



Identifying and Serving Homeless Youth in Rural Colorado:

Rural Collaborative Annual Report

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Introduction

Over the past decade, States have reshaped policy and practice to better identify and serve youth who are at risk of homelessness. Nationally, programs and policies that support at risk youth have expanded including child welfare's expanded foster care serving youth up to age 21. The Chafee foster Care Act serves transition age youth and with its expansion to age 23, has broadened its reach. Youth who are involved in systems-whether it be child welfare, youth corrections or others-have some supports through their case workers. For those youth who are not connected to a system- and particularly those who are not system involved and live in rural areas- are left with little to no services or support. Colorado is no different in that there are some counties where youth are unable to access services and others where youth must travel many miles to seek food and shelter. Because of this gap in services for homeless youth in rural Colorado, a collaborative was formed to strengthen community connections and supports in a coordinated effort to provide vital services to youth who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in rural Colorado.

The Colorado Rural Collaborative for Homeless Youth (RC) was established in 2008 to collectively address the unique needs of rural runaway and homeless youth and the challenges geography poses for them to receive support and services. The Rural Collaborative was formed to address a gap identified by the Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth (ACHY), Colorado's network of Runaway/Homeless Youth and Child Welfare providers, to serve youth in rural communities who have little or no connection to stable housing and family situations. The Advisory Committee on Homeless Youth Services also identified the need for a strategy to engage a large number of rural counties to collectively address the unique needs of rural youth.

The Rural Collaborative was developed through a five-year Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) Rural Runaway and Homeless Youth Demonstration Grant called Support Systems for Runaway and Homeless Youth (SSRHY). In 2013, the Rural Collaborative received a three-year Basic Center Program (BCP) grant to serve runaway and homeless youth under the age of 18 as well as two Statewide Strategic Use Fund grants (TANF). In 2018 the Rural Collaborative received another BCP grant and began contracting with the Center for Policy Research (CPR). Since then, The Rural Collaborative (RC) has continued to receive funding from FYSB under their BCP, their Street Outreach Program (SOP), and Transitional Living Program (TLP). CPR continues to provide evaluation services for the RC and produces this annual report covering all programs.

Program Overview

The Rural Collaborative brings together the resources, knowledge, and expertise of rural Colorado communities. Each of these communities utilizes a host of programmatic resources and funding streams. The Rural Collaborative is made up of seven partner agencies supported by blending and braiding resources to serve hundreds of youths experiencing homelessness and housing instability in rural Colorado. These partner agencies are:



Shiloh House is a nonprofit organization that offers youth and families support and services to overcome challenges, enhancing their success in the community and maintains a vision of every youth and family flourishing. Shiloh House serves youth in Arapahoe, Douglas, Morgan, Larimer, Weld, Logan, Sedgwick, Phillips, and Yuma counties.



Centennial BOCES services range from high quality professional development, 4 annual regional McKinney-Vento Summits (Limon, Sterling, Fort Morgan & Greeley), on-site consultation with district staff and students, community resource development and delivery, and solution-focused problem solving with students / families as they confront educational, social barriers and houselessness. C-BOCES serves youth in Larimer, Weld, Morgan, Logan, Washington, Sedgwick, Phillips, and Yuma counties.



Chaffee County Family & Youth Initiatives builds strengths and reduces risk for youth, families, and neighborhoods by providing evidence-based programs to build a strong community. We are the prevention division of Chaffee County Human Services and have been serving the community for over 15 years.



Lake County Wraparound serves youth ages 0-21 who benefit from a facilitated team- based process to help them address challenges in their lives and build resilience. Through our program families and youth develop their own vision and a plan with formal and natural supports to reach that vision.



La Plata Youth Services serves as a resource to schools, law enforcement agencies, local human services departments, and other community agencies that come in contact with youth who are in need of additional support. LPYS serves youth in La Plata and San Juan counties.



Oak Tree Youth Resources is a youth-serving nonprofit in rural Southwest Colorado. We offer young people the chance to re-enter school, complete their education, learn job skills, employment assistance, supportive services, and seek stability while avoiding homelessness. OTR serves youth in Montezuma and La Plata counties.



CASA of the 7th Judicial District's Advocacy Program, Youth & Family Advocacy Services has become a regional resource providing Supervised Visitation, Parenting Classes, Mental Health Services, Supportive Housing, and Life Skills for youth and young adults coming out of foster care or currently homeless. We aim to break the cycle of abuse and neglect through prevention, advocacy, and intervention, and maintain a vision of a community where children and youth become tomorrow's champions of hope, purpose, and family. CASA7JD serves youth in Montrose, Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Ouray, and San Miguel counties.



