

Issue BRIEF

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Learn, Innovate, Improve: **Lessons from Arapahoe County's Efforts to Increase Engagement with Colorado Works**

LI² is a three-phase, evidence-informed analytic process designed to guide innovation and improvement of human services programs.

The objective of the LEARN phase is to clarify the underlying reasons for a program change and to build a common understanding of the problem to be solved.

The objectives of the INNOVATE phase are to generate and prioritize ideas for program change and document a clear road map for change.

The primary objective of the IMPROVE phase is to conduct a series of small pilots, or "road tests," to gather feedback and refine the program innovation. A second objective is to help build program staff's capacity to collect, analyze, and use data for everyday program decisions and continuous improvement.

Engaging people in required program activities is a persistent problem in human services agencies across the country. The Colorado Works program—Colorado's version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF—is not unique in its struggle to engage beneficiaries of cash assistance (parents with little to no income) in employment services. Counties throughout the state, which all run their own version of Colorado Works, have tried a variety of strategies to engage parents, including financial incentives. Yet initial engagement rates—the share of parents who follow through on required upfront activities such as orientation, initial meetings, and plan creation—generally remain around 50 percent.

This problem threatens to further destabilize vulnerable families, who may have their cash assistance revoked for failing to comply with program requirements. It also puts an administrative burden on the program staff who spend time trying to re-engage parents, issuing sanctions, and closing cases.

A growing body of research in the behavioral sciences reveals some important facets of human behavior that are relevant to solving this problem: (1) people rely more on intuitive, reflexive thinking than on deliberate, effortful thinking; (2) the mind's attention is finite and highly selective; and (3) self-control is an exhaustible cognitive resource.^{3,4} Moreover, research shows that living under the stress of insufficient physical resources complicates a person's ability to navigate everyday tasks, which in turn can inhibit follow-through on intended or expected behaviors.⁵

Drawing on this body of research, a team from Mathematica Policy Research, in partnership with the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) and three county agencies, used a behavioral science lens to diagnose the

factors that lead to low engagement. The team then co-created evidence-informed solutions and tested them to see whether they improved upfront program engagement. This brief summarizes the innovation experience of the Arapahoe County Human Services department. We describe the county's efforts, which were guided by the Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²) model, to design, test, and learn from a research-informed solution to this common engagement challenge (see sidebar).

LEARN



Our work began with understanding and documenting the factors that lead to low initial engagement in the Colorado Works program. The CDHS Employment and Benefits

Division defines and measures initial engagement in the Colorado Works program as the parent (1) agreeing to a road map that outlines his or her goals and work-related activities and (2) reporting at least one hour in a work-related activity. Through a series of interviews with staff in 10 counties across the state, our team found a considerable amount

of variation in how counties communicate and track engagement within their agencies. In addition, counties use a variety of approaches to engage parents in employment services, some of which are more onerous than others. Despite these differences, counties of varying sizes and with various Colorado Works models reported similar challenges communicating with families and completing referrals from eligibility to employment providers.

Arapahoe County focused on engaging parents at an orientation session with one of two workforce services providers, following a referral from the specialist who assesses Human Services eligibility. After the initial eligibility meeting, parents who are approved for cash assistance in Arapahoe County receive a referral to either Arapahoe/Douglas Works! (ADWorks!) or the Center for Work Education and Employment (CWEE). In some cases, a particular provider is selected for the parent based on the parent’s perceived needs. The orientation sessions at ADWorks! and CWEE occur on regularly scheduled, set dates and last nearly a full day. When making the referral to an orientation session, eligibility specialists briefly discuss the meeting content and logistics with clients and then work with them to arrange child care as needed.

About half of the parents who receive referrals attend their assigned orientation within 30 days.⁶ Based on their experience working with clients, staff indicated that low attendance could be driven by confusion about the steps parents must take before orientation (such as arranging child care or transportation) and a lack of

understanding about the orientation or why it might be beneficial. Specifically, staff noted that employment services providers could do more to highlight the opportunities for parents through their service offerings—that is, to give parents a motivating reason to engage with the provider beyond simply “checking the box” to attend the required orientation.

INNOVATE



To address some of the bottlenecks in the upfront engagement process, the staff of Arapahoe County Human Services designed an intervention called Goal-Oriented Assessment Language (GOAL). The county developed its intervention using a “road map” for change, a tool that helps to link the desired outcomes to specific targets (parents’ attitudes or behaviors they expect to shift) and to evidence-informed strategies (Figure 1).

