



# Colorado's Child Welfare System

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Colorado's child welfare system provides services to protect children from abuse and neglect and to support families in caring for their children. This issue brief provides an overview of the child welfare system in Colorado, including its administration and funding; reporting of child abuse or neglect; and the judicial process and types of services provided in child welfare cases.

## Administration and Funding

Colorado's child welfare system is county-administered and state-supervised. The [Colorado Department of Human Services](#) (CDHS) provides guidance to county departments, oversees funding, maintains the centralized child welfare data system (TRAILS), [reports child welfare data](#), and operates a statewide child abuse reporting hotline. County departments of human services respond to reports of child abuse or neglect and provide direct services to families, including prevention services, child protective services, and out-of-home placements.

The child welfare system received \$714.2 million in FY 2025-26 and responded to over 118,000 reports. Most child welfare service costs are shared between state, local, and federal entities, with local funds typically covering 20 percent of costs and the

remaining 80 percent covered by a mix of state and federal funds. Table 1 provides an overview of the funding sources for child welfare services in Colorado.

**Table 1**  
**FY 2025-26 Child Welfare Funding**  
*Dollars in millions*

General Fund	Cash Funds	Reapp. Funds	Federal Funds	Total Funds
\$391.6	\$113.2	\$30.8	\$178.6	<b>\$714.2</b>
55%	16%	4%	25%	<b>100%</b>

Source: FY 2025-26 Long Bill ([SB 25-206](#))

Cash funds include county-originated funds.

## Reporting Child Abuse or Neglect

Reports of child abuse and neglect may be made to [county departments of human services](#) or by calling the statewide hotline at 1-844-CO-4-KIDS (1-844-264-5437).

## Mandatory Reporters

State law mandates that certain professionals report suspected child abuse and neglect within 24 hours. Failure to report is a class 2 misdemeanor. [Mandatory reporters](#) include, among others:

- health professionals and pharmacists;
- veterinarians and animal control staff;
- teachers and other school officials;
- athletic program staff;
- peace officers, firefighters, and emergency medical service providers;

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- clergy and religious professionals;
- commercial film and photographic print processors; and
- employees of state and county departments of human services.

## Services and Judicial Process

Counties provide various child welfare services depending on individual needs and level of risk. Lower risk cases may receive prevention and intervention services, while abuse or neglect cases may be referred to the courts, with counties providing intensive services or removing a child from guardian custody.

### Intake and Assessment

After a report of child abuse or neglect, county staff conduct a safety assessment of children in the home. Cases are then prioritized based on level of risk for further investigation and evaluation of service needs. If the safety of a child cannot be determined, an immediate investigation is conducted.

### Court Oversight

Courts [oversee child welfare cases](#) involving abuse or neglect. These cases, referred to as dependency and neglect cases, are civil rather than criminal. At the initial hearing, the court evaluates evidence of abuse or neglect and determines whether a child can safely remain in the home or if they require an out-of-home placement. The court may appoint a [guardian ad litem](#) to represent the child, and the [Office of Respondent Parents' Counsel](#) may represent indigent parents. In certain cases, the court

can order and approve treatment or service plans and monitor family progress in the plan.

### In-home Services

In low-risk cases, the child can often remain in the home while the family receives services to prevent further incidence of abuse and neglect. In-home services may include substance abuse treatment, intensive family therapy, life skills training, and other services to allow the family to remain intact.

### Out-of-home Placement

In cases of serious abuse or neglect or high risk of further harm, the courts may order that a child be placed in out-of-home care. Out-of-home care may be with a relative, in a foster home, or in a group home or residential care facility. While the child is in out-of-home care, the family continues following its case plan and receiving services with the goal of reunification. However, in cases where a child's safety cannot be ensured, other permanency options such as adoption or permanent guardianship may be considered. In some cases, the court may terminate parental rights, allowing for the child to be adopted.

### Services for Foster Care Youth

Youth in out-of-home placements can qualify for certain federal, state, and local supports. The federal [Chafee Program](#) provides assistance in education, employment, housing, and other related supports to current and former foster care youth who are transitioning to adulthood.