

RESEARCH REPORT
EVALUATION OF COLORADO'S MULTI-
DISCIPLINARY LAW OFFICE PROGRAM



The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges® (NCJFCJ), affiliated with the University of Nevada, Reno, provides cutting-edge training, wide-ranging technical assistance, and research to help the nation's courts, judges, and staff in their important work. Since its founding in 1937 by a group of judges dedicated to improving the effectiveness of the nation's juvenile courts, the NCJFCJ has pursued a mission to improve courts and systems practice and raise awareness of the core issues that touch the lives of many of our nation's children and families.

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Executive Summary

Few studies have been conducted to examine the ways in which quality child legal representation impacts outcomes of dependency court cases (Zinn & Peters, 2015). The few studies that have engaged in such an examination have demonstrated the benefits of child representation in dependency court cases (Zinn & Peters, 2015). Colorado provides attorney-GAL representation for all children in dependency and neglect cases and currently has multidisciplinary law offices (MDLOs) in three counties in the state. These offices are different from more traditional law offices that deal with dependency cases in that each child is assigned both an attorney and social worker at the beginning of his or her case. An evaluation was conducted to determine how MDLOs perform compared to Independent Contract offices in the state of Colorado. While a small percentage of independent contractors employ social workers in their practice and applicable practice standards provide some guidance as to the appropriate use of social workers, the MDLO structure formalizes this practice through a specified statement of work.

Data was collected via court file reviews and surveys with attorneys and social workers. Court files were reviewed in three counties in Colorado (Arapahoe, Denver, and El Paso). Surveys were distributed to stakeholders in multidisciplinary law offices and to Independent Contracts who employ social workers.

Key Findings from Court File Review

- **MDLO and Independent Contract GALs did not differ in time between hearings or time to case closure.**
- **MDLO and Independent Contract GALs advocated for similar services.**
- **MDLO and Independent Contract GALs were equally likely to be present at hearings.**
- **MDLO and Independent Contract GALs were equally likely to file motions.**

Key Findings from Surveys

- **MDLO GALs were equally likely as Independent Contract GALs to indicate that they “often” or “very often” filed motions, petition, and requests on their client’s behalf; were able to be present for their client’s hearings (other attorneys rarely substituted); were given sufficient notice to have enough time to prepare for court; and were present at the Initial Hearing than Independent Contract GALs.**
- **MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs were equally likely to “agree” or “strongly agree” that the GALs and Social Service Professionals (SSPs) communicate well with one another, that they achieve an institutional presence, and that this institutional presence helps in their ongoing advocacy than Independent Contract GALs.**

Introduction

Child abuse and neglect cases, also known as dependency cases, can be exceedingly complex and lengthy (Hardin, 1998). The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) requires states to document provisions for providing child advocates to children who enter dependency court (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Despite this requirement, states are often left to determine exactly when a child will receive such an advocate (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) recommends that children receive a child advocate (such as an attorney) at the preliminary protective hearing, and that this advocate engage in quality legal representation (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 1995). Quality legal representation can be defined as children being represented by attorneys who have received specialized training (e.g., training specifically regarding the unique needs of children in dependency courts, how to engage children, etc.) and who have more strict requirements on how to handle dependency cases (e.g., requirements on how often to meet with clients, when to bring up services, etc.).

Research has demonstrated that providing a child with quality legal representation early on in the case is associated with more positive outcomes (Zinn & Peters, 2015; Zinn & Slowriver, 2008). Results from one study indicated that children who received quality legal representation were more likely to achieve permanency than the comparison group (children who did not receive such representation due to legal conflicts; Zinn & Slowriver, 2008). Another study found children who received quality legal representation reached permanency at a rate 1.59 times higher than comparison children (Zinn & Peters, 2015). Permanency in this case was less likely to be reunification with parents, but more likely to be adoption or long-term custody (i.e., a child is placed with a fit and willing relative for a long-term period; Zinn & Peters, 2015).

Zinn and Peters (2015) further discovered that the reason children with an attorney were more likely to reach permanency was due to the timing between hearings. More specifically, the authors noted that children with an attorney were found to transition from disposition to permanency at twice the rate of the comparison children (Zinn & Peters, 2015). In other words, children with quality legal representation experienced less time between the disposition and permanency hearings than did children without quality legal representation. Moreover, children with quality representation were found to transition from the disposition hearing to the TPR hearing at 4 times the rate of children without quality representation.

Other studies have demonstrated similar effects (Duquette & Ramsey, 1986). In this instance, training program representatives in what defines quality legal representation was associated with an increase in “advocacy” behaviors (Duquette & Ramsey, 1986). This, in turn, led to expedited times between case hearings (i.e., there was less time between case hearings) and increased court orders for treatment and assessment (Duquette & Ramsey, 1986).

