



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Cross-System Collaboration to Better Support Babies in Colorado: Embedding a Two-Generation Approach into State and Community Systems

Colorado Embeds a Two-Generation Approach Into State and Community Systems to Better Serve Families

Community leaders, philanthropists, and state agency staff in Colorado have embraced a family-oriented approach to service delivery and program and policy development. This shift has been building momentum for decades, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s as leaders recognized that poverty reduction initiatives focused on the family were more effective than those focused solely on adults. It gained steam as communities began experimenting with new strategies for supporting children and parents simultaneously, when a statewide system of family resource centers providing comprehensive whole-family services was established in statute, and as state agencies began exploring how to apply a two-generation lens to existing policies and practices such as child support enforcement and work preparation activities.

Unlike some states that operate under a top-down approach to policy development, Colorado is a state-supervised, county-administered system that gives counties and communities a great deal of autonomy in decision-making and service delivery. This structure allows for more customization to meet

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the varied needs of residents living in diverse communities spanning urban, suburban, rural, and frontier areas. The state plays a critical role in supporting the sharing of best practices and incorporating what is learned at the local level into state policy. This “local control” arrangement has influenced how two-generation efforts have taken hold in Colorado. Instead of the state dictating a single way for communities to implement a two-generation approach, communities have designed local efforts that look different in practice but align with a shared two-generation vision.

At the state level, Governor John Hickenlooper and Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) Executive Director Reggie Bicha have been strong champions, charging departments to reorient their work to better serve families and ensure they are prepared to succeed in a 21st century economy. Bicha was one of the inaugural fellows with Ascend at the Aspen Institute, an organization that serves as a hub for researchers and policymakers interested in promoting a two-generation approach. Ascend developed the two-generation framework that defines Colorado’s work and has been closely involved with the state’s efforts. In addition to working with several fellows from Colorado who participate in group learning and strategy activities, Ascend works closely with local philanthropy and supports a network of partners from local communities. Their presence in the state is credited as a key factor in accelerating the two-generation work.

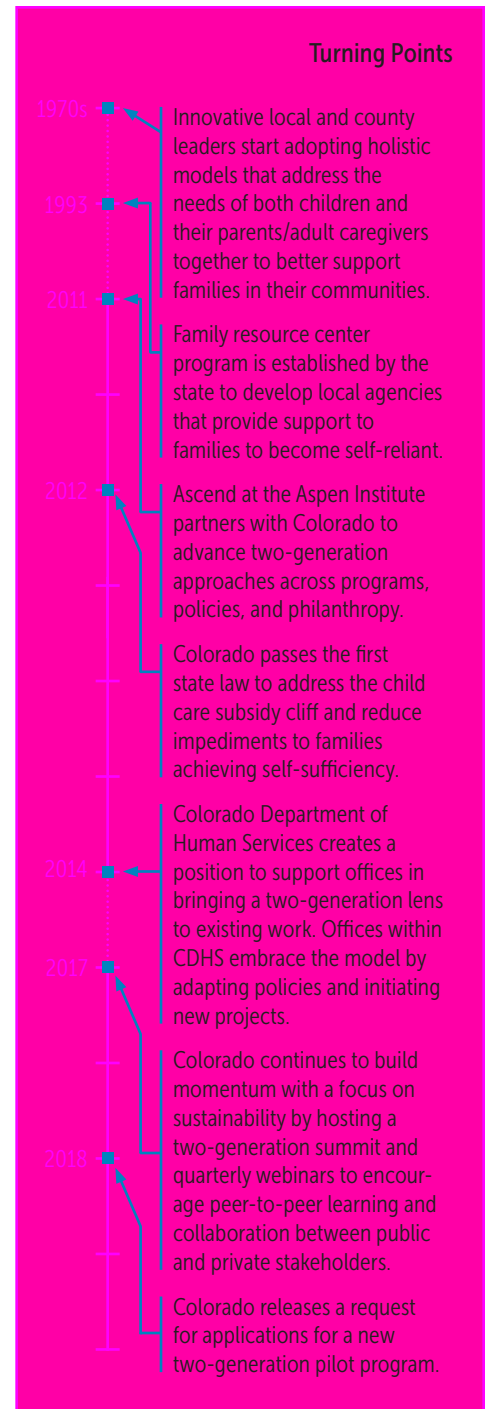
Recent efforts in Colorado have focused on expanding the adoption of two-generation approaches beyond the realm of human services and on identifying and implementing strategies that cut across sectors, nonprofits, the business community, state and local governments, and philanthropic partners. Governor Hickenlooper created a State Two-Generation Program Coordinator position within his administration in 2017 to coordinate and oversee this work. Key initiatives led by the Governor’s office have included hosting a state-wide two-generation conference, which brought together over 200 stakeholders to identify and develop opportunities for collaboration, and developing and implementing the [State 2Gen Action Plan](#).

