Early Lessons from the Work Support Strategies Initiative: Colorado

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In recent years, Colorado’s public benefits system has faced multiple challenges, which include a problematic automated benefits system causing delays in benefit processing, lawsuits leading to court-ordered program benchmarks, and rising food, medical, and cash assistance caseloads as a result of the Great Recession. In response to these issues, Colorado began multiple efforts to improve program processes.

In 2011, Colorado was awarded a Work Support Strategies (WSS) grant to help improve the system for connecting low-income families to work support benefits. Supported by private philanthropy, this multiyear initiative gave grants to select states to test and implement more effective and integrated approaches to delivering key work supports, including health coverage, nutrition benefits, and child care subsidies. Streamlining and modernizing these processes can help improve the health and well-being of low-income families, save states money, and improve overall efficiency. Colorado used the WSS initiative to draw together many related efforts under one vision in order to propel change in technology, data collection and analysis, and collaboration and joint planning for state agencies and counties.

Colorado’s 64 counties vary from highly urban to rural and sparsely populated; the 10 largest counties contain 85 percent of the population. Colorado’s public benefit system is state supervised and county administered. The Department of Human Services (DHS) manages Food Assistance, Colorado Works, child care, energy assistance, and other economic security programs, while the

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**Work Support Strategies**

Work Support Strategies (WSS) is a multiyear initiative to simplify the process of getting work support benefits. Working directly with selected states, WSS seeks to:

- improve the health and well-being of low-income families by increasing enrollment in work support programs;
- deliver benefits more effectively and efficiently, reducing administrative burdens on states as well as clients; and
- evaluate the impact of these streamlined approaches, disseminate lessons learned, and inform state and federal policies.

WSS focuses on three work support programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP), and child care subsidies through the Child Care and Development Block Grant. Participating states may choose to add other programs, and most have done so.

In fall 2010, WSS invited states to apply for one-year planning grants, with the opportunity to continue to a three-year implementation phase. Twenty-seven states submitted applications, and nine were competitively selected: Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, and South Carolina. During the planning phase, the selected states received $250,000, expert technical assistance, and peer support from other states. With these resources, the grantees performed intensive diagnostic self-assessments, explored business process strategies, established leadership structures, and developed data-driven action plans that address policy and practice changes.

This report is one of 10 (one on each state, plus a cross-cutting report) describing state activities during the planning year.
Department of Health Care Policy and Financing (HCPF) manages Medicaid and other health and medical programs. Food Assistance, Medicaid, and cash assistance programs are administered through the state’s automatic benefits system, Colorado Benefits Management System (CBMS). Other work support programs are managed through discrete automated systems. At the county level, most programs are administered together by the same workers. Because counties have the flexibility to operate programs independently—and that includes setting service delivery practice and priorities—program procedures vary considerably.

CBMS has presented problems since it was launched in 2004, creating difficulties for caseworkers and causing concerns over delayed applications and recertifications for many public benefits. A lawsuit against the state by the Colorado Center on Law and Policy was largely a result of these problems. The suit led to a 2010 court-ordered settlement setting specific benchmarks for DHS and HCPF.

**Colorado’s Goals for the Planning Year**

The Colorado WSS team’s goals for the planning year focused on developing and cultivating cross-program understanding and engagement both across state agencies and programs and between the state and counties. The team also sought to determine where alignment of policies and practices was feasible, to use data to inform strategic planning, and to push for the technology needed to streamline and coordinate across programs. Colorado had multiple, ongoing efforts to streamline benefit programs and improve benefit eligibility processes and related technology. WSS was a way to unite these efforts “under one umbrella.”

**State Background**

In 2011–12, the WSS initiative’s planning year, Colorado had a mixed-party government, with a Republican state house and Democratic state senate. Democrat John Hickenlooper, the former
A Quick Glance at Colorado

Population (in thousands): 5,029
Share of individuals living below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) (in 2011): 31.3%
Unemployment rate (in September 2012): 8.0%
Share of eligible people participating in SNAP (in 2010): all individuals, 69%; working poor 58%
Share of eligible children participating in Medicaid/CHIP (in 2010): 78.7%
State Medicaid/CHIP upper income eligibility limit as % of FPL: children, 133%; working parents, 106%

Programs state or county administered? County
Number of counties: 64

Lead WSS agency: Department of Human Services (DHS)
SNAP governance: DHS > Office of Economic Security > Food Assistance Program
Medicaid governance: Department of Health Care Policy and Financing (HCPF) > Health Programs Office
Child care governance: DHS > Office of Children, Youth, & Family Services > Division of Early Care & Learning > CCAP

Sources: a U.S Census Bureau (2013); b Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012); c Cunyngham (2012); d Kenney et al. (2012); e Kaiser Family Foundation (2013).

