



# INVESTING IN THE HUMAN SERVICES WORKFORCE

**Matthew Dodson, Archuleta County Department of Human Services**

Changing values in society are having a profound impact on Colorado Human Service Department's workforce at the county and state level, and increased aspirations for personal development are presenting a demand that we must seek to meet. Occupational changes, economics, work satisfaction rates, and significant stress for those in the field are a few of the significant factors that need to be considered or "shifted." Staff need to have the appropriate knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitude to accomplish current and future goals; be equipped to adapt to changing and challenging needs; and have enhanced capacity through a coordinated approach that builds a culture of leadership, continuous learning, and commitment to excellence to sustain the success and future of children and families who enter our human service systems and the staff that serve them.

In Archuleta County, we have implemented several major changes in the way we deliver services to children and families. Most important is our goal at Archuleta County Department of Human Services (ACDHS) to always remember the importance of customer service; customer service is an integral part of our job, as is the experience we deliver to those we serve.

We use a two-generational approach that considers the needs of both children and their caregivers. These programs are designed to assure that services support the whole family in reaching self-sufficiency so that opportunity becomes a family tradition. It is a concerted effort from leadership to case managers — it is probably the most significant change we have made. When we are working to help someone become more employable, for example, it becomes a work ethic tradition for the entire family.

In many ways, Colorado is at the forefront of child welfare. The Title IV-E waiver (which expands flexibility in use of federal funds) allowed Colorado to develop interventions that allow our case managers and families to work toward child and family safety goals in a more transparent and supportive manner. We have implemented the differential response model, which allows us to use a less severe family assessment response, when it is appropriate, after receiving a call for concern about child welfare. When that perceived threat from social services intervention is removed, case managers can better connect with families to offer help and support.

Another example: We are using family engagement meetings to provide a common framework for sharing information. They allow parents to have a voice and a choice in decisions regarding their families — which they are more likely to implement because they were involved in making the decisions.

## IN ARCHULETA COUNTY'S DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES, WE HAVE PRIORITIZED THE FOLLOWING STAFF INVESTMENTS:

- Embed an ethos of commitment to excellence in service provision;
- Promote and reinforce the alignment of staff goals, aspirations, and performance;
- Continue to review and enhance a wide array of training and professional development paths for staff;
- Develop and implement a comprehensive pay schedule; and
- Reward and recognize strategies to attract, motivate and retain quality, high-performing staff at all levels of the workforce.

Specifically, we have provided staff with access to training on resilience and trauma-informed care (for both employees and community partners). We have engaged further with partner agencies to promote and endorse 2Gen approaches, including presenting to state health and human services and the human trafficking coalition. We have also worked with the town, the county, the county's Economic Council to prioritize access to child care and educational opportunities, including purchasing and remodeling a facility to open in September 2019 with 30 new child care slots. We have also partnered with peer agencies and community members to apply for 2Generation Opportunities (2GO) grant project funding. Whether that application is successful or not, the partnership development is an important investment that will serve the county well in other efforts to align services.

Health and human services are intrinsically linked. We are very proud of the relationships we have across sectors, including those with our local health department, community mental health providers, business and nonprofit communities, school district, and the citizens of Archuleta County. We are highly engaged in informing, developing, and maintaining these relationships, recognizing that each sector has a role to play in helping individuals succeed.

At the state level, Archuleta County has also played an active role in the human services staff retention working group, which developed and disseminated a set of recommendations for use by county management across the state.

There are three levels of intervention recommended to mitigate the impact of vicarious trauma on the individual level: education, structural processes, and supports. Education includes training for professionals who work with traumatized clients on trauma-informed care, impact of trauma work, and reflective supervision. Structural processes include strategies for decreasing worker stress, promoting physical health and well-being, and providing reflective supervision. Supports include mindfulness-based methods, post-crisis debriefing meetings, and formal peer groups.

Two lenses have proven critical in Archuleta County's efforts to motivate and retain high-performing staff: a trauma-informed approach for human services staff and the families they serve and a whole-family approach that leads to more effective alignment of systems and services.

In Archuleta County, we are seeing a cultural shift in which staff report increased career enjoyment and increased support from various levels of administration. There has also been a decrease in staff turnover due to career dissatisfaction. A focus on

resilience and the importance of practicing trauma-informed care appears to be positively shifting the mindset of both internal and external consumers of the system.

Archuleta County Department of Human Services was recognized as a distinguished performer across all performance measures, ranking seventh in the state, a first for the county! Success included, but was not limited to, performance in improved client economic security, improved child and family safety and well-being, and timeliness in financial program application processing (expedited benefits to clients).

The biggest challenge has been the time, resources, and ability to focus in the midst of an ever-changing environment and systems.

Overall, we have learned that we must love our staff members, support them, provide them with the tools they need to succeed, and listen. We must do all these things with intention and show our staff members this intention. Expanding staff development efforts serves the field of human services and Colorado families well. Policy shifts and state support would facilitate ongoing investments and their replicability.

### RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDE:

- Changing the formula for the allocation of state child welfare block grants;
- Additional case manager funding;
- Implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act, including trauma-informed care, increased prevention services and support, and resources for doing preventive work;
- Recognizing the importance of 2Gen approaches and treating the whole family; and
- Using the Self-Sufficiency Standard as a way to account for the differential experiences of poverty and the variances in income required to meet the basic necessities of life.



**Matthew Dodson**

**Director**

**Archuleta County Department of Human Services**

Matthew Dodson is the Director of Archuleta County Department of Human Services. The Department's assistance programs are provided to eligible residents in financial need and include federal food, cash, and medical benefits, as well as child care, child support, energy assistance, child welfare, and adult protection, prevention, and intervention services, so children and adults have a future that is bright, full of hope, opportunity, and security.

*“So many of the stories, poems and reaction we read and discussed as a Fellowship evoked strong emotion and response for me as an individual and for us as a group. One poem that stuck out to me at the time and that I read periodically is “Life While You Wait” by Wislawa Szymborska. The following passage is taken from the poem:*

*I’m standing on the set and I see how strong it is.*

*The props are surprisingly precise.*

*The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.*

*The farthest galaxies have been turned on.  
Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere.  
And whatever I do  
Will become forever what I've done.*

*For me, just these seven lines, symbolize our journey as a Fellowship. Each Fellow has been brought together with purpose. The vision, whether it be individual and nurtured through the energy we provide to one another or collective and nurtured through the relationships we have developed, is based on what can be. We are the "props" and we are the actors. The "machine" symbolizes the systems we work within and have the power to change. The "galaxies" are the possibilities and symbolize the ideas we've generated together and that are yet to come."*