County staff focused primarily on shorter-term goals related to the eligibility assessment. Specifically, they sought to design an intervention that resulted in parents leaving the eligibility assessment with a clearer understanding of the required next steps and with a more relaxed, reassured feeling. The belief was that by reducing parents’ confusion and stress, a larger share would attend the orientation appointment—and increased sustained engagement with the workforce provider would follow. With a more pleasant experience and information clearly explained, the team hoped that there would also be fewer escalations of parents’ complaints, client triggers, and sanction activities.

Arapahoe County’s road map for change

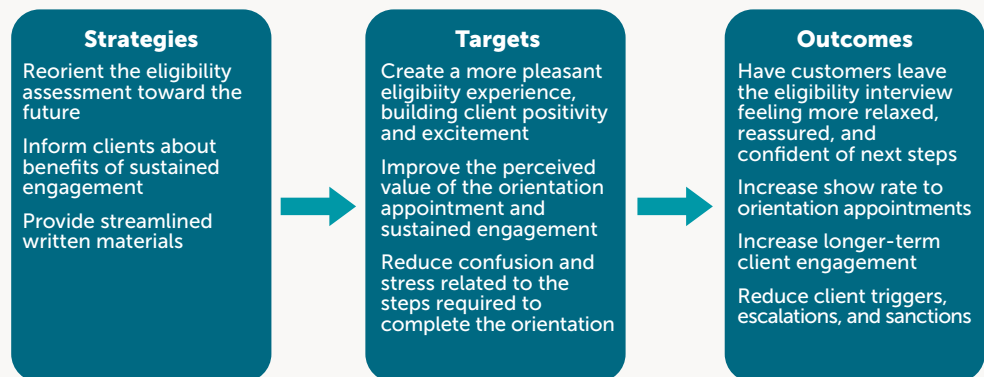


Figure 1

WHY RANDOM ASSIGNMENT?

A random assignment approach assigns study participants to either receive an intervention or not. Because the assignment is done at random, it is safe to conclude that any resulting difference in outcomes between the group who received the intervention and the group that did not was the effect of the intervention. In other words, the outcomes of the two groups would have been the same if not for the intervention. Randomly assigning parents to either receive the intervention or receive “business as usual” is the best way to test and know—with a high degree of certainty—that any resulting difference in outcomes (such as better engagement) can be attributed to the intervention itself.

With the outcomes outlined, the team turned to designing a set of strategies and targets to achieve them. The GOAL intervention was designed to clearly communicate the value of attending orientations and of having more dialogue-based, future-oriented interactions with eligibility specialists. It sought to reduce the cognitive load associated with navigating steps between eligibility and orientation with three specific strategies:

- **Reorient the eligibility assessment toward the future.** Parents would be asked about their goals and aspirations, with the intent of orienting parents toward thinking about achieving something they care about and building a human connection with the specialist. Three goal-focused questions replaced an 11-page written questionnaire (which was duplicative of most of the information collected by the workforce providers at orientation).
- **Inform clients about the benefits of sustained engagement.** ADWorks! and CWEE each developed a glossy brochure that outlines the orientation activities and highlights the benefits of working longer term with them, including pictures and testimonials of former clients. The goal of the brochures was to build client excitement and make clear that there are tangible benefits to engaging with the provider.
- **Revise and streamline written materials.** The county developed clearer written materials, designed to be easily understood and to present only the information most relevant at this particular point in the engagement process. Materials included two components:
 - A visually pleasing summary sheet that clearly lays out the parent’s assigned orientation date and time, along with steps that he or she needs to take before the meeting (such as child care arrangements)
 - A personalized text message reminding the parent about his or her orientation, in an effort to help parents remember the appointment (which could be one or two weeks after the eligibility meeting)

Staff who developed the intervention recognized that they would need the eligibility specialist to buy in to the approach and use it with fidelity. They also acknowledged that the approach would not overcome external challenges experienced by parents, such as the availability of child care and transportation.

IMPROVE



In trying out its new approach, the Arapahoe County team was committed to generating reliable evidence about whether this strategy could truly achieve the desired

impact on the primary outcomes of interest. So, in partnership with Mathematica, the team launched an experiment of its new approach in February 2018 by randomly assigning about half the team of eligibility specialists to the GOAL approach; the other half continued conducting eligibility interviews as it had been doing. Applications for Colorado Works are already assigned at random to eligibility specialists, so this further strengthened the study design.

Over three months, Arapahoe conducted 290 eligibility assessments in which parents were referred to a provider.⁷ Consistent with the plan to assign about half of cases served to the new approach, 49 percent were assigned to the GOAL intervention, and the remaining 51 percent were served using the “business as usual” approach. The county tracked three measures to examine the outcomes identified in the road map: (1) parents’ attendance at orientation within 30 days, (2) parents’ responses to a question about whether their immediate needs were met at the end of the eligibility appointment, and (3) parents’ responses to a question about whether they felt they clearly understood their next steps. The responses to questions were collected from parents on an exit survey, where the scale ranged from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest).