The mayor of Denver, became governor in January 2012. This meant a change of administration (though not party affiliation) as the WSS project was getting started. Hickenlooper was a strong advocate of the vision underlying the WSS project; he wanted to streamline and integrate benefit programs to improve access for all eligible Coloradans. His chief of staff had previously served as the head of Denver’s human services agency, and both she and the governor believed that the state’s segregated approach, with minimal cross-program interaction, posed major challenges for counties.

DHS took the lead on the WSS initiative, with HCPF as a key partner. County representatives and community stakeholders were engaged as the planning year progressed. The Center for Policy Research, a Denver-based consulting firm and longtime partner of DHS, was engaged to help with policy and data analysis. Julie Kerksick, appointed by the new administration in July 2011 as director of the Office of Economic Security in DHS, became the project lead for most of the planning year, replacing Pauline Burton, former head of the Office of Economic Security and the original author of the WSS grant application, who retired from state government.
Four key areas were critical aspects of Colorado’s planning year: changing the conversation, both between state agencies and between the state agencies and the counties; starting to redesign benefit processes; overcoming challenges to accessing and using program data; and becoming proactive.

**Changing the Conversation, Part I: State Agency Collaboration**

“You now know not to go ahead without your other half [HCPF]... We have to make sure that we’re working with each other. I’ve told my staff that I don’t want them to make final decisions without making sure that you’re making things as simple as possible across programs.”

—DHS staff member

Everyone involved with WSS acknowledged that there had been little collaboration between DHS and HCPF, the two agencies responsible for the majority of public benefit programs, despite the fact that both agencies’ programs served common customers and used a common computer system, CBMS. Everyone also agreed, from top-level state leadership to county administrators, that making the changes necessary to realize the WSS vision required the two agencies to work together.

Both agencies were under pressure to improve the timeliness and accuracy of benefit receipt, stemming from the large increase in caseloads and the need to meet court-ordered benchmarks. They were also under pressure to move quickly. Given the historic separation of the agencies’ work, initiatives had typically been operated within a given program or carried out by one of the two agencies. In the words of one WSS team member, when it came to “access to benefits and being accurate and timely, no one needed selling. [But state agency staff] wouldn’t always necessarily see beyond their own individual program.” The WSS project took advantage of existing efforts and was able to act as an umbrella for collaboration moving forward—by providing time, a forum, and dedicated staff support for the two agencies to learn each other’s programs and to do the time-consuming work of developing joint plans. At the same time, additional factors contributed the culture of collaboration between the agencies, including executive leadership, joint work toward fixing CBMS, and the modifications needed to
implement federal health reform. The WSS project was able to serve as a common vision and touchstone for collaborative change.

As a former mayor and businessman, Governor Hickenlooper strongly supported initiatives to streamline services and generate efficiencies. The governor made clear to his appointed executive directors of DHS and HCPF that he wanted the two agencies to be better aligned and coordinated and to help county partners meet the needs of Coloradans. Early in his administration, the governor created the Executive Steering Committee, which required DHS, HCPF, and the Office of Information Technology (OIT) to meet regularly and produce results on integrating and streamlining services. According to Director Bicha of DHS, the timing was fortuitous: “WSS came at the same time as that new vision to help us figure out how to improve efforts to identify and make eligibility determinations for programs.” The leadership also reflected the greater connection in purposes between the programs. “From Medicaid’s perspective, my people were worrying about physical and mental health,” HCPF Director Birch said. Under the WSS initiative, “they started seeing a different picture, [a picture of] integrated physical, mental, dental health, and then stacking social engagement and food security and workforce engagement.”