Colorado Communities Drive Change

Colorado communities continue to take a number of innovative steps to embed a two-generation approach in services and systems. The following examples represent current efforts underway to better support families at the local and regional levels.

Valley Settlement Project

A grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2011 supported creation of the Valley Settlement Project in the Roaring Fork Valley. The aim of the initiative was to work collaboratively with new immigrant families to improve outcomes for children and parents by increasing their connections to the community. Project staff interviewed 270 immigrant families to understand the barriers they were facing related to securing employment, enrolling their children in child care or school, and connecting to other community services. These conversations revealed that many immigrant



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families felt isolated and unsure how to navigate the various systems meant to help them. Recognizing the interrelatedness of many of the problems families were experiencing, project staff made an intentional decision to take a whole-family approach to addressing the root causes of families' difficulties.

Valley Settlement Project offers several two-generation programs to immigrant families. Some that are particularly relevant for infants, toddlers, and their families include:

- Learning with Love, an evidence-based infant-toddler and parent program that helps parents learn strategies to promote their child's healthy development. After participating in the program, parents reported that they knew better how to keep their children healthy and access community resources.
- Wellness programs that employ promotoras to provide group cooking classes and make home visits to families with young children to promote healthy eating, mindfulness, and exercise. Participants reported decreased stress and increased healthy activities.

The project also offers community-based adult education and leadership opportunities. Since the Valley Settlement project began, the level of school readiness among immigrant children has improved, as has the level of educational achievement for immigrant parents. Project participants have also reported that they have been able to obtain better jobs and feel like valued members of the community.

"Employing a two-generation approach is not about creating new programs; it is about meeting your current objectives more effectively by focusing on the family."

***– Mary Alice Cohen,
Two-Generation Initiatives
Coordinator, CDHS***

Arapahoe County

Arapahoe County, the third-most populous county in Colorado, has rethought how it provides human services to incorporate a two-generation approach. A key aspect of doing so has been strengthening connections between county departments and the programs they offer so that families do not need to navigate a fragmented system. One very tangible way the county has done this is by creating a comprehensive resource directory with information about a variety of parent- and child-focused community-based services. The services include child care and parent supports, employment and job training, health and mental health services, food assistance, housing, transportation, and financial assistance. The county also created a web-based application, [ArapaSOURCE](#), that uses GPS to show the service providers/offices that are closest to the user. Having information about so many resources in one place has made it easier for families to connect to services.

Another initiative Arapahoe County is pursuing to address the needs of vulnerable young children and their parents together is a partnership with a local nonprofit, Family Tree, to design a bridge housing program for families experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness. [Generational Opportunities to Achieve Long-term Success \(GOALS\)](#) will provide temporary housing and wraparound services to support families in achieving economic self-sufficiency. During a four- to nine-month stay at the residential program, families will have access to a variety of resources on-site. They include early childhood education, health and mental health services, adult education, case management, parent support, and assistance building social networks within and outside the program.

Arapahoe County has also integrated two-generation approaches into its child welfare system. For example, the county now employs a family-centered decision-making process called Listening to the Needs of Kids (LINKS) at the beginning of child protection cases. Trained facilitators engage parents, family members, child welfare staff, and other service providers working with the family in discussion to develop a plan for ensuring the child's safety and connecting the family with needed services. Meetings are held every 90 days until the case is resolved.

