

Building a True Safety Net

A Case Study of El Dorado County's Youth and Family Commission

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Introduction

At age 3, Tilly entered the foster care system in El Dorado County, California. She moved back and forth between foster care homes, rehabilitation facilities, and her family's home, rarely staying in the same place for more than a few months. It wasn't until she was 12 years old that Tilly was placed in a stable foster home with her siblings.

The instability Tilly experienced in her home life was compounded by disruption to her schooling. Many of Tilly's moves required her to switch schools — she didn't stay in the same school for a full year until the seventh grade. As a result of the constant disruption to her education, Tilly didn't learn to read until the sixth grade, and she always felt like she was playing catch-up with her peers.

Many adults came in and out of Tilly's life during this time period as well, including several social workers, dozens of teachers and other school staff, and various staff members of the different agencies working to support her.¹

Tilly's experience is hardly unique. The numerous home placements, countless adults, and disrupted education trajectory is a common symptom of a problem underlying social services in communities across the country: agency fragmentation.

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The term “agency fragmentation” refers to the siloed structure of agencies in cities and counties across the nation. Within any given community, child and family-serving agencies and organizations including child services, health services, education services, police and probation, and nonprofits operate largely independently from one another. It’s a bureaucratic issue involving the challenges of sharing data and information between government agencies. But it’s a fundamental problem that prevents students from getting the help they need.

Mitigating, and ultimately eliminating, agency fragmentation is crucial to ensure that vulnerable youth receive comprehensive, streamlined support services to help them grow into successful, fulfilled adults.

The purpose of this case study is to provide more background and detail about El Dorado County’s work to address agency fragmentation through a two-year partnership with Bellwether Education Partners that began in fall 2017. The County’s efforts ultimately resulted in the creation of a new commission focused specifically on reducing fragmentation among agencies and ensuring the County’s young people have access to the services they need. Through a series of interviews with key participants and in-depth analysis of project artifacts and deliverables, this case study highlights four key components of El Dorado’s approach and surfaces lessons that other districts, counties, and states ought to consider as they work to mitigate the effects of agency fragmentation on vulnerable young people, which includes children who are experiencing barriers to their education such as foster care placement, homelessness, involvement in the juvenile justice system, unmet mental and physical health needs, and other drivers of chronic instability.

Context

El Dorado County is situated in northern California, about a two-hour drive east from Sacramento and extending to the Nevada border at Lake Tahoe. It’s a small, rural community that performs well on many indicators of well-being compared to state and national averages (see Tables 1-2). Based on the most recently available Census Bureau data, the poverty rate of 8% in El Dorado County is well below the national average of 12%. The County’s median household income of \$80,582, which has increased by \$11,000 since 2015, is \$20,000 above the national median of \$60,293 (in comparison to \$53,889 in 2015). Statewide, nearly a quarter of K-12 students are in foster care, experiencing homelessness, or English language learners, compared to 11% of K-12 students in El Dorado.

Table 1 Comparison of County, State, and National Demographic and Income Data

	El Dorado County ²	California ³	National ⁴
Total population	192,843	39,512,223	328,239,523
Percent white	88.90%	72.10%	76.50%
Percent Black or African American	1.00%	6.50%	13.40%
Percent American Indian and Alaskan Native	1.30%	1.60%	1.30%
Percent Asian	4.70%	15.30%	5.90%
Percent Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	0.20%	0.50%	0.20%
Percent Hispanic or Latino	12.90%	39.30%	18.30%
Percent two or more races	3.80%	3.90%	2.70%
Median household income	\$80,582	\$71,228	\$60,293
Percent of persons in poverty	8.10%	12.80%	11.80%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau population estimates, 2019

Table 2 Comparison of County, State, and National School Information and Student Characteristics

	El Dorado County	California	National
Number of school districts	15 ⁵	1,037 ⁶	13,598 ⁷
Number of public schools	67 ⁸	10,521 ⁹	98,277 ¹⁰
Number of students enrolled in public schools	29,518 ¹¹	6,186,278 ¹²	50.9 million ¹³
Percent of population under age 18	19.80% ¹⁴	22.70% ¹⁵	22.40% ¹⁶
Percent of youth in foster care	1.67% ¹⁷	0.76% ¹⁸	0.86% ¹⁹
Percent of youth experiencing homelessness	2.62% ²⁰	4.35% ²¹	8.27% ²²
Number of incarcerated youth per 100,000 youth	198 ²³	134 ²⁴	138 ²⁵
Percent of English language learner students	6.60% ²⁶	20.80% ²⁷	10.10% ²⁸

El Dorado residents describe the County as tight-knit and people-centric, due in part to its small population that is largely concentrated in a few clusters, despite the County's large geographic span. These relationships can help offset some of the challenges that larger communities face in meeting the needs of youth experiencing homelessness, incarceration, foster care placement, or other disruptions that might have a magnifying effect on one another. For example, the adults working in El Dorado's child-serving organizations tend to know one another and the families they're serving, which can facilitate access to information and service delivery. As David Ashby, executive director of local nonprofit New Morning Youth & Family Services, explained, "We have a rural community mindset, it's very relationship-based. If you know who to talk to, you can get the information you need. This works well for the most part."²⁹

Yet despite the better-than-average numbers, many of El Dorado's young people struggle. For example, in 2018-19, nearly 1,300 El Dorado youth were homeless or in foster care.³⁰ Moreover, despite the tight-knit nature of the community, the County's child and family-serving agencies and organizations lack formalized processes to share data and information on the young people in their care. As Ashby went on to explain, the relationship-based approach "is not a systems-based approach, so it breaks down when the people leave or if an individual doesn't know something." This fragmentation is especially problematic for young people receiving care from multiple agencies simultaneously or in quick succession. These youth must navigate multiple bureaucracies, programmatic requirements, and adults (social workers, judges, lawyers, therapists, etc.) all at the same time, creating additional burdens for them and for their families.