The directive from the governor and the encouragement and support from departmental leadership facilitated the WSS team’s work to dismantle barriers between programs in order to better serve families and move toward a holistic view of what services and assistance people need to lead healthy and successful lives. One long-standing obstacle to effective SNAP and Medicaid performance—and a long-standing contributor to poor state–county relations—was the automated benefits management system, which was widely viewed as extremely flawed (see box). Leadership and staff across the departments designed a unified proposal for overhauling CBMS and assessing its costs and benefits. The governor endorsed the budget proposal, and just after the planning year ended in February 2012, the legislature approved it. This step had important implications for improved service delivery: In addition to strengthening the system, the clear action to address a problem that crossed agencies and particularly distressed the counties built trust among all parties that they could work together and were paying attention to the stressors on workers.
While the CBMS redesign is crucial to achieving WSS goals, state leadership also felt it was important to place the benefits management system in a broader context of other important improvements. “I’m proud that we reframed that notion,” one DHS leader said. “We have to fix the computer, train staff to use it, create linkages across programs, make the eligibility process easier for the client…and use [all] those to get where we want to be, instead of just fighting over CBMS.”

One early task the WSS team undertook was an environmental scan of work support programs, examining program policies and practices around eligibility, enrollment, and recertification. The purpose of this effort, led by the Center for Policy Research (CPR), was to educate WSS team members about each other’s programs and to identify ways to streamline policy and processes across programs. Each WSS member knew his or her own program inside and out, but had little knowledge of other programs’ policies and practices despite a shared client base. One team member commented that the initial ignorance of each other’s programs obstructed the team’s ability to establish joint goals, and it was critical for members to educate each other before creating a unified vision. CPR developed a report that evolved through nearly a dozen iterations and was published in early 2012. This exercise produced a valuable resource for the WSS team members to refer to as they moved forward.

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**Modernizing IT Infrastructure**

The Colorado Benefits Management System (CBMS) administers state public benefits, including Food Assistance, Medicaid, TANF, and adult financial programs. Since its inception in 2004, CBMS has been plagued with problems, resulting in slow processing, inaccurate benefit terminations, and huge backlogs. Problems with CBMS played a central role in the lawsuit filed against the state by the Colorado Center on Law and Policy.

Every state and county agency worker, advocate, and other stakeholder we spoke with agreed the system was antiquated and needed changing, especially in light of the additional demands health reform would put on the system. Working within CBMS could be a frustrating endeavor for workers: mouse clicks could take seconds to register, system shutdowns on monthly submission days were the norm rather than the exception, and data extractions were so difficult that they needed to run at night to avoid visibly slowing down the entire system.

Support for change came right from the top; Governor Hickenlooper made fixing CBMS part of his gubernatorial campaign. Regular joint meetings across multiple agencies were held to develop a proposal to modernize and fix CBMS, with constant communication with the high-level Executive Steering Committee and the governor.

Toward the end of the WSS planning year, the governor announced an 18-month plan to rebuild CBMS that was endorsed by four state agencies and the counties. The plan asked the joint budget committee (JBC) of the legislature for $17 million in supplemental funds to be used for technology improvements and for training across state and county workers. While some legislators were hesitant to pour more money into the system, the committee approved the proposal in April 2012. According to JBC reports in the months following passage, CBMS performance has improved.
Planning for health reform was a tremendous undertaking during the planning year, and team members had to consider carefully how those plans would affect CBMS and the other benefit programs. HCPF actively collaborated with DHS and involved DHS staff in planning meetings for implementing health reform and developing the federal proposal to receive 90-10 match funds. A DHS program staff member appreciated how HCPF was including others in health reform plans from the beginning: “They’re being good about hearing our concerns and including our concerns in the planning, and we’re there all along the way. It’s painful because it’s a lot of work, but…it’s better to know it now so we can prepare.”

HCPF staffers now factor time to collaborate with other programs into their planning processes, and they do this more automatically than they did before WSS. Although collaborating makes the process longer, HCPF staff observed that “you end up going back if you don’t get that input initially anyway.” By communicating with other programs earlier and before decisions are made, HCPF has “eliminated some of that unintended surprise” that DHS had occasionally felt in the past when it learned of changes only after they were already in place.

Despite the progress, HCPS was concerned about the staffing time that collaboration required. HCPF is smaller than DHS, with a small staff devoted to Medicaid eligibility and outreach; with health care reform imminent, staff time is in short supply. WSS team members from both agencies observed that adding staff to HCPF would be helpful going forward.

Changing the Conversation, Part II: State–County Collaboration

“I thought the state’s role across programs was to throw policies out and then audit us to death...That’s really changed, and I feel like they now listen. They don’t always have the answers we want, but the conversations are happening...the door is open.”

“Both the state and counties have improved. We talk about how to improve the system to get benefits to folks in the most useful way.”