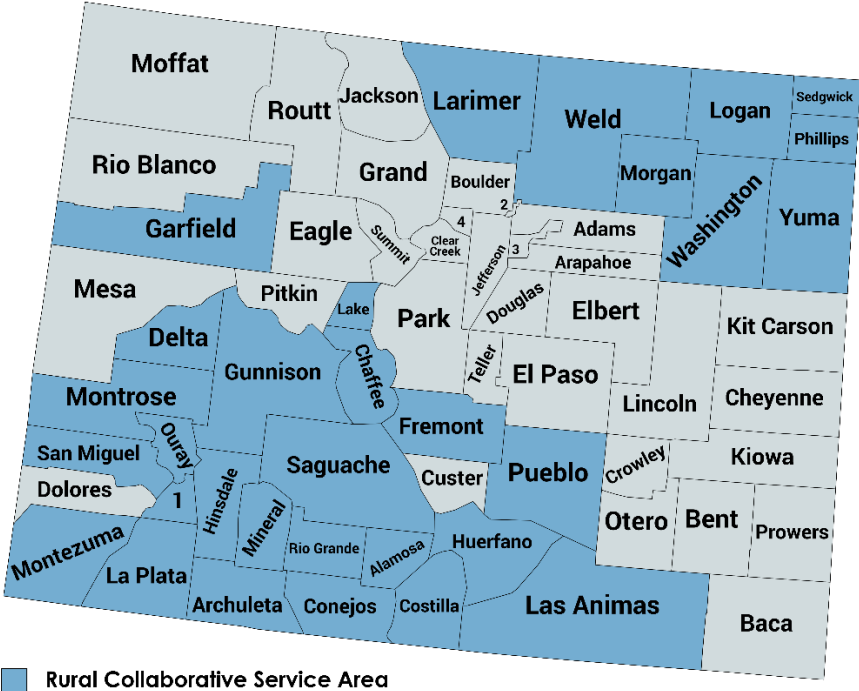
San Luis Valley BOCES operates under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to ensure every student succeeds by providing specific resources and information for school district liaisons and other audiences to ensure access to a free and appropriate public education for homeless children and youth, and success in school once enrolled.



Pueblo YWCA's (renamed to Mariposa Center for Safety) motto is rebuilding lives, renewing hope. Empowering adults and their children with the skills they need to live a life that is free of fear and to move forward on their healing journey. Our mission is to empower survivors of domestic violence, human trafficking, sexual assault and family abuse through increasing self-sufficiency and self-worth, education, prevention, victim advocacy, and by offering emergency services, provisions and shelter when needed. Pueblo YWCA also supports runaway and homeless youth.

The Colorado Rural Collaborative serves the rural and frontier counties across the state of Colorado. These counties make up a majority of Colorado's Balance of State Continuum of Care (CoC). See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Colorado Counties Served in the Rural Collaborative



Background

The Rural Collaborative brings together the resources, knowledge, and expertise of rural Colorado communities to form an effective safety net of support for youth without stable housing. While housing is a foundation for safety and stability, site leads provide other supportive services using positive youth development approach and address key outcome areas of education, employment, well-being, permanent connections, and community engagement.

The Rural Collaborative is a Collective Impact Initiative, which is defined as long-term commitments (since 2008) by a group of key stakeholders (Rural Collaborative Lead Agencies) to form and pursue a common agenda for solving a specific social problem (rural youth homelessness). The Rural Collaborative is supported by a shared measurement system (independent local evaluator, logic model, and Management Information System, Continuous Quality Improvement process,) mutually reinforcing activities, and ongoing communication (Rural Collaborative’s strategic work and communications plan, monthly All Sites electronic meetings, annual meeting). The Rural Collaborative is staffed by an independent organization (Spark Community) (Kania & Kramer, 2011).

The Rural Collaborative’s Leadership Team consists of the Project Manager, Strategic Development, Training and TA Coordinator, Evaluator, and Site Coordinators. It meets monthly for project oversight, training/TA, shared learning, and decision-making.

The RC’s focus is to support rural homeless youth in providing services that lead to four outcome areas identified by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness:

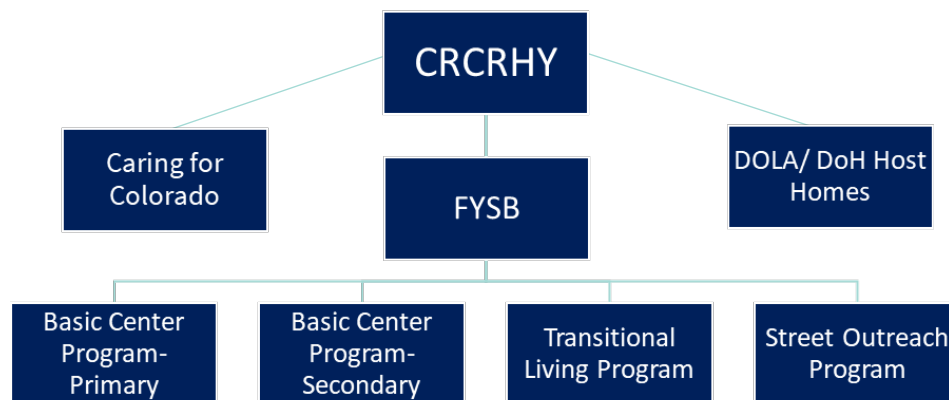
- Stable housing: a safe, affordable, and stable place to live.