Leaders in El Dorado have been grappling with the issue of agency fragmentation for years. In 1990, for example, county government, schools, and community-based organizations created the Children and Families Network (CFN) to formalize countywide, inter-agency collaboration.³¹ Over the next several decades, CFN made important progress including developing an annual interagency master plan to address community needs and creating children's resource teams. These teams, composed of staff from probation, public health, mental health, social services, the district attorney's office, schools, and community-based organizations, worked to support families with children simultaneously involved in the juvenile justice system and other service systems.³²

CFN's main goal was to improve delivery of key agency services, minimize silos between agency funding mechanisms that resulted in fragmentation, and find ways to effectively collaborate to better help high-need students and their families. These attempts led to some codified agreements between agencies, but in looking back at this work, community leaders identified a number of reasons why these efforts did not produce a lasting, sustained impact as leaders initially hoped. One of the consistent themes was lack of buy-in from all agencies to share their time and resources with one another. Agencies were concerned about the limited capacity they had to serve the population of students under their care, and new initiatives would potentially require sacrificing resources they did not have to collaborate with other agencies.

The County's school attendance review board (SARB) has also played an important role in creating a support system for young people who struggle. SARB identifies youth who may be in need of additional support due to poor school attendance, and then works to keep track of them, check in regularly, and provide supports as necessary. Sheila Silan, current SARB coordinator, described why this process has worked well: "El Dorado has had its SARB program since the late 1970s, so we have a long tenure. That's a luxury. We have good relationships with all of the school districts in the County and we work well and in collaboration with law enforcement and others as needed."³³

While these efforts have helped mitigate challenges with fragmentation and lay the groundwork for interagency collaboration, they haven't resulted in the long-term, systemic change that's needed to truly address agency fragmentation in El Dorado.

In 2013, many years after El Dorado County launched CFN and SARB, the California legislature enacted sweeping changes to how the state funds education. The new formula, called the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), grants local education agencies greater fiscal autonomy to serve the most vulnerable students.³⁴ In order to ensure accountability, the LCFF requires an aligned Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP).³⁵ The legislation included new requirements like explicitly naming youth in foster care as a subgroup in the education accountability framework and allocating resources to improve the educational outcomes of youth in foster care. These new requirements created an opportunity for El Dorado County's leaders to develop innovative and creative solutions to support these groups of young people.

Around the same time, El Dorado County's leadership underwent significant changes. Over the course of several years, newly elected and appointed people filled the positions of County superintendent of education, chief probation officer, chief administrative officer, and director of health and human services. The combination of new leadership and a shifting state policy environment created an opportunity and appetite to bring together government and community leaders to coordinate systems on behalf of students who have experienced the most significant disruptions to their education.

In 2017, the County teamed with Bellwether Education Partners to launch what became a two-year-long project to identify the core issues underlying agency fragmentation in the County and determine a solution and a path forward. Ultimately, this project resulted in the creation of the El Dorado County Commission for Youth and Families, which is intended to address the lack of centralized communication and data systems necessary to provide the coordinated level of service that would maximize positive outcomes for all young people and their families. The Commission aims to coordinate an integrated, transparent, and data-driven system of services so that all young people have access to the social, emotional, educational, and/or health services they need.

The rest of this case study focuses on the core components of the process leading up to the creation of the Commission for Youth and Families and shares lessons learned from the leaders and stakeholders who participated over the course of the two years.

A New Approach to Addressing Agency Coordination

El Dorado County has dozens of government agencies and nonprofit organizations that serve youth and families. The path toward creating the Commission for Youth and Families required engaging nearly all of these agencies. To do that, El Dorado leaders and Bellwether team members developed a process that involved bringing together the County's various child-serving agencies, gathering extensive input from key stakeholders, and using in-person meetings to develop, revise, improve, and sharpen potential solutions.

Bellwether and the County pursued a four-pronged approach, grounded in human-centered design (see sidebar).³⁶ The four components of the approach are:

Component 1: Engage youth at the outset

Component 2: Learn from and engage with a wide range of stakeholders

Component 3: Align on a shared definition of the problem

Component 4: Allow solutions to develop organically from stakeholders to ensure buy-in

Sidebar 1

Human-Centered Design

Human-centered design is a method used to develop solutions for problems that focus on the needs, contexts, behaviors, and emotions of the people that the solutions will serve. It is an emerging approach to public policy development that shows promise when deployed thoughtfully. It differs from traditional research and policy processes since it starts with the unique perspectives and needs of the beneficiaries of the tool, product, or policy, and designs for those needs. Within the context of this work, human-centered design offers strategies for developing policies and systems that are created with and responsive to the people they serve.

To learn more about human-centered design, see Bellwether's report, [Creating More Effective, Efficient, and Equitable Education Policies with Human-Centered Design](#), or website, [Design Methods for Education Policy](#).

Component 1: Engage youth at the outset

Young people are rarely given the opportunity to provide feedback to the systems that serve them or to share their stories with the adults making decisions on their behalf. Too often, this results in misalignment between those experiencing a problem and those trying to solve that same problem. However, El Dorado's leaders understood the importance of engaging young people at the outset to help define the problem, rather than gathering their input as a supplement to information from adults who normally have the final say. They wanted to ensure that student experiences were at the center of their decisions.

To ensure young people's needs were considered from the outset, the El Dorado and Bellwether team began its work by conducting a series of interviews with students who had experienced disruptions to their education pathways due to difficulties such as homelessness, foster care placement, or incarceration. These young people had firsthand experience navigating multiple agencies and programs and interacting with countless adults – core symptoms of agency fragmentation.

Several key themes arose from these conversations. The students commonly expressed frustration over having to work with several agencies to access the supports they needed to successfully transition between schools, find support for their mental or physical health needs, address family struggles, or ensure they were on track to graduate. For instance, some students had difficulty contacting their social workers, who were frequently over capacity. One student explained, "My social worker doesn't pick up her phone because she has so many cases."³⁷

Many had been reassigned social workers several times; one had a dozen different social workers over 12 years of school. Constant turnover in social workers results in further setbacks as students have to build a new relationship and bring each new social worker up to speed on their needs, which often requires that young person to share hard moments and traumatic situations over and over again.

Furthermore, some students experienced geographic transitions across county lines. Every move required agencies to collect documentation each time, and agencies frequently took a while to reply to students' questions and concerns. One student shared his struggles in working with his social worker to collect proper documentation after several moves in and out of El Dorado County: "When you're in and out of several counties, it's hard. I needed my birth certificate and it took forever. My social worker can never find it, or they're gone when I need it. They won't let me keep it because I'll lose it, but it's a problem not to have it because I have to fight with people in every new school about why I don't have it."³⁸

These themes, and the underlying issues they surfaced, formed the basis of the rest of El Dorado's and Bellwether's work together.