—County social services directors

Colorado’s decentralized county-administered system requires communication and shared goals to move toward statewide change. Many state and county staff in Colorado characterized the historical relationship between the two groups as a difficult one. The past administration’s efforts
to transfer control of Medicaid and child care from the counties to the state—efforts not continued by Governor Hickenlooper—had created tension. In addition, state agency staff often needed and wanted to get county buy-in on new policies and procedures, but often felt torn between the time it took to do this properly and the pressure to get things done quickly. According to both county and state program staff, a cultural change has taken place in the past year, moving toward a more collaborative and productive relationship. Linking DHS and HCPF at the state level, as described earlier, has helped improve state–county relations as well.

A more inclusive and collaborative attitude toward the counties was developed in the early stages of the WSS planning year. A few counties had been involved in the initial WSS application and early project meetings. When the WSS team was organizing a strategic planning meeting a few months later, it originally thought it would follow precedent and select counties to participate. But the new director of the Office of Economic Security suggested, “Let them vote with their feet.” The team extended an open invitation to all interested counties, and 18 of them sent staff to the strategic planning meeting. An important outcome of the meeting was to broaden the WSS team with county staff who volunteered to actively participate in the Coordinating Committee and working groups that subsequently formed.

The WSS team’s vision was a more collaborative and streamlined process to deliver critical work supports to vulnerable families, and most counties supported that vision. Given the large growth in caseloads, pressure from the lawsuits, and limited resources, the counties were already on board for any streamlining and coordination changes that would alleviate burden on workers. When asked if counties were hesitant, state WSS team members said that, on the contrary, counties were insistent on being involved.

Some counties did have concerns over whether the WSS vision meant an increase in benefit receipt, given budget constraints and politically conservative leaders and constituents. To bring all counties on board, it was important for the state to carefully convey the message of Colorado’s WSS vision. Colorado sought to increase efficiencies and educate eligible residents about work support programs so they could make their own choices. Above all, the state emphasized the importance of these benefits to support work among low-income individuals, and this continues to be a centerpiece of their message.
Other county doubts about WSS came from hesitation that DHS and HCPF would work together toward the shared vision. But after attending meetings with participants from both agencies, the counties began to trust that DHS and HCPF were communicating and cooperating. (A county WSS team member remarked this was one of the first times s/he had seen the agencies joining together.) Watching the continuing progress of the WSS work throughout the planning year reinforced this feeling. One benefit of the initiative, county social services directors stated, was that it encouraged and continued engagement between DHS and HCPF and helped “solidify the service delivery paradigm at the state departments.” “We have a plan,” a county supervisor told us, “and everyone basically has the same objectives, and the workers and clients are at the center of that. I’m encouraged by that.”

One outcome of state collaboration between departments was streamlined communication with the broad array of Colorado counties. DHS and HCPF had typically communicated separately with the counties, even to the same county administrators. This disjointed strategy caused confusion: one WSS team member felt the counties were receiving so much information from the two agencies that it was hard to sift through all the material and know what was important to communicate to frontline workers. Under WSS, the departments began communicating and messaging that vision jointly to others.

As one example, DHS Food Assistance staff conducted a monthly Performance Improvement Group meeting with the 10 largest Colorado counties. It is now a joint meeting, and Food Assistance and HCPF “are tied at the hip at this meeting every month.” Counties view the meetings as a place to work out problems with the state collaboratively and positively, rather than prior interactions that had sometimes seemed more focused on pointing fingers. In the same vein, HCPF and Food Assistance now conduct regional trainings together.

Another improvement was how the state involved counties in making changes. When the WSS team took up one of its first tasks—shortening the joint benefit application—some of those involved observed that too much work was happening at the state level and not enough at the county level. The worry was that a familiar pattern would be repeated: the state would claim a change was made with county input when only a few counties had been consulted, or that the state would make the decisions and present the finished product to the counties for approval.
While everyone realized the necessity of county input on the changes, the immense pressure to move quickly was working against meaningful county participation. Fortunately, the new director of the Office of Economic Security was willing to go to bat with higher-ups on the need for more time, and a slower process took place. “We created a work plan and stuck to it, and kept bringing people together in meetings to make sure everyone was okay with the plan. [Everyone] felt heard and included—that we incorporated their perspective.”

As another example, county directors were part of the team that wrote the Implementation Advance Planning Document (IAPD), the federal proposal for health reform changes. In the past, HCPF might have written the proposal and asked for county reactions afterward.

