2013).

On May 7, 2013, Colorado Governor Hickenlooper signed House Bill 1117 (2013), "Alignment of Child Development Programs," which requires the streamlining and coordination of several early childhood programs under the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), specifically the Nurse Home Visitor Program, Tony Grampas Youth Services Program, Colorado Children's Trust Fund, and Family Resource Center Program. These programs address multiple needs of young children, including early learning, child health, child mental health, and family support. The bill aims to improve outcomes for children by:

Providing services or work with other programs to provide a continuum of services to ensure that, as they develop, these children have access to the services and supports they need to grow into healthy, educated adults who are well-prepared to positively contribute to their society. (Colo. Gen. Assembly, HB 1117, 2013).

The State of Colorado has made significant efforts to address the national shift to align early childhood programs by strengthening partnerships across several agencies that serve young children (CDHS, 2012). It is well recognized that exposure to adverse social factors (e.g., abuse and neglect, poverty, inadequate prenatal care) has deleterious impacts on a child's social, emotional, and developmental functioning (Jaffee & Maikovich-Fong, 2011), thereby increasing the need for access to early childhood care. Research demonstrates that child and family outcomes can be mitigated when collaboration exists among early childhood services (Bai et al., 2009). This article describes the problems associated with fragmented systems of care, as well as how House Bill 1117 (2013) aims to address outcomes for children and families through improved interagency partnerships.

Consequences of Fragmentation

Lack of program coordination and collaboration can result in myriad problems for children and families seeking early child development services. In a study conducted by the United States General Accounting Office (GAO; 2000), several issues were found when multiple agencies were involved with the management of early childhood care. Among the 69 federal programs that provided or supported early childhood education and care for children under the age of five, service fragmentation and overlap often occurred (GAO, 2000). Division between early childhood programs may duplicate or leave gaps in services, contributing to inefficient and ineffective service delivery (USDHHS, 2003). Furthermore, siloing these programs may increase administrative costs with each agency having its own reporting system, rules, and regulations (United States Department of Education [USDE], 2012).

Vulnerable children involved in early childhood systems are often exposed to higher rates of trauma and other risk factors, such as experiencing economic hardship or residential mobility (Robbins, Stagman, & Smith, 2012; Snyder et al., 2012). Approximately 16% of U.S. children are affected by poverty in combination with another risk factor, while 20% of young children are affected by three or more risk factors (Robbins et al., 2012). Children impacted by multiple adversities are also more likely to experience school failure, maladaptive behaviors, and emotional and behavioral challenges at a young age (Bücker et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2012).

Caregivers exposed to deleterious environments are also likely to experience unfavorable outcomes, subsequently impacting their children and increasing service need. Pregnant women who experience insufficient personal, psychological, or financial resources and who are unable to access prenatal services are at an increased risk to develop poor maternal health consequences (Issel, Forrestal, Slaughter, Wienerot, & Handler, 2010). High-risk pregnant women require assistance and support, and if deprived of these resources, their children's mental and physical health can be negatively affected (Issel et al., 2010). In particular, there may be problems associated with maternal-infant interactions, an increased risk for child abuse and neglect, and a decline in developmental and cognitive progress in children (Kearney, York, & Deatrick, 2000).

The aforementioned risk factors, coupled with insufficient access to services, may threaten overall family health. Moreover, streamlined resources and access to early intervention services for young children and families are not always available, which may in turn exacerbate the negative consequences experienced by children and families. Introduction of House Bill 1117

(2013) is Colorado's effort to help combat these problems with the goal that children and families who are exposed to multiple risk factors will have better access to effective and efficient programs that will help them thrive.

Alignment of Early Child Development Programs

Early childhood authorities have recognized that no single child-serving agency has the ability to provide all the services and supports needed by families (USDHHS, 2008). This knowledge has contributed to efforts that strengthen interagency coordination among early childhood care and education programs. Implementation of policies designated to advancements in systems of care for children and families has been shown to promote child well-being and lead to more positive life-long outcomes (Dahl & Lochner, 2012), specifically through home visitation and other early childhood programs (Hinrichs, 2010; Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

Streamlining early childhood services is shown to improve children's psychosocial functioning and increase service use for families (Bai et al., 2009). Hurlburt and colleagues (2004) found that the intensity of coordination between child welfare and early childhood agencies was related to improvements in children's internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors and service use. Findings from this study also demonstrated improved equity of access to services across racial and ethnic groups. Specifically, increased strength of program coordination was associated with decreased differences in service use among white and African American children (Hurlburt et al., 2004).

In the State of Colorado, relationships between education, mental health, child welfare, and other service organizations are generally weak and reflect a lack of partnership. Historically, "the support systems and services that comprise Colorado's early childhood systems have been spread across multiple public agencies" such as the departments of education, human services, public health and environment, health care policy and financing, and higher education, as well as various private entities (Colo. Gen. Assembly, HB 1117, 2013). Alignment of child development programs in the State of Colorado has proved to be a difficult feat, with a similar bill proposed in the Senate in 2012, but failing by a four to three vote (Colo. Gen. Assembly, SB 130, 2012). Early childhood program alignment was then re-introduced in Colorado's 69th legislature and successfully passed.