- Permanent connections: the presence of supportive adults who provide physical and emotional support throughout the young person’s life.
- Social and emotional well-being: the skills, capacities, and characteristics that enable young people to understand and navigate their world in healthy, positive ways.
- Education/employment: the ability to access and perform in both school and in employment toward self-sufficiency.

Program Funding

The RC is supported by blending and braiding funds from a variety of sources, primarily through the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB).

Figure 2: Rural Collaborative Structure and Funding Sources



Program Updates

Since the last review, the Rural Collaborative has expanded with additional support from FYSB several State sponsored grants. This has allowed the Rural Collaborative to expand its reach and make adjustments to meet the challenges of working with this highly mobile population. During the past eighteen months, the RC has expanded to 8 additional counties and 2 new sites. These programs collectively staff 4 site leads and that serve homeless youth across rural areas of Colorado.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB) funds grants to community agencies that support Runaway and Homeless Youth (RHY). These funds support services across several program types. The Rural Collaborative receives funding from these RHY program grants to support services to homeless youth across rural Colorado. A brief description of the programs is provided below.

- **Street Outreach Program (SOP):** The SOP supports community organizations in working with homeless, runaway and street youth aged 21 or younger to help them find stable housing and services. SOPs focus on developing relationships between outreach workers and young people that allow them to rebuild connections with caring adults. The ultimate goal is to prevent the sexual exploitation and abuse of youth on the streets. The SOP works to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse of youth on the streets. SOP funding supports: street-based education and outreach, access to emergency shelter, survival aid, treatment and counseling, crisis intervention, and follow-up support.
- **Basic Center Program (BCP):** The BCP meets the immediate needs of youth ages 17 and younger that are or are at risk of homelessness and runaway. Enrollments come in two forms,

emergency shelter (ES) or homeless prevention (HP). BCP emergency shelter is most commonly provided via host homes. BCP can include working to reunite young people with their families or locate appropriate alternative placements. BCP funding supports: temporary shelter, counseling, crisis intervention, recreation programs, and aftercare services.

- **Transitional Living Program (TLP):** The TLP supports youth ages 16 to 21 that are homeless or are at risk of homelessness with long-term (12-18 months) services to create and maintain housing stability. In rural areas of Colorado, there is very limited residential housing available, and often-times takes the form of host homes or single occupancy rooms, which provide a family like setting. TLP may provide short-term rentals and hotel stays for youth as they prepare or work with the site lead to locate more permanent housing. TLP funding supports: safe and stable housing, basic life skills building, educational opportunities, job attainment services, mental health care, and physical health care.
- **DOH Host Homes:** Host homes provide a safe temporary welcoming space for youth age 18 to 23 for up to 6 months. The RC provides at least 5 beds per region. Host homes are a community driven, youth centered solution and a service provider. Host families provide homeless youth with a safety net including housing, food, and sometimes transportation. Due to the lack of shelters and housing in rural areas caused by a lack of economies of scale and development costs, Host Homes can uniquely help to fill the gaps in emergency and traditional housing available.
- **Caring for Colorado:** The RC is supported by blending and braiding funds from a variety of different sources, including CFC. These funds allow the RC to provide important services to Runaway and Homeless Youth in rural Colorado communities. A portion of the CFC funds supplement the BCP.

Research and Evaluation

The evaluation of Colorado's Rural Collaborative is conducted by the Center for Policy Research (CPR). CPR has been leading the evaluation, performance monitoring and reporting for the RC since 2017. CPR implemented an online management information system called the CRCMIS in 2018 to support data collection, serve as an online case management record for sites and securely host required forms for each site within the RC. Data for this report comes from the CRCMIS and is combined with data from the homeless management information system (HMIS) where HUD requires data on youth served to be recorded.

Description of Youth Served

Enrollments and Referrals

Combined the Rural Collaborative served 137 youth across four main programs from July 2021 through December 2022. A total of 124 youth were enrolled in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) which is how the RC tracks youth for the federally-funded programs. A total of 80 youth were enrolled in the RC's online management information system, CRCMIS, and 67 were enrolled in both. The CRCMIS was created in 2017 for the RC to better track youth and record services across the rural areas they served in Colorado. In total, this amounts to 137 total youth at risk of homelessness

that these programs served during this reporting period. Table 1 shows the breakdown of program enrollments for youth.