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Other strategies counties are employing include co-locating adult- and child-oriented services, merging county departments for social services and housing to provide more holistic family support services, and incorporating screening for social determinants of health into existing programs. Several successful models are emerging that communities are sharing with each other and beginning to expand with the support of philanthropy and local and state government.

Colorado Department of Human Services Leads the Way

Under the leadership of Executive Director Bicha, CDHS has undergone significant culture and system change. Beginning in 2012, Bicha began bringing together CDHS office and division leaders, county human service directors, and philanthropic and nonprofit partners to develop a shared understanding of the two-generation approach and create a plan for integrating it across all their work. Taking the time to build relationships and strategize together helped the department embrace shared goals of serving children and families together and focusing on improving families' economic security. Within these goals, the department identified employment and early childhood education as initial priorities for two-generation work.

Each office/division in CDHS is given flexibility to determine specific ways to integrate a two-generation approach into their work. CDHS created a full-time two-generation initiatives coordinator position to support their efforts. Offices and divisions have shown great creativity and innovation in rethinking how they work with families. In addition to updating their individual policies to fit a two-generation frame, offices/divisions have increased their collaborative efforts around professional development, accountability, and policy/program design and implementation. These cross-office collaborations have led to several improvements in outcomes for parents, children, and families. A few examples are described below.



Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Working Together Project

Colorado received a MIECHV innovation grant in 2016 to support a two-generation approach to integrating education and employment services into home visiting. [The MIECHV Working Together Project](#) provides wraparound services to families with young children enrolled in MIECHV-funded home visiting programs in San Luis Valley to support parents returning to school or work. State and county government offices, local nonprofits, and higher education institutions are working together to provide an integrated array of supports to families, including financial literacy education; access to high-quality child care; navigation and connection to state/county public assistance programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child care subsidy, and nutrition programs; GED training; short-term college certificate programs; career counseling; transportation; and ongoing case management. The project was initiated in response to data showing that 37% of families enrolled in MIECHV-funded home visiting programs in the state were earning incomes less than 50% of the federal poverty level (\$12,125 for a family of four). By enhancing the education and employment supports parents receive, it is anticipated that families will improve their short- and long-term earning power, as well as their competency with financial planning and budgeting.

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Colorado Keys to Success

- **Integrate family outcomes into accountability systems and data collection efforts.** CDHS asks offices/divisions to look beyond the goals of their individual program areas to consider the impact their services have on the entire family. The creation of the Opportunity Framework has been helpful in identifying common metrics all programs should support individuals in achieving.
- **Include families in program and policy design and implementation.** A critical component of Colorado's approach has been their authentic engagement of the families they serve to understand the problems they're experiencing and think together about how government can help families to address them.
- **Provide professional development on two-generation approaches to staff at all levels.** Colorado needed buy-in from everyone from front-line staff to agency leaders to successfully redesign its systems to fit a two-generation frame. Providing professional development opportunities on a regular basis to all staff to help them understand the importance of making this shift was essential to building support and eliciting creative ideas.
- **Infuse two-generation approaches into existing programs.** By engaging all CDHS divisions/offices in strategy sessions early on and by emphasizing that a two-generation lens could be applied to existing programs, Colorado instilled broad ownership in the effort, making it possible to survive transitions in leadership. Had they branded it as a new initiative that staff had to take on in addition to their existing work, it may have been more difficult to build support.
- **Cultivate champions in all areas.** Colorado was fortunate to have two-generation champions in state and county government, nonprofits, philanthropic organizations, and among community members. They worked together to develop shared messaging and goals that enabled them to achieve much more together than would have been possible individually.