Component 2: Learn from and engage with a wide range of stakeholders

After speaking with young people, El Dorado and Bellwether pursued a three-phase approach to engage agency staff to build upon the understanding of fragmentation in the County. The three phases were:

Phase 1: Learn from county leaders and staff

Phase 2: Build a leadership team

Phase 3: Convene stakeholders on a regular basis

Phases 1 and 3 helped ensure that county stakeholders were engaged regularly throughout the process and given opportunities to share information, offer suggestions and ideas, and provide feedback on the direction of the work. Phase 2 ensured that there was a group of county leaders deeply engaged in the work and committed to seeing it through to the end, even in the midst of other priorities.

Phase 1: Learn from county leaders and staff

After first engaging with El Dorado's youth, the next step was to speak with leaders and staff members working in El Dorado's child-serving agencies. Bellwether conducted dozens of interviews with staff members over the phone and in person with the goal of learning how agency fragmentation affected each agency and how they approached these issues. A key theme that surfaced through these interviews was the difficulty of ensuring young people don't get lost as they transition between systems: "[The lack of integration across agencies] is what makes this job hard. I have a front-row seat to see where it all falls apart. There are often signs years in advance but kids fall into these gaps and you just can't get to them."³⁹

In addition to participating in interviews, county staff members provided the Bellwether team with documents and information about the different agencies and organizations in the County that offer programs and services to young people. Bellwether compiled the information from the interviews and document reviews into a single "readiness assessment." This readiness assessment summarized the County's current programs and practices in supporting youth and surfaced a number of important findings that would guide the work as it moved forward:

- El Dorado County did not centralize data collection for youth served by multiple agencies. For instance, students who might have been served by the Health and Human Services Agency, placed in foster care in the El Dorado County Child Welfare Program, and interacted with the Probationary Department had their information in three separate agencies' systems with no guarantee that any one agency knew that the same child was being serviced simultaneously or in quick succession by other agencies.
- The County did not collect data on how frequently a child might bounce from one agency to another, how many students switch schools during the course of an academic year, or how long students might spend in transition not enrolled in any school.

- There was no centralized or systematic way to determine when students came into contact with local community-based organizations or faith-based services, or whether a child was receiving support from one of these organizations while simultaneously receiving custodial services from state agencies.
- Data on the academic performance or long-term outcomes of system-involved youth were lacking. Even if data did exist within a specific agency, the data were not readily accessible or transferrable to other agencies, making concerted coordination efforts challenging.

The findings from the readiness assessment served as the foundation for subsequent stakeholder meetings and helped drive participants' thinking about possible solutions that meaningfully address the specific challenges that arise in the County as a result of agency fragmentation.

Phase 2: Build a leadership team

As Bellwether was conducting interviews with county leaders and compiling the findings into the readiness assessment, it worked closely with the El Dorado County Office of Education (the leaders of which initially engaged Bellwether in this work) to build a leadership team. As Bellwether was an external facilitator of the process and not part of the community, it was imperative that the County had a set of leaders who owned the process and took on the responsibility for seeing it through to a solution.

The leadership team ultimately included the County superintendent of schools; the deputy superintendent; the director of curriculum, instruction, and accountability; the executive director of First 5 El Dorado, a commission focused on supporting the County early childhood education system; and the County's chief probation officer. This team included substantial representation from the County Office of Education because of its broad reach — the vast majority of the County's young people come into contact with the education system at some point.

This small group of leaders met regularly between stakeholder meetings (described below) to process input from the larger stakeholder group. They also helped shape the agendas for the stakeholder meetings and provided regular updates to key county leaders, like the chief administrative officer. This structure helped expedite the process and ensure continuity between stakeholder meetings.

Phase 3: Convene stakeholders on a regular basis

Fragmentation is a problem that affects all agencies, so any solution must also fit the needs of all agencies. To ensure that agency leaders and staff had ongoing opportunities to offer input, ideas, and feedback as solutions evolved, Bellwether and the newly established leadership team developed a plan to meet regularly with county stakeholders. These meetings included representatives from the Health and Human Services Agency, the Foster Youth Education coordinator, the School Attendance Review Board (SARB) coordinator, the Homeless Youth coordinator, the chief probation officer of the El Dorado County Probation Department, and the juvenile court judge, as well as any other agencies, foundations, or organizations that played a significant role in supporting students who have experienced significant disruptions to their education.

Stakeholders met in person four times over the course of the two-year engagement (see Appendix 1 for more information on the timing and goals of these meetings). The in-person time was critical, as while these organizations might interact to resolve day-to-day issues, they had not been brought together in one place to specifically develop solutions addressing fragmentation across their respective agencies. As Leslie Griffith, assistant director of Child Welfare Services, noted, “I really valued the in-person relationship-building opportunities in the convenings.”⁴⁰ Strengthening relationships and building trust among these individuals proved to be a crucial component of developing a viable solution to agency fragmentation and creating the buy-in needed to see that solution through to completion.

While the overarching goal of these meetings and the entire project was to identify a solution or set of solutions to agency fragmentation, the exact goals of each session varied depending on what information the leadership team needed from participants. Bellwether facilitated these sessions and used human-centered design principles to solicit input, provide feedback, and surface key questions. In some cases, the direction of the work changed based on the contributions of the stakeholders during these in-person meetings.