- The Basic Center Program was the most common program providing services for youth, with more than half (55%) of the youth enrolled in BCP. The BCP is also the longest running funding stream supporting the RC.
- DoH Host Homes and the Transitional Living Program (TLP) were the second most common type of program services provided.
- The newest funding stream awarded to the RC was the Street Outreach Program (SOP). This newly awarded program to the RC was just getting up and running during this reporting period and the number of services provided reflects this with only 5% of youth receiving SOP services.

Program Providing Services (July 2021-December 2022)	# of Youth Served (N = 137)	% of Youth Served
Basic Center Program	75	55%
DOH Host Homes	40	29%
Transitional Living Program	39	28%
Street Outreach Program	7	5%
Other*	11	8%

*DOH Youth RFA & Unspecified

Note: Youth may receive services from multiple programs; total percentage exceeds 100%.

Most youth are identified for services through street outreach, word of mouth or other community agencies where youth appear for help such as a food bank (35%). Other common referral sources are the school systems where the youth attend and are identified as homeless or at risk of homelessness from the McKinney Vento liaison at the school (28%). Other sources of referrals are self-referrals, and government agencies such as the child welfare or law enforcement services within a community. See Table 2 for a breakdown of common referrals sources.

July 2021-December 2022	# of Youth Referred (N = 137)	% of Youth Referred
Individual*	20	15%
School	39	28%
Self	16	12%
Government Agency**	14	10%
Outreach project/Other Community Agency***	48	35%

*Parent/Guardian/Relative/Friend/Foster Parent/Other Individual

**Child Welfare/CPS/Caseworker/Community-worker/Juvenile Justice/Law Enforcement/Police

***Outreach project/other organization/unspecified

Screening and Referral (risk factors)

The RC adopted the screening tool that is used across multiple agencies in Colorado including the division of child welfare and coordinated entry process, among others that screens for risk factors of homelessness. This tool identifies youth who have risk factors associated with homelessness such as

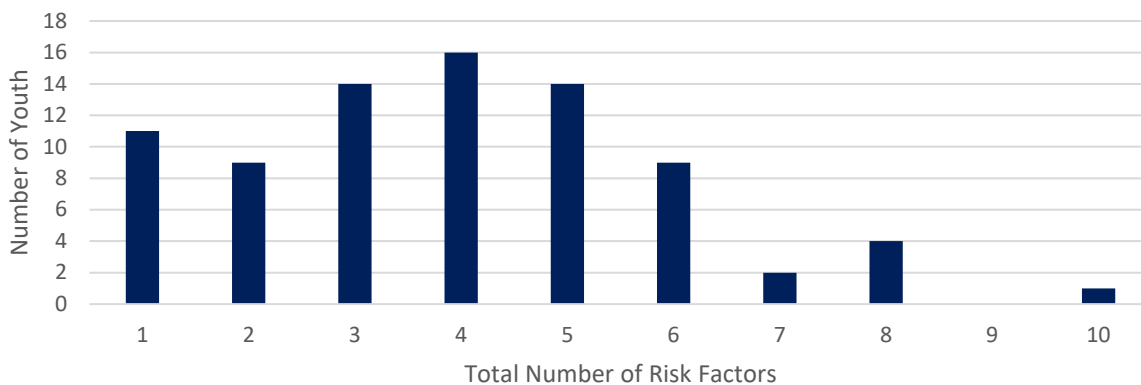
a parent in jail/prison, use of marijuana before the age of 14, and child welfare or detention prior to age 18. Table 4 provides a breakdown of the risk factors that youth who were served by the RC identified at enrollment. The most common risk factors among youth were “mom or dad ever in jail” (74%) and “became homeless because of violence, running away or religious differences” (72%), this was followed closely by “used marijuana ever” (69%). See Table 3.

Table 3. Percent of Screened Youth with Associated Risk Factors for Enrolled Youth (N=80)		
Risk Factor (July 2021-December 2022)	Number of Youth Responding Yes	% of Youth Responding Yes
Current or prior foster care involvement or placement	25	32%
Ever been homeless or used a shelter	48	62%
Became homeless because of violence, running away, or religious differences	52	72%
Been pregnant or gotten someone else pregnant	11	14%
Ever used marijuana	50	69%
Jail or detention prior to turning 18	12	15%
Mom or dad ever in jail	43	74%
Mom or dad ever in foster care	10	20%
Ever been trafficked or sexually exploited	3	4%

* Percentage is based on the number of valid responses for each question

The average number of risk factors identified by youth receiving services in the RC was 4 and a range of 1-10. See Figure 3.