Colorado Parent Employment Program (CO-PEP)

Recognizing that children, especially infants and toddlers, benefit from strong, caring relationships with both of their parents, the Colorado Division of Child Support Services (CDCSS) used a \$2.3 million federal grant to pilot a family-centered approach to collecting child support. Through a series of conversations with noncustodial parents who were behind in child support payments, CDCSS staff learned that parents wanted to support their children but were facing multiple barriers. Difficulties included un- or under-employment, poor housing, mental health or substance abuse problems, and other issues that made it difficult to get jobs, such as suspended licenses, criminal records, and bad credit. [CO-PEP](#) was created to support parents in addressing these barriers. Participants worked intensively with a case manager and received supports ranging from gas vouchers to get to work to mental health and substance abuse treatment. CDCSS also amended their policies so that parents would not receive sanctions for noncompliance with child support orders as long as they were engaged with their case manager. The pilot was a huge success – within six months of enrolling in the program, 66% of parents had secured full-time employment, and within a year that percentage increased to 75%. As parents became more financially stable and confident, they not only increased their child support payments, but began engaging with their children more frequently as well. Additional funding received in 2016 allowed Colorado to expand CO-PEP.

2GO Innovation Grants

In August 2018, CDHS announced a new pilot program to support communities in implementing two-generation approaches to policy and programs to ensure both children and their caregivers experience positive outcomes. The department will award up to 10 [2GO](#) grants of \$100,000 each to regional and community collaborators to plan and implement innovative ideas. CDHS anticipates that up to four years of additional funding may be available for successful projects.

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Colorado Opportunity Project

CDHS's leadership in two-generation work in Colorado extends to other departments as well. CDHS collaborated with the Colorado Departments of Health Care Policy and Financing (HCPF) and Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) on the [Colorado Opportunity Project](#), which aims to coordinate efforts across departments and community partners to support economic opportunity for all Colorado residents. They established an Opportunity Framework that identifies indicators of opportunity across the lifespan so that government and private initiatives can work toward the same goals. They have also identified evidence-based programs that help residents reach the indicators. For example, some of the indicators identified during the prenatal and early childhood period in-

clude: rate of low birth weight, maternal depression, early screening and intervention for mothers and children, percent of families relying on low-cost food, and school readiness. Some of the interventions identified include home-visiting programs, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the earned-income tax credit, and family resource centers. Work is still underway, but departments are already using this framework to guide some of their work.

Sustaining Progress

Over the course of its two-generation journey, which started before the term "2Gen" was coined, Colorado has made significant progress in embedding this approach into state, county, and local systems. The Hickenlooper administration expanded both the breadth and depth of two-generation initiatives in the state by emphasizing cross-agency collaboration, strengthening existing public-private relationships, and developing cross-sector partnerships around a unified vision of two-generation approaches in Colorado. As Colorado is on the eve of swearing in a new governor who will assemble a new cabinet and launch new priorities, stakeholders in and out of government are confident that two-generation efforts will continue to flourish. The time put in to build consensus, foster peer-to-peer sharing, and evaluate outcomes has paid off. State agency staff, nonprofit organizations, service providers, businesses, philanthropic organizations, policymakers, researchers, and community advocates are seeing the value of holistically serving children and their adult caregivers simultaneously and are coming together in new, innovative ways to build a state that provides opportunity for all families to succeed.

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Resources

- To learn more about Colorado's plans to further integrate a two-generation approach, read the *Colorado Guide to 2Gen* at <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/resources/colorado-guide-to-2gen/>
- To learn more about the Colorado Opportunity Framework, visit www.colorado.gov/pacific/hcpf/colorado-opportunity-framework
- To learn more about Valley Settlement Project, visit www.valleysettlement.org

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- To learn more about Arapahoe County's two-generation efforts, visit www.arapahoegov.com/1905/2Gen
- To learn more about the MIECHV Working Together project, visit www.colorado.gov/governor/sites/default/files/working_together_-_empowering_families_mary_anne_snyder.pdf
- To learn more about CO-PEP, visit www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdhs/article/engaging-fathers-child-support-punitive-supportive-approach
- To learn more about the new 2GO grants, visit www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdhs/2gen-pilot#The%20Pilot

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For more information about the *Building Strong Foundations* project, and to see other case studies in this series, please visit www.zerotothree.org/resources/series/building-strong-foundations.

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