An important part of the county conversation was embracing the differences across the county systems while encouraging change toward common goals. Again, the stakeholder meeting early in the planning year set the tone: WSS leadership recognized the counties’ work on improving efficiencies and benefit access, and framed the project as an opportunity to connect the WSS’s goals for Colorado with what counties were already concerned about, such as timeliness, accuracy, staff capacity, and technology. At another stakeholder meeting later in the planning year, attendees—including state program staff, representatives from counties of all sizes and regions, and external stakeholders—discussed best practices from other states and from among Colorado’s counties. According to one state agency staff member, “the county differences were allowed to shine through, and you could hear them perking up when counties shared best practices.” This meeting produced concrete strategies to include in Colorado’s WSS action plan moving forward. The open communication and sharing of best practices was such a hit, county staff said they see a permanent role for the state in disseminating best practices across counties and helping counties create those intersections. In the words of one county supervisor, “We’re in it together because we know that that’s how we get to a better model.”

Starting to Redesign Eligibility and Recertification Processes

“[WSS] isn’t one more new idea; this is an incredible set of resources to support what we’re already working on.”

—State staff, explaining WSS to county team members
The legal requirement to meet timeliness benchmarks, and the broader sense that low participation rates among eligible families reflected barriers in the system, motivated Colorado’s WSS team to make benefit application and recertification easier. Several initiatives that had begun before WSS were continued under the project, and new initiatives were started with greater attention to cross-state agency and state–county collaboration.

Immediately before the WSS planning year, Colorado had launched its Program Eligibility Application Kit (PEAK) online screening and application tool. Built to ease the burden on clients, PEAK screened potential applicants for multiple benefits; users determined eligible could apply for food, medical, and cash benefits through PEAK. Under the umbrella of the WSS project, PEAK was further revised to make it more seamless and useful.

One of the WSS team’s first tasks was to condense the joint benefit application, an overwhelming 26-page paper form shortened to 8 pages. The team collaborated with state and county program representatives from Food Assistance, Medicaid, TANF, and adult financial programs. Promoted by Governor Hickenlooper on the campaign trail, this initiative received constant attention from senior leadership. When the team was able to produce an eight-page application, it was considered an early win, showing how state agencies and counties could work together.

Work on redesigning county office processes to improve efficiency and timeliness was a core part of the planning year, continuing work from prior initiatives (see box for more detail). These joint state–county discussions will move forward to implementation in the year to come.
Addressing the Timeliness of Recertifications

In the six months before the WSS planning year, the Colorado Eligibility Process Improvement Collaborative (CEPIC), made up of state staff from DHS and HCPF as well as line staff and administrators from 13 counties, contracted with Southern Institute for Children and Families to hold a series of meetings to sketch out county application processes and identify strategies for improving timeliness. This initiative, made possible through a grant received by HCPF that invited DHS participation, was an early collaboration between the two agencies. Following the positive reception of these meetings, the WSS team brought the Southern Institute back, using WSS funds, to continue this work and broaden the focus to recertifications. Colorado had a significant backlog in recertifying benefits, and resolving the underlying issues would help the state on two fronts: Improving timeliness was an important part of court-ordered benchmarks, and benefit retention was a key element of the WSS project vision.

The 10 largest counties in Colorado, where roughly 85 percent of the caseload lives, participated in the two-day session. Each county team had mapped out its recertification process ahead of time so discussion at the session focused on how to make the process more efficient for staff and clients. In the spirit of collaboration, state program staff from Medicaid, Food Assistance, and Colorado Works attended the meeting to strategize what improvements could be made at the state level. Working together, the counties and the state streamlined their processes for staff and simplified it for families to facilitate stability by maintaining continuous assistance. State and county participants viewed the session as successful, and similar work is scheduled to continue with the rest of Colorado's counties.

HCPF made additional changes during the WSS planning year, in part as a result of joint team discussions and increased collaboration through WSS, which streamlined Medicaid eligibility processes. Recognizing that federal regulations for Medicaid were more flexible than those governing some of the other benefit programs, HCPF implemented an ex-parte process and administrative automatic renewal for Medicaid for those renewing their SNAP benefits. In doing so, HCPF aligned recertification dates for clients enrolled in Medicaid and SNAP. (During the next year, the state aligned recertification dates across Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, and adult financial programs.) HCPF further simplified Medicaid renewal by sending outs forms pre-populated with information from CBMS, so families just had to send in corrections. To further simplify eligibility determination and reduce the significant backlog, Medicaid began work on interfaces that could electronically verify wages from the Department of Labor and information on citizenship and identity from the Social Security Administration.