Figure 3. Number of Risk Factors Identified by Youth at Enrollment



An analysis of risk factors was conducted through an equity lens to show the distribution of risk factors among youth served in the RC. The identification of risk factors among youth receiving services in the RC did not vary significantly by gender or race. Both male and female youth identified the same number of risk factors, although trans or nonbinary youth did have a higher average number of risk factors identified. Trans/nonbinary youth identified an average number of 5.3 risk factors, higher than

their male/female counterparts although not statistically significant. We looked at risk factor differences by race and there were no significant differences by race among the number of risk factors identified. Table 4 provides a breakdown of risk factors with an equity lens. While no significant differences were found, it is important to note that the numbers are very small and it is important to present results through an equity lens even with a small number of youth responding.

Table 4. Risk Factors by Gender Identity and Race/ethnicity (N=80)	
Risk Factors	July 2021-December 2022
All Youth (N = 80)	3.9
By Gender (n=71)	
Male	3.8
Female	3.7
Trans or Nonbinary (n=3)	5.3
By Race/Ethnicity	
White	3.8
Black or African American (n=1)	1
Hispanic or Latinx	3.6
American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous	4.3
Multi-Racial (n=1)	5

Note: There were no significant differences by gender or by race/ethnicity

Characteristics of Youth Served

Once youth are screened and determined eligible for services, site leads enroll youth in services based on their risk factors, barriers, and needs. The Rural Collaborative serves homeless youth across broad sections of the state of Colorado and provides a description of rural youth homelessness in Colorado. These youth are evenly split between male/female and most identify as heterosexual (76%). Youth served across the RC are primarily white (53%), with nearly one third as Hispanic or Latinx (34%). Forty-three percent of the youth served report a disability. The average age of youth served by the RC is 18 years old.

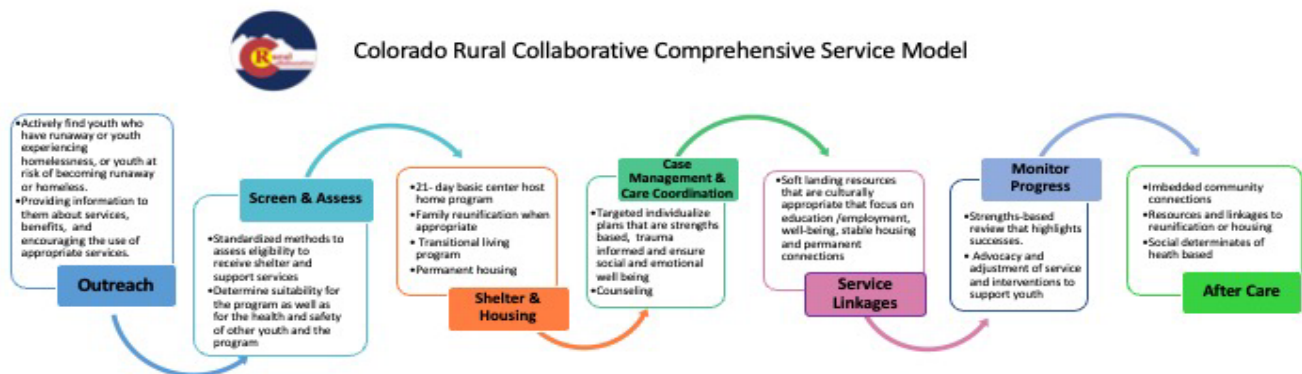
Table 3. Demographics of Enrolled Youth		
	Number of Youth	% of Youth
Gender (N=128)		
Male	61	48%
Female	64	50%
Trans or Nonbinary	3	2%
Sexual Orientation (N=91)		
Heterosexual	69	76%
Gay or Lesbian	3	3%
Bisexual	10	11%
Questioning, Unsure, Other	9	10%
Race/Ethnicity (N=128)		
American Indian Only	15	12%
Black or African-American Only	2	2%
Hispanic or Latinx	43	34%
White Only	68	53%
Has Reported Disability (N=79)	34	43%

Age at Intake (N=131)	Average	18.0 years
	Median	18.1 years

Services

RC’s comprehensive service model (see figure 4) focuses on social and emotional well-being, where youth are connected with providers to help with health care (primary, substance use, mental health), personal safety, trafficking, and sexually risky behaviors; permanent connections where youth experience ongoing attachments to families, communities, schools, and other social networks; education/ employment where youth connect to school or vocational training programs, improve interviewing and job attainment skills to obtain employment; and safe and stable housing where youth transition to safe and stable housing including moving in with family, when appropriate, or other permanent supportive housing.

Figure 4.