Component 3: Clearly define the shared problem

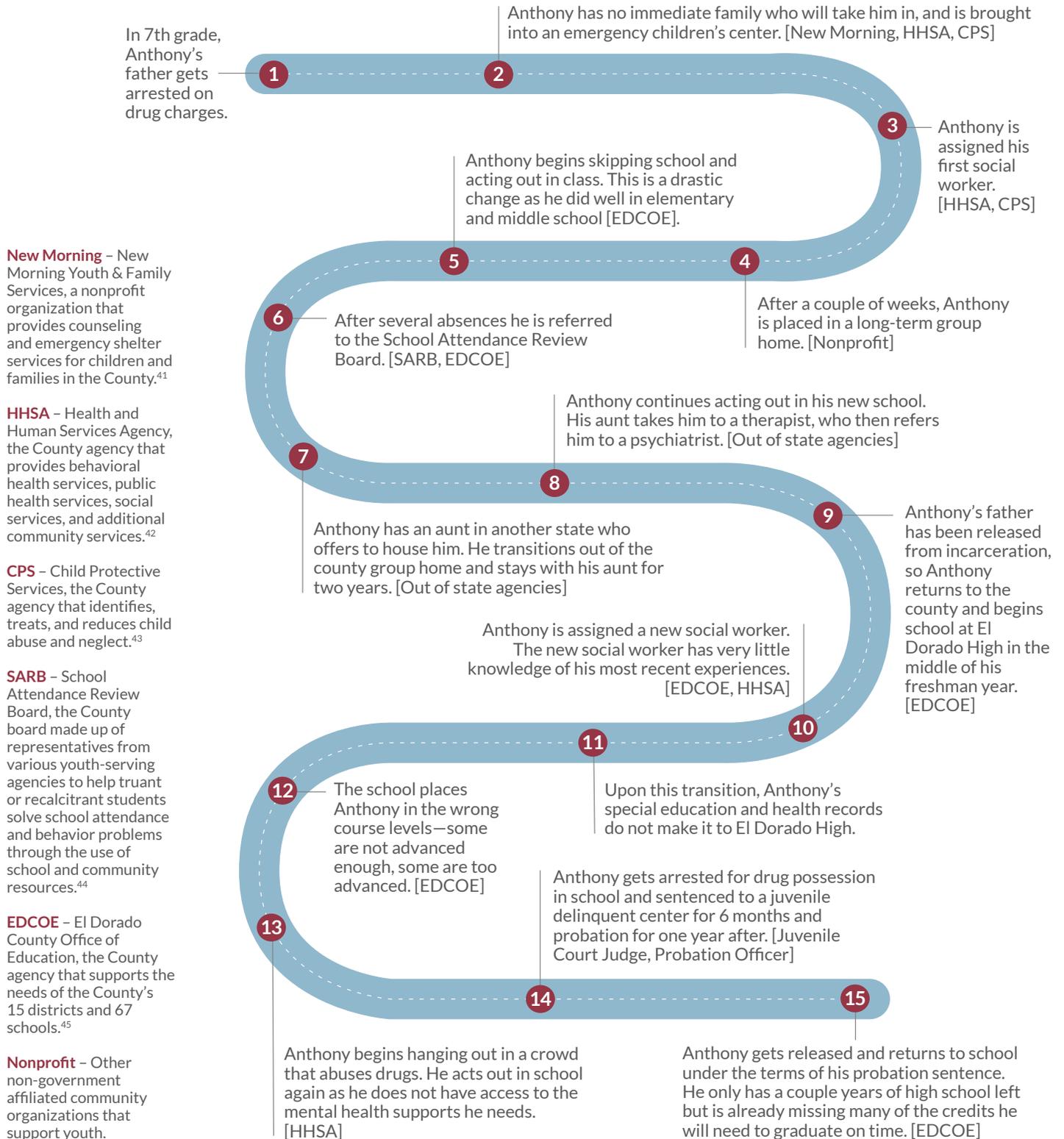
The interviews with youth and the process of putting together the readiness assessment were critical steps toward understanding the nature of agency fragmentation in El Dorado. However, in order to create a solution to agency fragmentation, it was crucial for agency stakeholders to develop a common understanding and definition of the problem they were trying to solve and a shared vision of what success would look like if they effectively solved that problem. To this end, the goals at the first stakeholder convening were to align on a definition of the problem and a statement of the intended impact.

The group of stakeholders took part in several human-centered design activities designed to prompt their thinking about how agency fragmentation manifests in El Dorado County. One of these activities was a journey map, which mapped the K-12 journey of a hypothetical student who received assistance from different agencies over the course of his education (see Figure 1). Participants discussed opportunities where their agency or organization could care for the student through various life events, potential deficiencies they might encounter, and ways they could best help connect with the proper agency if the needs of the student should fall out of their specific jurisdiction.

Figure 1

Journey Map

Below is a sequence of events in the life of hypothetical student Anthony. Interactions with specific support agencies are noted in brackets.



This activity helped participants identify gaps and overlaps among the different agencies represented in the room, and served as a foundation for the development of the problem statement. Following this activity, participants worked in small groups to draft and refine two statements: a definition of the problem and a vision for success (the “intended impact” of their work together). Small groups rotated and provided feedback on the other statements. Several common themes surfaced among the different draft statements, which ultimately came together into a common problem statement and a common vision for the intended impact:

Problem Statement: El Dorado County partners lack the centralized communication and data systems necessary to provide the comprehensive, coordinated level of service that would maximize positive impacts for all young people and their families.

Intended Impact: By 2023, El Dorado County partners will consistently use an integrated, transparent, and data-driven system of services to ensure all young people have access to the social, emotional, educational, and/or health services they need.