Under the current version of House Bill 1117 (2013), the programs that will be aligned include Colorado's Nurse Home Visitor Program, Tony Grampsas Youth Services Program, Colorado Children's Trust Fund, and Family Resource Center Program. The goals and outcomes of these programs are provided in Table 1. Of particular importance, the bill asserts a coordinated service delivery system under CDHS with designated funds for each of the aforementioned programs. Additionally, unified guidelines and standards are to be established in order to improve eligibility requirements that allow for more children and families to receive services.

Table 1
Early child development programs

Program	Goals	Outcomes
Nurse Home Visitor Program	Improve health by providing education and resources to first-time, low-income mothers and their children.	Reduce the amount of drug use and abuse by mothers and the number of incidents of child abuse and neglect.
Tony Grampsas Youth Services Program	Improve community-based programs that target youth and their families.	Reduce the number of incidents of youth crime and violence and the occurrence of child abuse and neglect.
Colorado Children’s Trust Fund	Obtain grants intended to reduce and prevent child abuse.	Reduce the occurrence of child abuse and neglect.
Family Resource Center Program	Provide grants to community members to create or maintain family resource centers.	Increase access to community centers for vulnerable children and families.

Note: Summarized from House Bill 1117 (2013)

House Bill 1117 (2013) also reauthorized the Early Childhood Leadership Commission (ECLC), which is responsible for oversight of the aligned programs by making recommendations and advising funding sources. The governor may allocate funds to the ECLC to help the development of efforts to increase school readiness, access to early education programs, and information sharing among early childhood programs (Colo. Gen. Assembly, HB 1117, 2013). The ECLC is responsible for adequate implementation of the policy and to ensure that the service delivery systems will improve “prenatal health, child health, child mental health, early learning and family support and parent education” (Colo. Gen. Assembly, HB 1117, 2013). Alignment of these programs also impacts Colorado’s workforce and aims to provide support to persons who currently deliver early childhood services and create additional employment opportunities.

Discussion

Through the recognition that children benefit from stable and nurturing families, as well as coordinated systems of care (Bai et al., 2009); professionals in the State of Colorado have integrated this knowledge into their policies, programs, and practices. Problems associated with children’s health and education are largely preventable, but are often exacerbated by inadequate or insufficient access to services (Felitti, 2009). The passage of House Bill 1117 (2013) helps to

address these barriers through the implementation of streamlined systems with long-term goals focused on alleviating the negative consequences associated with fragmented systems of care.

Similar initiatives are being adopted nationwide in an effort to increase children's success and well-being. Related early childhood alignment policies are being executed in cities such as Boston, Hartford, San Antonio, San Jose, and Seattle, with improvements documented in areas of child health and education (National League of Cities, 2013). Moreover, government entities at the macro systemic level are actively assessing state-level cross-agency coordination of services for vulnerable children and families (USDHHS, 2008). For example, the U.S. Children's Bureau conducts Children and Family Service Reviews in which it is demonstrated that systems of care show promise in ameliorating children's mental health and educational needs (USDHHS, 2008).

Collaboration among early childhood programs increases support and decreases duplication of services for children and families (USDHHS, 2008). With coordinated systems of care, children are more likely to receive high quality services that meet their multiple needs (USDHHS, 2008). While the State of Colorado has made advancements in agency collaboration among a few of the promising early childhood development programs, improvements to House Bill 1117 (2013) may be necessary in which partnerships with juvenile justice, child advocacy, and parent empowerment programs occur to further address the complex needs of vulnerable families.

Limitations to House Bill 1117 (2013) include implementation fidelity and financial issues. Established measures that will help determine if better coordination among Colorado's early childhood programs are actually occurring and improving the delivery of services are needed. Quantifying results from early childhood program alignment is important to demonstrate improved outcomes for children and families and may draw conclusions to potential service gaps. Furthermore, it is uncertain if the funds designated to the ECLC as well as each early childhood program will be sufficient to accomplish the policy's goals of improved service coordination and access for vulnerable children and families.

Implications for Social Work

Early childhood development programs provide many opportunities for service delivery from social work professionals. Social work professionals associated with these programs can serve as change agents by making child health, well-being, and education a priority. Specifically, they can collaborate with caregivers and other service providers in helping young children have access to a multitude of resources (Azzi-Lessing, 2010). Social work professionals can also assess if these interagency collaborations are implemented in a manner that help the overall system of care function effectively and meet the needs of the children and families they serve (USDHHS, 2008).

Conclusion

Streamlining early childhood programs helps to achieve service collaboration and improved access to resources for children and families. Through the implementation of House Bill 1117 (2013), the State of Colorado has made efforts to address fragmentation among early

childhood programs in order to provide greater support to meet the needs of children in areas of early learning, health, mental health, and family functioning. While the strategies for program alignment introduced in House Bill 1117 (2013) seem promising, the process by which alignment occurs will need to be monitored and evaluated to ensure the goals of coordination and access to services are met. If alignment of early childhood programs is successful, those in need of support are likely to benefit from strengthened and efficient services that are focused on alleviating and preventing poor outcomes among children and families.

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Samantha Brown is a doctoral student at the Graduate School of Social Work (GSSW), University of Denver. Her primary research interest examines the intersection between child maltreatment and caregiver substance use and the subsequent impacts on child and family well-being. Samantha also has an interest in intervention research that utilizes mindfulness-based components and trauma-informed care. Samantha received her B.A. in psychology and criminal justice at The College of Saint Rose and her M.A. in forensic psychology at the University of Denver. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor in the state of Colorado and her clinical experience includes domestic violence counseling and child welfare casework.