Services were tracked in the CRCMIS and HMIS. In all, 58% of youth received some case management services while enrolled in an RC program; the remaining percentage may have also received services, however, may not have been tracked within the system. Services ranged from referrals, general case management, advising youth on various outcome areas, or providing direct financial assistance (supportive services).

Table 4. Case Management Services Overview

	Youth (N = 80)
Case Management (Services)	
Enrolled Youth Receiving Services	58%

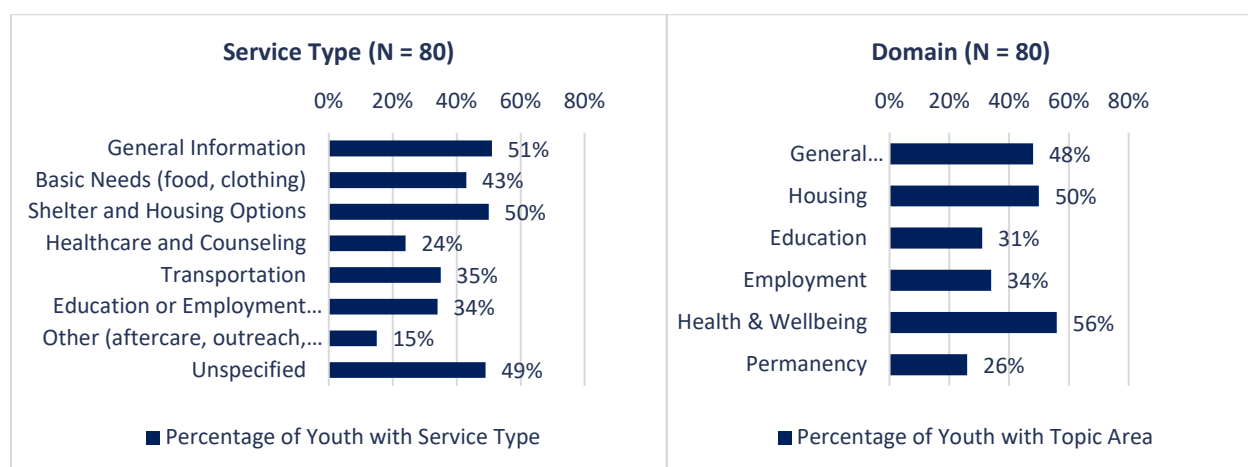
Total Services Provided	542
Average per Youth (of those receiving)	6.8

Service Types and Domains

The RC provides services that align with the framework created by the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness. Youth are provided services under the broad categories of basic needs, housing, health and well-being, education/employment and supportive connections. These services vary depending upon the youth’s needs and the resources available in the community. The RC provided the following services to youth:

- Shelter/housing options (50%) and general information (51%) were the most common services provided to youth. Youth most commonly (56%) sought out health and well-being services.

Figure 5. Service Types and Domains



Many service areas overlapped with one another. For example, a Case Management record that recorded the type of service as both “medical care” and “transportation,” might be that a Site Coordinator drove the youth to a COVID testing facility. The following are examples of the services provided, when recorded in greater detail through Case Management notes:

- Emergency shelter, motels, funds for tent/camping
- Locating housing options
- Housing paperwork
- Applications to services
- Meals and groceries
- Transportation, direct or public vouchers
- Job applications, resumes, interview prep
- Finding health or mental health providers
- Hospital and emergency care
- Check-ins/Aftercare
- Budgeting and banking

Outcomes

The RC aligns outcomes with those defined by the U.S. Inter-agency Council on Homelessness (USICH), including housing, employment/education, health and well-being and supportive connections/permanency. Outcomes related to these four domains are detailed in the section below.

Education and Employment

- 23% of youth were employed at baseline, while 57% were at the most recent follow-up.
- Approximately 7% of youth reported having a high school diploma, GED, or some type of degree or certificate at baseline, while 22% had one at the most recent follow-up.

Table 7. Education and Employment Outcomes		
	% on Baseline (N=137)	% on Most Recent Aftercare (N=33)
Has degree (GED, HS education, or vocation)	6.6%	22%
Currently enrolled in education or training	32%	38%
Employment		
Full time	5%	21%
Part time or seasonal	18%	36%
No	33%	40%

Housing Stability

- There was a substantial decrease in youth that reported being homeless, couch surfing, or staying at a hotel, motel, or shelter from approximately one-third at program entry to only 6% following involvement in the rural collaborative.
- Aftercare surveys are required to be completed in CRCMIS at 30,60, and 90 days post program exit. The Aftercare survey data recorded in CRCMIS is lacking in consistency and is something that is being addressed through monthly monitoring calls. For this annual report, the housing outcomes are reported from HMIS enrollment and exit survey data.