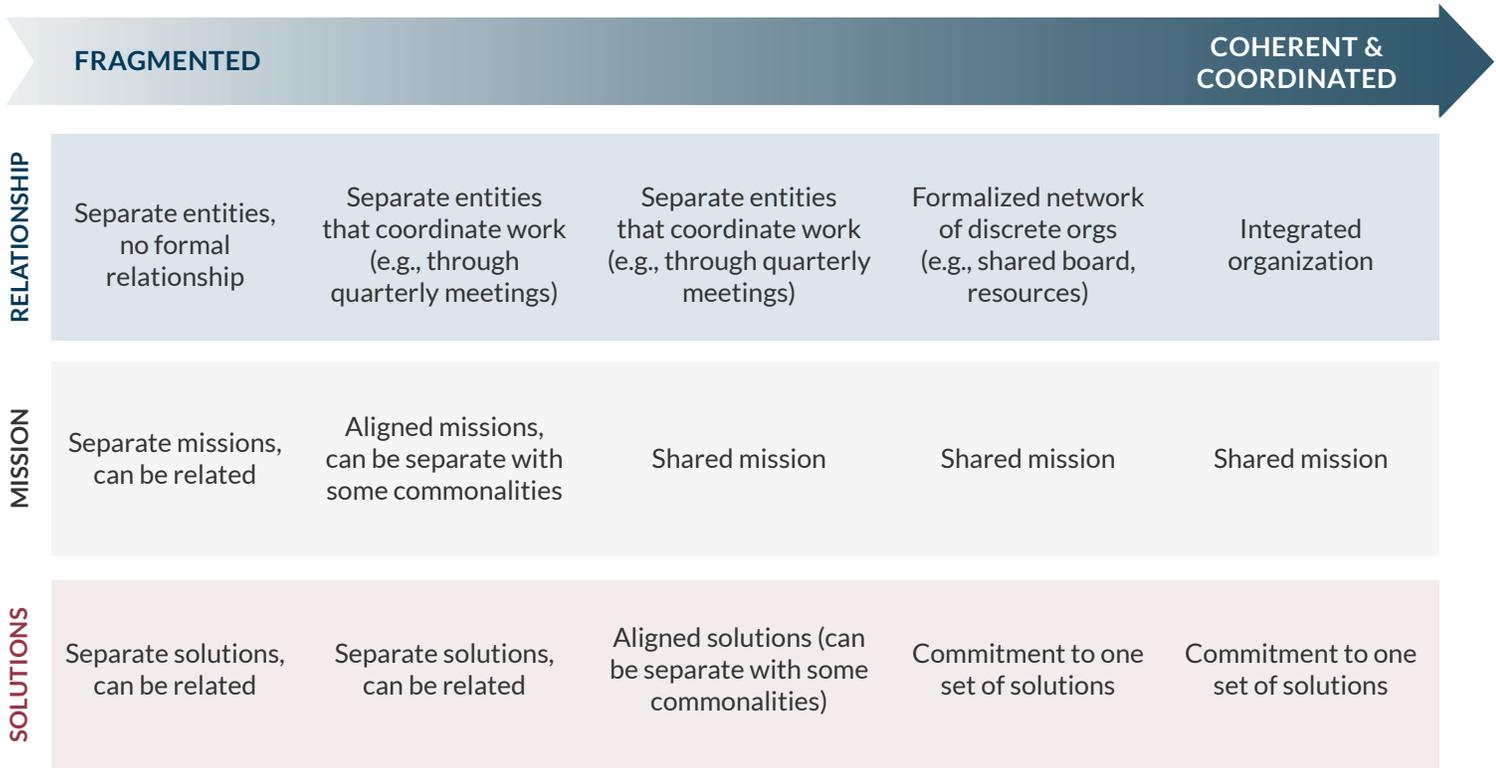
These two statements guided the rest of the group’s work together. They served as litmus tests against which all potential solutions were tested: Does this solution address the problem we defined at the outset? Will it get us to our intended impact? Without first aligning on these two points, the work to address agency fragmentation risked losing focus.

Component 4: Allow solutions to develop organically from stakeholders to ensure buy-in

Following the development of agreed-upon definitions of the problem and what success would look like, the work to develop a solution began. The stakeholders – who represented child-serving agencies and organizations across the County – first needed to consider the degree of collaboration and coordination they were willing to commit to in implementing a solution. To do that, stakeholders had to decide the extent to which they would operate as one cohesive body versus continuing to operate as individual agencies with minimal collaboration (see Figure 2). Ultimately, the majority of participants agreed that the current level of collaboration fell somewhere closer to operating as individual entities and that they were willing and able to do the work necessary to move toward a more formalized collaboration.

With all of those parameters in mind – a clear definition of the problem, what the intended impact is, and the level of cohesion agencies were willing to commit to – Bellwether guided the stakeholders through several activities over the course of two in-person convenings to develop, refine, and ultimately align on a solution.

Figure 2 > Spectrum of Agency Collaboration



It became clear early on that any solution must address two separate but related issues: cross-agency communication and cross-agency data collection. Through several different activities, including a gallery walk to learn about how other counties and states had attempted to address agency fragmentation and small-group brainstorming activities, stakeholders’ ideas began to converge around a single idea: creating a stand-alone office tasked with coordinating across agencies to ensure all students had access to the supports they needed.

With this broad solution in hand, the final convening sought to refine the idea and develop a proposal for a new commission. The proposal would include answers to four key questions:

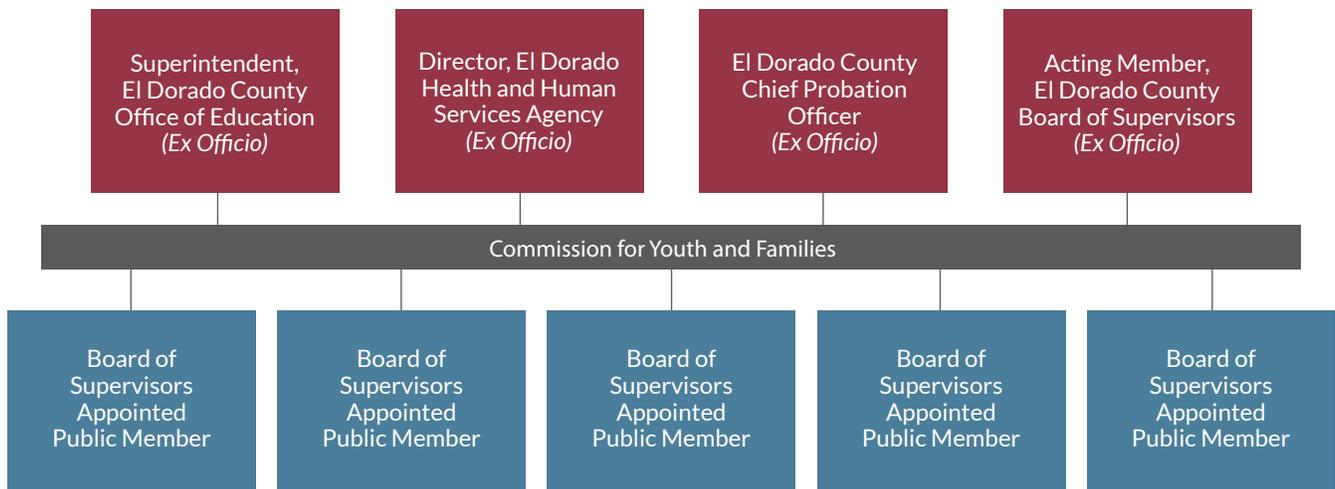
- 1 What is the purpose of the Commission?
- 2 Where will the Commission be housed?
- 3 What authority will the Commission have?
- 4 Who will be on the Commission?

Engaging stakeholders in all parts of the solution-designing process, including gathering their input on technical questions such as these, ensured that the solution represented the perspectives and ideas of participants and had buy-in from key community leaders.