Collaborative WSS efforts and discussions also produced efforts to improve client notices. About halfway through the planning year, SNAP, Medicaid, TANF and other CBMS programs decided to improve the confusing and lengthy notices and correspondence that clients receive. Representatives from each program met and agreed to develop a single correspondence template for use by all CBMS programs—one for approval notices and one for denial notices—using
simplified wording. In addition, DHS staff spoke about adding flags to the recertification applications sent out to clients so that when the applications are returned to the offices, workers know what program they are for and their due date.

The WSS team was unable to integrate child care with the other benefit programs during the planning year, primarily because the program eligibility and benefits are managed through a different automated system. However, state and county partners saw this as a key area for future work. The team needed to find a way to engage counties, which have extensive control over child care policy, in the search for ways to link child care with the other services as a key support for working parents. Colorado’s child care program had recently undergone some significant changes, including expanding the time between enrollment and recertification and implementing a new automated eligibility system. Further, child care agency staff were interested in building bridges to SNAP and Medicaid. However, limited resources—and the fact that child care is not an entitlement program in the way that SNAP, Medicaid, or CHP+ are—made integration difficult. The child care program’s different data system, rules, workers, and application created further challenges to alignment with the other benefits programs.

To strategize how they might connect child care with the other benefits programs, the WSS team held a major session with the WSS child care technical assistance team, counties, and state staff toward the end of the planning year to jump-start next steps in this arena for the next phase of the project. Agency leaders remarked that it was good to be challenged on this front by the WSS mandate to include child care. DHS Director Bicha said, “We’re not where we need to be in child care, but this [grant] created a requirement to get people in the same room and talk about it as our families see it.”

Overcoming Challenges to Accessing and Using Program Data

“The court reports got us to use data much more, and WSS reignited the efforts to actually use it to manage performance and make sure we understand the problems.”

—WSS team member

The WSS team focused on data early on to get a lay of the land and look for areas of improvement. Several months into the planning year, program experts from Food Assistance,
Medicaid, TANF, and child care met to determine what data extracts and variables were available to get a picture of the current state of client access to, and the delivery of, work support benefits. A formal WSS Data Committee was established soon thereafter to determine what data were needed, what could be quickly obtained, what could be extracted from the automated systems, and what would need to be taken from alternative sources, such as surveys and focus groups. The committee determined it needed data on, among other things, program churn (that is, families leaving benefits and reapplying within three months) and multiple program benefit receipt.

Early on, several key data challenges emerged. One was the inability to find programming assistance to extract the necessary data from CBMS. The team made several unsuccessful attempts to acquire a programmer with specific skills to write the data queries and pull the necessary data. The WSS team faced the additional challenge of hiring data programmers with enough policy knowledge of the different programs to write thoughtful queries and pull the necessary data. As one team member explained, most IT staff can write code and run tests, “but they don’t know if they’re writing the right code to pull out information on churn. They don’t know the program specifics enough, and the program people don’t have the SQL skills.” Finding someone with both the policy knowledge and the technical knowledge was difficult, but the team needed someone to bridge that gap in order to move forward thoughtfully.

Another obstacle to examining data across programs was that the child care program is not in CBMS. Child care has its own benefits management system, CHATS, and there were no common identifiers to link between the two systems. The WSS team discussed creating an interface between CHATS and CBMS to be able to share income eligibility information and other data.

Locally, counties varied in their ability to access and use data for management. Some larger counties had invested in their own data systems and regularly used data from multiple sources in decisionmaking. But not every county was capable of extracting data from CBMS. During the planning year, a number of counties expressed continuing frustration at having to “re-create the wheel because there’s no workflow management tool from the state to help us.” The CBMS
upgrades promise to produce daily reports to better assist counties with managing workflow and tracking productivity.

