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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 in their jurisdiction, while 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 provided by counties. The DHS also provides training to county child welfare workers and maintains the state's centralized child welfare data system (TRAILS) used by counties to track case information.

In FY 2013-14, the Division of Child Welfare in the DHS has total funding of \$421.2 million, of which about 97 percent is passed on to counties to provide child welfare services; the remaining 3 percent is used for central administration in the DHS. Table 1 below provides an overview of the funding sources for child welfare services in Colorado.

Table 1

Funding for Child Welfare Services, FY 2013-14
(in millions)

General Fund	Cash Funds	Reapprop. Funds	Federal Funds	Total Funds
\$232.8	\$74.1	\$14.7	\$99.6	\$421.2
55%	18%	3%	24%	100%

Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect

Currently, reports of child abuse and neglect must be made to the county department of human or social services where the child resides. Contact information for each county department is available on the [DHS website](#). Beginning in 2015, abuse and neglect may also be reported using a statewide hotline established through House Bill 13-1271.

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. These mandatory reporters include, among others:

- doctors, nurses, and other health professionals;
- teachers and other school officials;
- mental health professionals;
- peace officers and firefighters;
- pharmacists;
- commercial film and photographic print processors;

- veterinarians;
- clergy members;
- victim's advocates; and
- Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program educators.

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. The courts are responsible for overseeing child welfare cases in which county child protective services (CPS) 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.

Intake and assessment. Following a report of possible child abuse or neglect, CPS 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 hearings. At an initial 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 children during the proceedings. In cases where families require services and monitoring by CPS workers, the court approves a family service or treatment plan at subsequent hearings, 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 the child is in a safe, but least restrictive environment.

In-home services. In low-risk cases, the child can often remain in the home while therapy and

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 and prevent the removal of children into an out-of-home placement.

Out-of-home placement. In cases of serious abuse or neglect or when there is 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 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 may be considered.

Termination of parental rights. If family reunification cannot be safely achieved, a parent who has committed child abuse or neglect may have his or her parental rights terminated by the courts. This allows the child to be adopted by another family. Counties provides assistance to families adopting children with special needs from the child welfare system through monthly payments and other post-adoption services. In some cases, permanent guardianship may be pursued, where a child is placed with a relative or other person. Unlike adoption, parental rights do not have to be terminated to place a child in a permanent guardianship arrangement.