Ultimately, stakeholders and the leadership team agreed on a proposed commission structure to present to the County Board of Supervisors, who would have final say over its existence. That proposal included answers to the four questions above: The purpose of the Commission would be to guide and oversee countywide communication and data coordination efforts. It would be housed in the County’s Chief Administrative Office (CAO) to give it strength, credibility, and greater potential for long-term sustainability. Finally, in order to ensure broad representation from across the County, the Commission members would consist of four permanent members made up of the El Dorado County chief probation officer, the acting member of the County Board of Supervisors, the County superintendent of schools, and the director of the Health & Human Services Agency, in addition to five public members appointed by the Board of Supervisors and nine alternate commissioners (see Figure 3). All commissioners will appoint alternate commissioners from the community, who will provide broad community representation and voice. At least one alternate commissioner should be 24 years of age or younger with life experiences similar to those the Commission aims to serve, and at least one alternate commissioner must have an immediate family member who has encountered life experiences similar to those the Commission aims to serve.

In June 2020, the Board of Supervisors appointed five public members who will serve on the Commission for one to two years. Once seated, the commissioners will select alternate commissioners and confirm the Commission’s bylaws.

Figure 3 > Structure of the Commission for Youth and Families



Note: Each appointed commissioner will select an alternate commissioner.

Calculating the “Cost of Doing Nothing”

As the leadership team and stakeholders worked to develop a coordinated approach to addressing fragmentation in the County, Bellwether was in parallel working to quantify the cost of the status quo. In other words, what is the County currently spending on services to support vulnerable youth? If the County were to reduce fragmentation, how much money could be repurposed into other activities to support the community?

Bellwether measured the impact of disruption and fragmentation as the “opportunity cost” of inaction: The difference between the dollars spent in the current system and the dollars spent in a future, coordinated system. To conduct this calculation, Bellwether accounted for several costs to the county associated with events that disrupt students’ education trajectories.

Immediate costs:

- Cost of foster care placement
- Cost of youth incarceration
- Cost of birth and child care
- Cost to house youth in homeless shelters

Long-term costs:

- Lost income as adults
- Cost to house adults in homeless shelters
- Cost of adult incarceration
- Use of public benefits

By calculating and comparing the cost of support for students with disrupted educational trajectories, and an “average” student’s trajectory, we estimated that **El Dorado spends approximately \$246 million to support each cohort of youth who experience disruption. Better coordinated supports could allow approximately \$137 million of projected spending, about \$746,000 per individual, to be repurposed over their lifetimes.**

See Appendix 2 for more detail on this analysis.

Lessons Learned

Agency fragmentation is a challenge that shows up in many different ways in communities across the nation. It's the result of a number of factors, including barriers to integration of human services such as funding limitations and bureaucracy or siloed approaches to addressing needs in which service agencies pursue their own set of goals, that have calcified over decades. The process described above highlights one county's approach to addressing fragmentation and developing a system to better support its most vulnerable young people. While local and state contexts may not allow for a step-by-step implementation of El Dorado County's process to success, the lessons learned through their work, discussed below, may be valuable and adaptable.

1 Strong leadership is vital.

The process described in this case study was not El Dorado's first attempt at addressing agency fragmentation. But the resulting commission, tasked with coordinating across the County's child-serving agencies, holds potential for more meaningful and sustainable changes than previous efforts. When asked what made this time different, participants by and large pointed to one thing: strong leadership. While the renewed focus on high-need students through California's LCFF provided a policy environment ripe for change, it was the leadership and commitment of El Dorado's agency heads who saw the opportunity and decided to act. Those leaders pushed the process through to a meaningful solution. As Brian Richart, El Dorado's chief probation officer and member of the leadership team, explained, "The primary reason this was an opportune time was due to the makeup of our leadership team. It takes the right mix of people to pull off systemic change and from my perspective, the right group was in place."⁴⁶

El Dorado's leaders not only had the vision to see that things could be done differently than in the past, but they also had the patience to keep pushing forward through a process that ultimately took two years.

The fact that key agency and political leadership was part of this process from the beginning was key to generating broader support and buy-in, as well. As El Dorado's SARB coordinator, Sheila Silan, explained, "Having elected officials in the room was important. We started, from the starting line, with key people who can fund, send authority, and create real change. Many of the middle management and front-line staff have had unsuccessful attempts at this work because they didn't have the 'bigwigs' in the room supporting the work."⁴⁷ The engagement of county leaders not only signaled support for the work, but ensured that the solution would have the support necessary to be enacted. Absent this strong support from leadership, it's unlikely the County would have gotten a new commission off the ground.

2 Generate solutions from the ground up from a wide range of stakeholders.

Bellwether and the El Dorado leadership team were deliberate from the outset about providing multiple opportunities for stakeholders to participate in the process, lend their expertise, ask questions, share concerns, and shape the final solution. Doing so was critical to developing buy-in for the work along the way, as well as for the final solution — the Commission for Youth and Families.

Rather than having Bellwether or the leadership team push a predetermined agenda or set of priorities, stakeholders were able to contribute their own ideas and surface real problems at the convenings. Gabrielle Marchini, director of curriculum, instruction, and accountability at the El Dorado County Office of Education and member of the leadership team, emphasized the importance of allowing stakeholders to develop their own solutions: “Through the convenings, the stakeholders were able to come up with the solutions on their own, rather than having solutions thrown at them. This was vital to developing buy-in.”⁴⁸ Allowing stakeholders to organically express their concerns that led to concrete solutions significantly increased the potential for sustained support and motivation to pursue the proposed solutions. As David Ashby, executive director of local nonprofit New Morning Youth & Family Services, explained, “In previous attempts at coordinating agencies, we didn’t include either all or the right people. When we did meet, there wasn’t any consensus about how to move forward.”⁴⁹ By establishing a stakeholder engagement process from the outset, Bellwether and the leadership team were able to avoid these past mistakes.