While waiting to access the data it wanted, the WSS team used other data at its disposal to inform priorities and goals. It looked first at the monthly data they submit in the court reports (as part of continuing compliance with the requirements of the law suit), which covered Food Assistance, Colorado Works, and Medicaid. With these aggregate data, the team could examine caseload volume, retention, and efficiency across those programs and across counties. These data were used to help counties improve timeliness on processing applications and recertifications in SNAP. For example, state Food Assistance program staff organized reports from every county into one report that listed pending and overdue cases as well as each county’s share of the statewide backlog. This master report gave counties information on the reasons their cases weren’t being processed efficiently. Food Assistance staff sent these reports to the counties regularly and tracked weekly progress. They met in person with staff in each county that was having the most trouble and talked through the data. These meetings showed counties that the state staff members were trying to solve problems jointly, not just point them out, as illustrated by the joint agency performance improvement group meetings described in the previous section. With consistent, standardized data from the master report, county directors better understood how to improve timeliness. Six months after starting this process, the state reported that counties had reduced the Food Assistance backlog by more than 50 percent.

Another way the WSS team received data was by collecting it themselves. In the second half of the planning year, the team surveyed frontline staff online and clients in person to gain their perspectives on how well existing policies and procedures generated administrative efficiencies and connected eligible low-income working families with benefits. The surveys also helped the WSS team identify areas for improvement. The Center for Policy Research conducted the surveys statewide. To stimulate a high response rate, the WSS team offered staff a financial incentive to complete the survey; 530 county staffers completed the survey. The information gathered in both surveys provided valuable insight into the on-the-ground challenges experienced by workers and clients, along with feedback on how various business process strategies might increase or decrease staff workloads. This feedback helped shape the WSS
team’s action plan for the Phase II implementation grant, and it helped them prioritize between action steps.

Toward the end of the planning year, the WSS team was able to obtain some CBMS data on participant characteristics, program receipt overlap, and churn. These data helped state staff consider next steps, such as Express-lane eligibility for Medicaid using SNAP income information. Before WSS, team members said, they wouldn’t have had data from both programs to develop such a system.

**Becoming More Proactive**

“We needed to get the mindset of planning and thinking about a plan for goals and steps and working together for the whole year, instead of getting some ideas, taking your pieces…and doing them separately.”

—HCPF staff

“We used to work with HCPF from an automated side and because we had to. We are now…taking that relationship [to] a planning perspective rather than a reacting perspective. We’re including each other in the beginning rather than only looking at it when we’re ready to automate and implement.”

—DHS staff

In the years before WSS, the state agencies would do things too quickly without getting full buy-in or considering impact on other programs or whether the change fit with a larger vision, according to several WSS team members. State staff operated in an environment where they felt constant pressure to meet deadlines and benchmarks. That pressure to “deliver the impossible yesterday” left little room for the type of thoughtful planning that can lead to improvements in service and individual outcomes.

By starting with a planning year, the WSS initiative provided time and resources that allowed the Colorado team members to build collaboration between state agencies and the counties, think through and plan for next steps, and begin to change how decisions are made.

Over the course of the planning year, the state program staff has improved agency collaboration. This shift has happened through the chain of command; program leadership,
especially in Medicaid and Food Assistance, check in with each other regularly to ensure that any changes to one program would not negatively affect participation, retention, benefits delivery, or workloads in the other. The tradeoff is that it takes more time to move policy and process changes forward; however, this early joint planning reduces efforts on the back end to integrate efforts across programs.

Taking time for planning, including cross-agency and county input, avoids “unintended surprises.” HCPF staff gave an example where lack of planning proved problematic. In 2008, when proposing self-declaration of income in Medicaid, the agency had not initially recognized how this change affected income eligibility for Food Assistance, given that both programs use CBMS. Over the course of the planning year and moving forward, health reform required a great deal of planning, given Colorado’s commitment to integrating programs. Joint agency efforts and

### Colorado Planning-Year Activities

- Formed and held regular meetings of the WSS Coordinating Committee—which included state agency staff, county representatives, advocates, and project consultants—and was expanded over the year.
- Conducted two major county meetings (including counties of all sizes and from all regions of the state) and a strategic planning meeting that also included external stakeholders (advocates and foundations), so that staff from state health and human services agencies could hear perspectives, communicate the goals of WSS, seek input, and develop concrete plans for change.
- Conducted an environmental scan/program crosswalk comparing policies and requirements across programs that identified coordination opportunities and challenges.
- Created a shortened joint application for Food Assistance, Medicaid, Colorado Works, and adult financial programs, reducing length from 26 to 8 pages.
- Worked with counties to develop changes to improve processing of recertifications, including a two-day session with state program staff and the 10 largest counties facilitated by the Southern Institute.
- Developed a new approach to analyzing Food Assistance timeliness data by county and sharing it with counties during regular state–county meetings focused on jointly identifying problems and brainstorming potential improvements.
- Simplified client notices for multiple programs including Medicaid and Food Assistance.
- Provided analysis and support to help develop the business case for investing state resources to improve CBMS.
- Participated actively in Colorado’s planning for health care reform, including cross-training between health and human services staff and joint communications with the counties.
- Worked through difficulties in accessing data to carry out an initial data diagnosis on program overlap and churn.
- Carried out a web-based county caseworker survey to elicit input on next steps toward WSS vision.
- Convened state WSS staff, county child care staff, and national child care technical assistance team to assess Colorado’s child care subsidy process and identify actions and opportunities for the implementation period.
inclusion of DHS in activities incorporated this planning along the way.

