



The Differential Response Model

When someone calls a county department and reports concern that a child may be in danger of abuse, Colorado law requires that counties investigate the report. Counties then make a “finding” that the abuse occurred (founded), the abuse didn’t occur (unfounded) or there isn’t enough information to make a finding (inconclusive).

Two of the largest complaints about this system is that it is adversarial and provides limited options for response for the case workers. Under the traditional Child Protection System (CPS), case workers are required to follow a prescribed, strict process to address an incredibly diverse array of situations.

Differential Response (DR) is an alternate response for low or moderate severity child abuse and neglect cases. It allows county workers to engage and include families and other community support systems to ensure child safety without making a strict “finding.”

By definition, Differential Response is a practice model that allows for more than one method of initial response to reports of child abuse and neglect. This approach recognizes variation in the nature of reports, and takes into consideration the value of responding differently to different types of cases

Traditionally, people viewed a visit from Child Protective Services as intervening and accusatory. This often placed families and the community immediately on the defensive, thereby creating an adversarial relationship that was not beneficial to anyone, especially the children involved.

Differential Response allows case workers to interact more positively with families, and focuses efforts on prevention as opposed to intervention. DR allows county workers more flexibility in how they address a report and allows them to be more efficient in their efforts.

Currently, five Colorado counties – Arapahoe, Larimer, Jefferson, Fremont and Garfield have implemented DR as a pilot program.

Data and Outcomes

The Colorado State University Social Work Research Center and Westat (the national cross-site evaluator) are evaluating the pilot program and its outcomes.

Early results predict that DR positively impacts families, increases the skills of county workers, and allows greater alignment between goals and results.

Limited data have illustrated that DR is increasing the number of cases closed by county workers which is positive because it shows that families are only having to

go as far into the system as necessary, and are not forced to go through a “finding.” To date, preliminary data indicates that of the 2,785 families who have participated in DR, 96% have had no subsequent abuse allegations. More substantiated data will be available in the next six months.

CDHS and the counties are collaboratively working to lay the foundation for statewide implementation. Senate Bill 12 – 011 has been proposed by the counties, with the support of the state, to allow for additional counties to implement Differential Response prior to the completion of the formal pilot. This proposed legislation is currently in the Senate.

Child Protection System vs. Differential Response

Child Protective Services	Differential Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One response track to reports of child maltreatment, regardless of severity. • Always includes a “finding” as to whether abuse or neglect has occurred and to identify a person responsible for abuse or neglect. • Can be perceived by families as adversarial and invasive, particularly in low and moderate risk cases. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dual response track that allows for a Family Assessment Response (FAR) in cases of low or moderate risk • Does not include “finding” of maltreatment or identification of a person responsible for abuse or neglect, but instead allows for family and community supports system engagement. • Focuses on safety through early family and community engagement. • If risk is determined to be high, then the investigation can be moved to the CPS track.

In addition, the Social Work Research Center evaluated the process of implementing a differential response (DR) model for the Colorado Consortium on Differential Response (CCDR). The process evaluation is part of the overall evaluation effort which features an outcome evaluation and a cost evaluation to assist in the determination of whether DR could be successfully replicated by other counties and adopted statewide in Colorado. Here are the [Site Visit Report](#) and corresponding [Appendices](#).