Table 8. Housing Outcomes		
Housing Situation	Program Enrollment (N = 121)	Exit Destination HMIS (N = 68)
Foster, group home, residential treatment, ILA	2%	6%
Home of family member or friend	59%	74%
Own home or apartment	4%	10%
Homeless, couch surfing, motel, care, shelter	33%	6%
Other	3%	4%

* Percentage is based on the number of valid responses for each question

Health and Well-being

- Youth reported improved access to a variety of health services at most recent aftercare.

Table 9. Health and Well-being Outcomes		
	Baseline (N= 76)	Most Recent Aftercare (N = 29)
Has Health Insurance	83%	93%
Know Where to Go to Access or Address	88%	96%

Mental Health Services	83%	96%
Personal Safety Concerns		
Visited a doctor, ER, or Urgent Care in past 12 months	50%	76%

Supportive Connections

Baseline and Aftercare measures also attempted to capture if the youth felt they had adequate support from adults who could provide them with help and support. Most (81%) of youth at Baseline felt they had someone they could count on in times of need; at the time of the most recent Aftercare survey, nearly all youth (92%) responded that they had such connections. Additionally, the majority (96%) of youth on the Aftercare surveys responded that they’d been in contact with their case manager or RC professional in the past 30 days, and all these youth said that they received the support they wanted from that interaction.

Coping Skills

Responses from the Aftercare surveys also tracked measures of youth coping skills by reporting how confident they felt in their ability to adapt to problems and stressors in their life.

- Youth reported the most confidence in their ability to “sort out what can be changed or not” and the least confidence in their ability to “take [their] mind off unpleasant thoughts.”

Table 50. Level of confidence in Coping Skills

Youth responding with “I feel very/moderately/a little confident in my ability to . . .”	30 Days	60 Days	90 Days	% Across All Aftercare Surveys
Get emotional support from friends and family (N = 45)	16	9	9	76%
Sort out what can be changed or not (N = 47)	16	12	9	79%
Break an upsetting problem into smaller parts (N = 48)	15	12	9	75%
Try other solutions to problems (N = 44)	15	11	8	77%
Take my mind off unpleasant thoughts (N = 47)	14	11	7	68%
Resist the impulse to act hastily under pressure (N = 42)	14	10	7	74%

Feedback from Sites

For the annual report on the RC, the research team conducted one on one interviews with site leads and supervisors at six sites. These interviews were completed in early 2023 over zoom and lasted approximately one hour with each site. The interviews were structured as an open-ended discussion with an interview guide developed by the research team to guide the questions on key topics related to opinions and feedback on the structure of the RC including challenges and successes in being part of the RC. Interviewers were eliciting feedback on the design of the RC and how their site fits into the overall structure. The interviews concluded with comments about any changes or suggestions for improvement that they have for being part of the Rural Collaborative and how service delivery may be adjusted to improve serving homeless youth in rural Colorado. Key takeaways from the site interviews are highlighted below.

There are many challenges to identifying youth that are at risk of or are homeless in Rural Colorado. RC organizations often lean on referrals from other agencies and word of mouth to get connected with youth in need of services. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated this challenge when youth were physically cut off from schools, a major referral source. A longtime site lead and McKinney-Vento Liaison that serves a large rural/frontier region of Northeast Colorado summarized the difficulties in locating and serving rural homeless youth best...

“There’s nowhere for young people to go for services in rural areas of Colorado. We find them getting in trouble or getting arrested for sleeping in an abandoned silo. A lot of kids get arrested because they are trespassing, then they get fined, which leads to a criminal record. We find that people that help the most are the ones that have the least. [Because of the RC] We are able to send funds to Host Homes, its organic and they know the person. We have a list of LGBTQ-friendly places in rural areas. There’s not a long list or even openings, but typically its parents who have an LGBTQ youth who open their homes to our kids. We have to travel one hour or more to access services to some youth in remote areas. Some churches support and dedicate a room. Lots of other communities there isn’t any availability. There’s a philosophical part to these youth who are hard workers and want to “do it on their own”. Don’t need help from the government, etc... mentality. We don’t have nearly enough but it is really great to have the RC funding because it is more flexible. Some of the other programs require so much bureaucracy to access and administer.”

-Site Supervisor, Rural Collaborative

Organizations also face many challenges in serving youth even after they are enrolled in the RC. Site supervisors noted that youth “often disappear and are unreachable” and “if you don’t have them housed, you can’t find them.” Additionally, sites reported being at or over capacity in terms of workload for staff.

“If we had the means to shelter youth...my son just [met] two other boys who told him that they had been sleeping in the dugouts at the baseball park. It’s ‘hurt you’ cold right now...we need it, we need a youth shelter.”