After 30 days had passed for all of the randomized cases, the attendance rate for both groups remained around 50 percent, consistent with historical trends (Table 1). Attendance for parents assigned to the GOAL intervention was slightly lower than for parents receiving services the usual way (49.3 versus 51.4 percent). The group assigned to the GOAL intervention reported about the same average scores on the two more subjective questions about their experience that day, with both groups reporting highly positive experiences.

	Received the GOAL intervention	Received services the usual way	Difference ²
Number of cases	142	148	—
Percentage who attended orientation within 30 days	49.3	51.4	-2.1 (0.72)
Average score on question about immediate needs being met ¹	4.79	4.91	-0.12 (0.22)
Average score on question about clear understanding of next steps ¹	4.94	4.96	-0.02 (0.54)

¹ Clients were asked to provide a score ranging from 1 to 5, where 5 was the highest.

² Statistical significance measured using a regression model with standard errors clustered at the staff level to reflect the unit of randomization; p-value shown in parentheses.

Table 1

LEARNING AND INNOVATING CONTINUES

Given that the GOAL intervention did not change parents' immediate sentiments or their attendance rate at orientation, the team at Arapahoe County Human Services sought to understand the challenges that staff faced in implementing this approach. Through conversations with eligibility assessment specialists, we identified a few important challenges.

- **The separation of the eligibility assessment from ongoing case management and provider involvement made it difficult to completely shift eligibility practices to a client-focused culture.** Eligibility specialists noted that their primary role was to complete their eligibility determinations in a timely manner; in delivering a timely and accurate decision, they were providing a value to those they serve. Because their focus is on the eligibility determination and not on case management, eligibility staff did not fully support the idea of being more dialogue based (with respect to parents' goals and aspirations) during their appointments.
- **Not all eligibility staff were convinced that focusing on the future during the eligibility assessment was appropriate; therefore, they may not have made that the focus of the appointment.** Staff said they believed that focusing on goals could overwhelm clients rather than reassure them. Moreover, because eligibility specialists do not have relationships with clients after the eligibility determination,

they did not see much value in discussing future plans with clients; they believed that the purpose of the eligibility appointment was limited to initiating benefits for those who are eligible.

- **Staff were not always clear about the value of ongoing engagement with the workforce providers, making it difficult for them to promote the value to parents.** Although some staff were familiar with the services provided by ADWorks! and CWEE, many were not. Those staff noted that a better understanding of both the orientation and workforce services would help them to better describe and promote the benefits of engagement to parents.

All three of these challenges were flagged by the team during initial development of the road map. The team knew that changing the culture of eligibility interviews to be future facing and dialogue based would be a challenge—and that fidelity to the model would be key to its success.

The team also identified two other insights about the intervention design that may have affected fidelity. First, although staff were randomly assigned to the GOAL intervention or to the "business as usual" approach, most of the staff using the GOAL approach were relatively new to their positions. Some of them may have still been adjusting to their roles and responsibilities in general. Second, seeing only half of the staff assigned to the intervention, some staff may have viewed the approach as unproven or experimental. This may have reduced their buy-in to the true spirit and culture shift of the approach.

Drawing on the insights from this short experiment, the county has returned to innovating and is focused on addressing the challenges described by eligibility staff. The team is considering ways to solidify a client-focused approach with full staff support, while acknowledging the inherent limits imposed by an organizational structure that separates the roles of eligibility assessment and case management. Eligibility specialists have already visited the employment services providers to learn more about the services they offer and to interact with their colleagues. Arapahoe County plans to revise its road map and move toward testing a different approach, using the lessons learned from this experience to improve parents' experiences with the program and, in turn, increase their engagement.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Mathematica Policy Research, Princeton, New Jersey
 - ² Arapahoe County Department of Human Services, Colorado
 - ³ Kahneman, D. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011
 - ⁴ Mullainathan, Sendhil, and Richard H. Thaler. "Behavioral Economics." October 2000. Available at https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=245733. Accessed June 22, 2018.
 - ⁵ Mullainathan, S., and E. Shafir. *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*. New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2013.
 - ⁶ Orientation meetings are biweekly, meaning that within 30 days, most clients will have had two chances to attend the orientation if the first date proves problematic.
 - ⁷ In two-parent cases, both parents received a referral and were expected to attend the orientation appointment.
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