



Colorado's Child Welfare System

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Colorado's child welfare system provides a range of services to protect children from abuse and neglect and to assist families in caring for their children. This *issue brief* provides an overview of the child welfare system in Colorado, including administration and funding, reporting and investigation of abuse and neglect, and the types of services provided. An overview of the judicial process in child welfare cases is also included.

Administration and Funding

Colorado's child welfare system is a county-administered, state-supervised system. County departments of human or social services are responsible for providing child welfare services such as prevention and intervention services, youth in conflict services, and child protective services. The Colorado Department of Human Services (DHS) provides guidance to county departments, monitors and manages state and federal funding for child welfare, promulgates rules, and performs other tasks to facilitate child welfare services. The DHS also provides training to county child welfare workers, maintains the state's centralized child welfare data system (TRAILS) used by counties to track case information, and operates a statewide child abuse reporting hotline.

For FY 2018-19, the Division of Child Welfare in the DHS has total funding of \$493.2 million, of which about 92 percent is passed on to counties to provide child welfare services; the remaining 7 percent is used for central administration and state-administered programs in the DHS. Most counties are required to cover 20 percent of the cost

for most child welfare services using local revenue. Table 1 provides an overview of the funding sources for child welfare services in Colorado.

Table 1
Funding for Child Welfare Services
FY 2018-19
Millions of Dollars

General Fund	Cash Funds	Reapprop. Funds	Federal Funds	Total Funds
\$270.2	\$93.1*	\$16.7	\$113.2	\$493.2
55%	19%	3%	23%	100%

Source: FY 2018-19 Long Bill (HB18-1322)

* This amount includes county funds

Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

Currently, reports of child abuse and neglect can be made to the county department of human or social services where the child resides or by calling the statewide hotline. Launched in 2015, the statewide hotline routes callers to the appropriate county department or to a central connection center. In FY 2016-17, the hotline averaged 569 calls per day. The hotline can be reached at 1-844-264-5437. Contact information for county departments can be found on the [DHS website](#).

Mandatory reporters. State law mandates that members of certain professions report child abuse and neglect if they have reasonable cause to know or suspect that such abuse has occurred. Failure to report is a class 3 misdemeanor. These mandatory reporters include, among others:

- doctors, nurses, and other health professionals;
- teachers and other school officials;
- mental health professionals;

- peace officers, fire fighters, and emergency medical service providers;
- pharmacists;
- commercial film and photographic print processors;
- veterinarians;
- clergy members;
- victim's advocates; and
- officials or employees of county departments of human or social services.

Child Welfare Services and Judicial Process

Counties provide a range of child welfare services, depending on the needs of families and children and level of risk. If a case is determined to be low risk, the county may offer prevention and intervention services. In cases of abuse and neglect, the county may refer the case to the courts for oversight and provide more intensive services to the family or remove a child from the parents' custody.

Intake and assessment. Following a report of possible child abuse or neglect, county child protective services staff conduct a safety and risk assessment of children in the home. Based on this initial assessment, cases are prioritized for further investigation and evaluation of service needs, with high-risk cases taking precedent over lower-risk cases. If the safety of a child cannot be determined, an immediate investigation is conducted.

Court oversight. The courts are responsible for overseeing child welfare cases in which county staff believe there is evidence of abuse or neglect and that intervention is required. Child welfare cases, referred to as dependency and neglect cases by the courts, are civil rather than criminal in nature. At an initial court hearing, the court evaluates evidence of abuse and neglect and determines whether a child can safely stay in the home or should be moved to an out-of-home placement. The court may also appoint a guardian ad litem to represent the interests of the child during the proceedings. Parents who are indigent may be represented by the Office of Respondent

Parents' Counsel. In cases where families require services and monitoring by county child protective services, the court approves a family service or treatment plan and monitors parents' progress in completing any required services and treatment. Throughout the process, the courts evaluate the custody and placement of children to ensure their safety in the least restrictive environment possible.

In-home services. In low-risk cases, the child can often remain in the home while therapy and other services are provided for the family to prevent further incidence of abuse and neglect. In-home services may include substance abuse treatment, intensive family therapy, life skills training, and other services to allow the family to remain intact.

Out-of-home placement. In cases of serious abuse or neglect or high risk of further harm, the courts may order that a child be removed from the home and placed in an out-of-home care placement. Out-of-home care may be with a relative (kinship care), in a foster home, or in a group home or residential care facility. While the child is in out-of-home care, the family continues following its case plan and receiving services, typically with the goal of returning the child to his or her family. However, in cases where a child's safety cannot be ensured, other permanency options such as adoption or permanent guardianship with a relative or other person may be considered. In some cases, a parent who has committed child abuse or neglect may have his or her parental rights terminated by the court. This allows the child to be adopted by another family.

Services for emancipated youths. Youths who are in an out-of-home placement and turn 18 without being placed in a permanent home can qualify for certain services and assistance after they leave state care. The federal John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program (CFCIP) gives grants to states to assist this population, including support for education and training, employment, and housing, to name a few. Starting in 2018, counties may also use part of their state child welfare funding to provide more assistance to this population.