Even so, some participants would have liked to see even more participation from additional key stakeholders, namely students and families. While the work began by gathering students’ perspectives through interviews, some participants felt that those perspectives and voices could have been better integrated throughout the process. As Kathi Guerrero, executive director of First 5 El Dorado and member of the leadership team, explained, “We could have had more representation of students and families during this process. We could have asked partners to bring in those clients, parents, or students they work with into the process, or we could have designed parallel processes with a subset of parents and students with whom they could have facilitated a discussion.”⁵⁰ Doing so would have more deeply integrated the voices of those experiencing agency fragmentation into the process of developing a solution. Ed Manansala, County superintendent of schools, agreed, saying, “Student and family voice was an area we were aware we could have done better with through this process.”⁵¹

This perspective wasn’t shared by all participants, however. Kevin Monsma, deputy superintendent, noted, “While the design process didn’t have families and students directly involved, it might have been difficult to incorporate them in the moment, when the focus was at that 30,000-foot level.”⁵² Without proper support and guidance to engage, young people might be overwhelmed or confused by being asked to engage in such a bureaucratic process.

Participants' varying perspectives on the role of young people in the process highlight a key tension for this kind of work. On one hand, incorporating the voices and perspectives of the young people served by El Dorado's agencies is critical to the development of a solution that meets their needs. But on the other hand, bringing in students and asking them to share stories of the challenges and traumas they've faced cannot be taken lightly. Leaders must be prepared to engage young people thoughtfully and empathetically, and in ways that protect both their privacy and their mental and emotional well-being. The process of designing a bureaucratic structure to solve very tangible needs could be overwhelming or seem callous to students who have lived through, or are in the midst of, traumatic events. Human-centered design processes can help mitigate some of these concerns, but leaders need to be aware of the delicate balance they must strike between engaging and protecting young people as they seek to address agency fragmentation.

3 Use human-centered design methods.

All of the various components of this two-year process were grounded in human-centered design principles. That means that, starting with student interviews through the development of activities for stakeholder convenings, all activities were deliberately focused on centering the human experience. Doing so helped facilitate relationship-building, which ultimately created a greater sense of community and buy-in for the work as it progressed. As Ed Manansala explained, "The convenings provided greater understanding of what our partners actually do. We were able to go beyond, 'What is the purpose of your organization and who do you serve,' to actually appreciate and understand the mindsets of the leaders, as well as more tangible things like their accountability structures and funding."⁵³

In addition, while there was more work that could have been done to integrate student and family voices throughout the process, starting with their experiences helped keep the conversations grounded in the real-life experiences of the individuals that the County's agencies serve. Participants continued to refer back to "Anthony" from the journey map activity in the first convening to ask whether this solution helped him. The problem statement around which the stakeholder group initially rallied was informed by the experiences of young people, gathered through the initial set of interviews. Participants returned regularly to this problem statement as a litmus test for assessing potential solutions. Keeping young people at the center of the work, even as there was room for improvement, helped ensure the solution was centered on the needs, wants, and constraints of humans rather than on bureaucratic or governmental processes.

4 Take advantage of external facilitation.

One key difference between this attempt at addressing agency fragmentation and the County's previous attempts was the County's partnership with Bellwether to serve as a third-party facilitator. Stakeholders and the leadership team indicated that having an external partner facilitate the process, from initial research and synthesis of the County's "current state" in the readiness assessment through design and facilitation of the convenings, helped participants take a step back, explore new ideas, and think outside of the box. David Ashby explained, "Bellwether's process helped agencies focus on the question of 'How do we improve things for kids in the community broadly?' rather than focusing on 'What does this mean for my agency?' That was incredibly important."⁵⁴ Kathi Guerrero concurred, explaining, "External expertise helped push us out of our bubble and forced us to think differently."⁵⁵

In addition, the outside expertise ensured that work to move the process forward continued in the time between leadership team meetings and stakeholder meetings. The El Dorado-based participants in both of those groups already had full-time jobs in their respective agencies and organizations. It was Bellwether's job to keep the agency fragmentation work moving forward even as participants had competing priorities.

Looking Ahead

El Dorado's Commission for Youth and Families is still very much in its infancy. Much remains to be seen about its ability to create meaningful coordination across agencies to better serve the County's vulnerable young people. Participants in the process are largely hopeful about the work the Commission could do in the future, though there are some underlying concerns. The biggest concerns relate to momentum, and the effect that pausing work in light of the coronavirus pandemic may have on the Commission's forward motion. Big decisions are still outstanding, including what, exactly, the Commission will be responsible for doing or overseeing. Ed Manansala explains: "We have work to do to establish the Commission. We're in a vulnerable state right now. Moving forward, our focus will need to be on ensuring we get and keep the right people onto the Commission and that we address the key objectives that are at hand."⁵⁶

While the pause is understandable given the current public health crisis, participants express concern that it won't be as simple as picking back up where they left off pre-pandemic. With likely budget cuts on the horizon and the County facing other pressing priorities, it's of real concern that the Commission may get put on the back burner. If it's deprioritized, there's potential that it won't get picked back up, or won't develop the roots in the County necessary to withstand future financial or political challenges or leadership transitions. Chief Richart shared his concerns: "We haven't developed enough resilience into the Commission to outlast the current leadership. We have a coalition of the willing right now, but as those positions get changed out every three to five years on average, will new leaders understand the genesis and take this on as a focal point or just another planning meeting?"⁵⁷

But even in the midst of the pandemic, leaders see signs of hope and promise in the Commission. County leaders expressed the value of the relationships built as a result of the last two years of work to bring the Commission to life. For instance, the County Office of Education and public health staff have been in regular communication to determine future prospects for bringing kids back to school. Agency leaders directly attribute this ease of communication to the relationships and structures put in place through the development of the Commission. Kevin Monsma explained, “In addressing COVID-19, we’re seeing the benefits of the structure [of the Commission]. We in education are now closely tied with public health. We’re not making decisions in isolation. There’s a lot of alignment between the County education system and other systems, from providing food to kids to how we’re coordinating with CPS. We’re seeing benefits of the communication structures we put in place in real time, in this moment.”⁵⁸

There are some very real challenges ahead for El Dorado’s Commission for Youth and Families to live out its potential. Its enactment is hardly the end of the story. As Ed Manansala put it, “The Commission isn’t the exclamation point.”⁵⁹ Rather, the Commission is a promising starting point to solving very real, potentially life-or-death challenges facing some of the County’s most vulnerable young people. Implemented well, it has real potential to support students in ways that meaningfully change their life trajectories, by providing the support they need to navigate challenging circumstances and get back on a path to a healthy, fulfilling life.