WSS team members felt the planning year played a key role in allowing for change. One team member noted, “We’re accustomed to having to move quickly, and [WSS] has allowed us to take a step back and think things through. It takes longer…but it’s a better process.” Another team member said, “The planning year gave us the time, attention, focus, and external resources [people and money] that helped us understand where we are now and think about where we want to get to.”

**Conclusion**

Colorado began the WSS planning year under pressure from lawsuits and recession-induced caseload increases to improve delivery of work supports and streamline processes. A history of limited state agency collaboration and the need to improve state–county relationships in a county-administered system created further challenges. WSS provided resources, a platform for joint planning and communication, and a vision for cross-program integration that complemented the vision of new state leadership and some state and county initiatives already taking place.

The state’s planning-year activities improved collaboration and communication between the state human services and health agencies, and between the state and counties. Successful products of these collaborations include the shortened joint benefit application, greater county efficiency in processing Food Assistance applications and recertifications, cohesive plans for implementing health reform, and supplemental budget funds to improve the statewide automated benefits management system.

Colorado will use what it has learned from the planning year to set the stage for additional changes as it moves on with a three-year WSS implementation grant. According to its action plan for the next phase of WSS, Colorado plans to continue its work on all fronts while focusing on expanding access to benefits and improving timely processing. Continuing the momentum on state–county collaboration from the planning year, the state plans to bring ideas for business process changes and additional staff training to all Colorado counties by using a regional approach that acknowledges the variation in counties. Improvements in CBMS will support program integration and efficiencies, and allow for greater state and county use of data. Finally,
additional specific changes are planned or already being implemented to ease the eligibility and recertification processes for programs, including simplified renewal forms, improved notices, and alignment of recertification dates.
References


Methodological Note

This report is based on several sources, including WSS evaluation team members’ on-site and telephone interviews with state and county Colorado WSS team members and others in the state working on WSS and related efforts; WSS materials, including quarterly progress reports and quarterly call notes; and state documents, including the WSS proposal, action plan, presentations, relevant web sites, WSS data exercise results, evaluation documents and other materials. During a three-day visit to Colorado in spring 2012, the evaluation team held 11 interviews (supplemented with several phone interviews) with the WSS management team (including consultants); staff from food assistance, child care, and Medicaid programs; relevant community-based organizations; and representatives from six county social service agencies.

The goal of this Phase I evaluation was to draw on these sources to document Colorado’s activities during the WSS planning year, including the challenges the state encountered and the approaches chosen to overcome them. This goal arose from the particular features of the planning year and the nature of the lessons that could be distilled. During this phase, states were assessing their current strengths and weaknesses, and designing and testing potential next steps, culminating in the development of an action plan (with clear goals and measurable targets for reaching them). From an evaluation perspective, therefore, it was too early to assess whether states had met measurable goals, but not too early to document what actually did happen, what bumps occurred along the way, and how states responded. Thus, during the on-site visits, the evaluation team members attempted to gather input from varied perspectives, including local office staff and community stakeholders, but did not attempt to comprehensively gather input from all perspectives in order to evaluate the effectiveness of planning-year activities.

Six states (Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, North Carolina, Rhode Island, and South Carolina) are continuing on to Phase II of the evaluation. This next stage has three major goals: to document, understand, and draw lessons from the implementation of WSS activities in the states; to identify and track over time key outcomes that the state would expect to be affected by its activities and interventions; and to measure the effect WSS or specific activities under WSS had on key outcomes. To meet these goals, the Phase II evaluation will include implementation analyses and data tracking for all six states and impact analyses to provide quantitative causal results, where feasible. Each state’s evaluation will be tailored to its particular activities, goals, priorities, and data availability. The overall evaluation will combine information, analyzing data and results from across all six states.