-Site Supervisor, Rural Collaborative

When it comes to services, the largest challenge by far is finding housing for youth. There is very limited availability in rural areas and housing is difficult to afford, even with vouchers. Many organizations depend on host homes, however the COVID-19 pandemic had negative impacts on their availability due to health (space restrictions) and economic (job loss for hosts) concerns.

All sites emphasized the need for more housing resources and many suggested that having their own shelter would greatly improve their ability to serve youth. One site supervisor explained that “when a kid has housing, you can focus on things like finding employment over let’s say the next couple of weeks.

When you take a kid that doesn’t have a home, you don’t have a couple of weeks.”

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional challenges to organizations in their efforts to provide services, such as limiting the availability of housing and forcing staff to communicate remotely with youth. Most sites noted a sharp increase in the number of youths needing services during the pandemic and believed that social isolation had a profound impact on youth leading to “a mental health crisis.” The additional funding available due to COVID-19 has been crucial to organizations’ ability to meet the needs of youth.

Considering the many challenges that organizations face, cross-system and cross-county collaboration is key to serving runaway and homeless youth in rural Colorado. The RC connects organizations and provides the knowledge necessary to serve this population. Site supervisors noted that the RC is “incredibly important,” “a huge guide [that] helps me think outside the box for options,” and “has allowed us to serve many more youth than we ever could have on our own.”

“RC provides us with connections, and as we navigate serving homeless youth, it [RC] helps build supports and services and we are able to learn from the other counties who are also doing this work. The RC has been able to bring in resources that we would have never had access to.....bring in services to our rural area and serve the runaway and homeless youth population.”

-Site Supervisor, Rural Collaborative

Summary and Lessons Learned

Youth homelessness is an often-hidden problem in rural communities. Youth who are at risk of or are experiencing homelessness typically receive help from systems they are connected to such as schools and other government agencies. But there are many youth who are unattached to these agencies, and they are left without services and supports. In Colorado, the Rural Collaborative was formed to identify and serve those youth who are unstably housed or homeless and lack services and supports across rural areas of the State.

Being part of a collaborative allows rural sites with limited resources to be more agile and responsive to needs. It can be challenging for rural sites to get the needed attention and resources directed to them because of the relatively small number of youths they serve compared to programs centered in large metropolitan areas. The RC serves as a unified voice in statewide conversations around services and supports to address youth homelessness.

During this reporting period, the Rural Collaborative served 137 homeless youth across Colorado’s rural counties. The RC represents 7 regions in 31 rural and frontier counties in Colorado. Lessons learned from this reporting period include:

- The Basic Center Program was the most common program providing services for youth. Most youth are identified for services through street outreach, school systems, or other community agencies.
- Site supervisors also noted that word of mouth was a common referral strategy in rural areas, as many youths heard about their organizations through friends that had already received services.

- Youth receiving services in the RC identified 4 risk factors on average, with the most common being “mom or dad ever in jail,” “became homeless because of violence, running away or religious differences,” and “used marijuana ever.”
- While approximately 60% of youth enrolled in the RC received some case management services, many others might have also received services through a brief contact (supported by SOP or other state sponsored funding) that have not been entered into the system. Shelter/housing options and general information were the most provided services for youth.

The RC seeks to reduce youth homelessness and provide supports and services to youth so they can achieve positive outcomes. The RC reported very positive outcomes for youth enrolled in their services as measured across four domains: housing, health and well-being, education and employment, and supportive connections/relational permanency. Specifically, the RC reported:

- There was a substantial decrease in youth that reported being homeless, couch surfing, or staying at a hotel, motel, or shelter following enrollment in RC.
- Youth reported better access to physical and mental health services at follow-up.
- After receiving RC services, youth were much more likely to be employed and to hold a high school diploma, GED, or some type of degree or certificate.
- A majority of youth maintained close contact with their case manager or RC professional.

Site leads who were interviewed for this report provided some lessons learned from serving youth during the past year, which spanned the COVID-19 pandemic. They report that:

- Locating youth in rural Colorado can be extremely difficult and organizations must rely on referrals from other agencies and word of mouth.
- Housing youth can be incredibly challenging but acts as a stabilizing force and helps organizations provide other important services to youth.
- The COVID-19 pandemic led to more youth needing services, less housing resources available, and an increased need for mental-health services for youth.

The RC is a unique collective impact initiative that brings together runaway and homeless youth serving agencies in rural Colorado. By combining together to form a collaborative group the program is better able to combine resources, apply for funding and serve homeless youth in rural areas in a systematic, coordinated manner that leads to positive outcomes for youth. Interviews conducted with site leads that make up the RC provided valuable insight into their motivations and the benefits of being part of the RC. Sites that make up the RC report that being part of the coordinated effort allows them to learn from each other, pool resources which ultimately allows them to better identify and serve youth in their communities.