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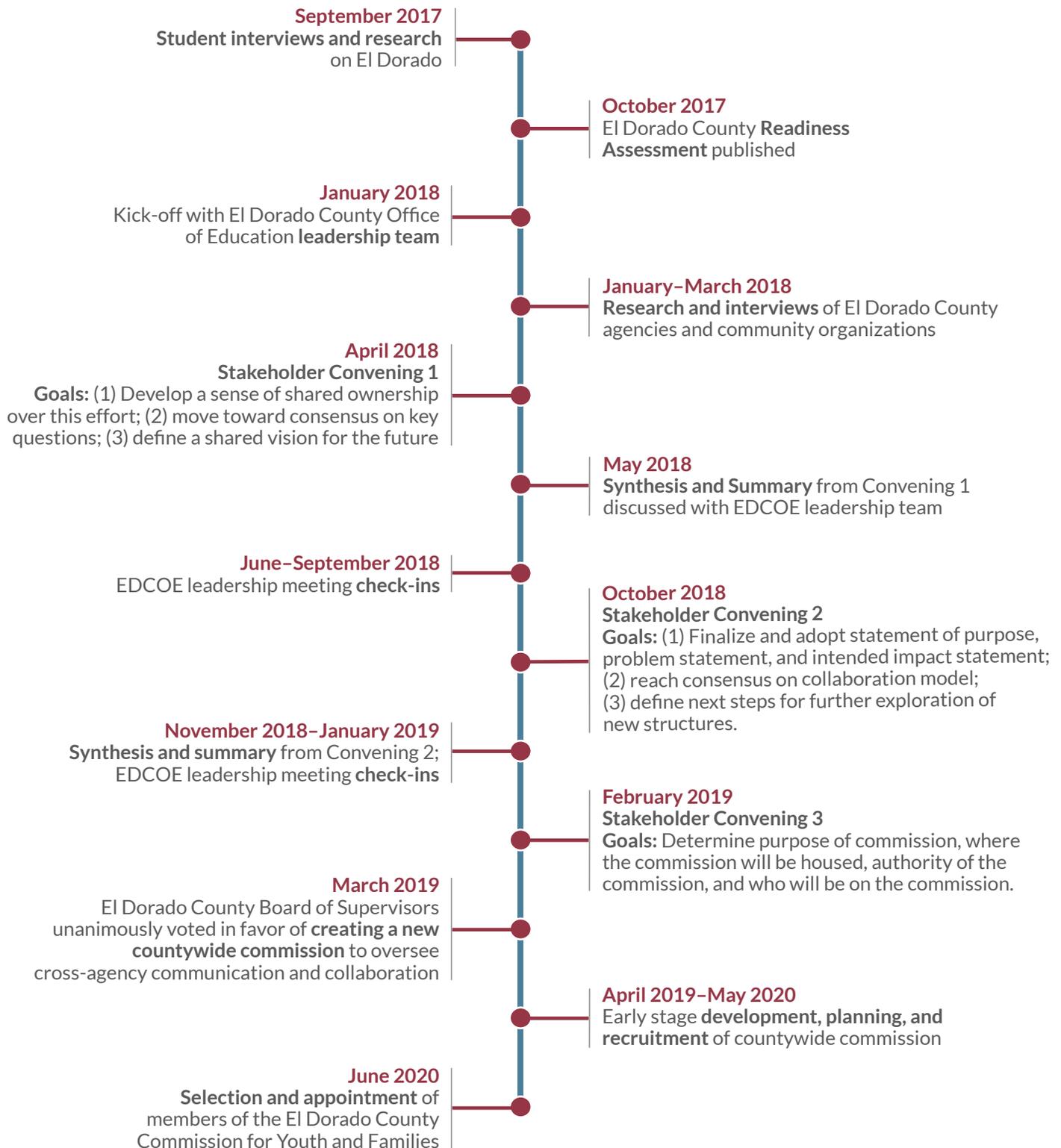
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Appendix 1: Timeline of Activities



Appendix 2: Cost of Doing Nothing Analysis

Bellwether developed a financial model to compare the amount of public dollars spent in the “current state” (care agencies are fragmented in their efforts to support youth) to the dollars spent in a hypothetical “future state” (care agencies are sufficiently coordinated). The purpose of this model was to define and underscore the urgency of disruption in the County. It relied on a basic calculation of opportunity cost: The dollars spent in the current, fragmented state minus the dollars spent in a future, coordinated state equals the opportunity cost of the status quo or, in other words, the number of public dollars that could be saved or reinvested by coordinating care.

Using data from federal, state, and local data sets, research organizations, and advocacy organizations, the analysis modeled the effects of four major disruptive experiences in childhood (foster care placement, unplanned and unwanted pregnancy, incarceration, and homelessness) and their corresponding adult outcomes (lost income, increased rate of adult incarceration, increased rate of adult homelessness, and increased rate of lifetime reliance on public benefits). We used existing research to estimate the cost of each of the disruptive childhood experiences on the set of adult outcomes. Where possible, we used local data as inputs to the model.

The table below summarizes the cost savings that El Dorado could see if it better coordinated its services for young people, based off estimates of the number of El Dorado youth experiencing disruptions, retrieved from publicly available data sources. The “Savings: Future State Cost” column represents the anticipated cost difference between the two scenarios, or the opportunity cost of the status quo.

Cost Savings to El Dorado with Better Coordinated Services

Costs	# Youth with Disrupted Experiences	Cost: Current State	Cost: Future State	Savings: Future State Cost
Total Direct		\$27,286,180	\$15,482,701	\$11,803,479
Foster Care	5	\$749,715	\$258,305	\$491,410
Early/ Unplanned Pregnancy	85	\$6,352,667	\$4,258,657	\$2,094,010
Incarceration	32	\$19,184,344	\$10,119,223	\$9,065,121
Homelessness	62	\$999,454	\$846,516	\$152,938
Total Lifetime		\$219,058,579	\$94,168,472	\$124,890,107
Lost Income	180	\$170,878,152	\$82,123,365	\$88,754,787
Incarceration	46	\$41,400,968	\$10,350,242	\$31,050,726
Homelessness	62	\$3,397,423	\$849,356	\$2,548,067
Public Benefits	41	\$3,382,036	\$845,509	\$2,536,527
Total		\$246,344,759	\$109,651,173	\$136,693,587
Average cost per youth		\$1,343,065	\$597,815	\$745,250

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