Study Overview

One particular state that promotes high quality representation early and throughout the dependency court process is Colorado. In Colorado, all children are appointed an attorney at the beginning of the dependency court process (Donnelly, 2013). Currently, the Office of the Child's Representative (OCR) offers children an attorney through two different routes: (1) independent contracting attorneys, or (2) attorneys in multidisciplinary law offices (MDLOs). The OCR contracts with approximately 230 licensed attorneys to provide legal representation to children in the state of Colorado. These independent contract attorneys are often sole practitioners (Donnelly, 2013). Independent contractors can bill OCR for paralegal, social worker, and associate time. The MDLOs, however, are legal offices that house both attorneys and social workers and children are assigned a team (i.e., attorney and social worker) at the start of their case. Currently, El Paso, Denver, and Arapahoe counties have MDLOs.

The MDLOs are unique in the type of representation that they give children. Not only are MDLOs comprised of both attorneys and social workers, but they are required to have more frequent face-to-face contact with children (Donnelly, 2013). While applicable practice standards require every GAL to visit children within 30 days of appointment and each change of placement, and to maintain contact with children, the MDLO statement of work specifically requires quarterly face-to-face contact with children. All GALs in Colorado are governed by the Chief Justice Directive which is intended to provide well-rounded and balanced representation of children in dependency court cases. The MDLO enhances this by providing each child with a team (i.e., an attorney and a social worker). Furthermore, both the attorney and social worker work together to provide more comprehensive representation for children in the child's best interests.

Purpose of the evaluation

This report is part of a larger evaluation of the MDLO model; it is not meant to assess adherence to practice standards, but rather help determine if there are any benefits to the MDLO model. Thus, the purpose of this evaluation is three fold. First, this evaluation will attempt to determine if MDLOs are better at achieving certain outcomes. Some of these outcomes include, but are not limited to: increased attorney preparedness, increased requests for services for children, decreased continuances requested by GALs, and faster permanency decisions (case closure).

The second purpose of this evaluation, which is intimately tied to the first, is to help stakeholders determine if MDLOs should continue to receive funding. The OCR is committed to providing best interests legal representation in a fiscally responsible manner (Donnelly, 2013), it is necessary to determine if MDLOs are more effective than independent contract attorneys and are thus worth the financial investment they would require.

Finally, this program evaluation seeks to add to the literature on the impacts of a multidisciplinary approach to child representation. Few studies have been conducted to examine how child representation impacts the outcomes children experience in dependency court cases. Thus, there is

a need for information about how multidisciplinary law offices perform and compare to other (e.g., independent contract) offices.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Evaluators collected data from 3 counties in Colorado: El Paso, Denver, and Arapahoe. Evaluators, with the help of the court administrative staff and the OCR, compiled a list of all dependency cases that were opened on or after January 1, 2012 and closed between July 1, 2014 and March 31, 2016. Furthermore, evaluators, again with help from the OCR, randomly selected 210 cases for data collection via case file review (60 cases in Arapahoe and El Paso Counties and 90 cases in Denver county). These cases were equally divided between independent contracting attorneys and MDLO attorneys. Since there are two multidisciplinary law offices operating in Denver, 30 cases were pulled for each of those offices and compared to 30 independent contractor cases. NCJFCJ research staff spent three and a half days on site collecting information in Denver and Arapahoe counties; OCR staff collected data from El Paso County.

A total of 63 stakeholders (a mixture of attorneys, social service professionals (SSPs), and other administrative staff) completed a survey about best practices, experiences working in their offices, and other information. NCJFCJ created the survey while the OCR helped to distribute the survey. Participants were given two weeks to complete the survey; a reminder email was sent to all stakeholders asking them to complete the survey if they already had not.

Surveys

Surveys were distributed to GALs and SSPs at MDLOs and Independent Contract offices that employ social workers. These surveys were used to answer questions pertaining to: relationships between social workers and attorneys, knowledge of best practices, attitudes towards collaboration, and how much supervision they receive.

Court File Review

A court file review tool was designed to answer the following outcomes: the number of continuances requested by GALs, the attorney engagement in case activity, whether there were faster permanency decisions, and whether there was increased timeliness.

In order to answer concerns pertaining to decreased continuances, faster permanency decisions, and increased timeliness the court file review tool included questions pertaining to the following: the date of each hearing (preliminary protective, adjudication, disposition, initial permanency, and termination of jurisdiction), whether the case was closed, the outcome of the child's placement (i.e.,

was the child reunified with parents, adopted, placed in long-term care, etc.), and how many continuances were due to GALs.

In order to assess the level of advocacy the attorney engaged in, the court file review tool included a series of questions pertaining to activities that attorneys should be doing across the life of the case in order to assure best interest representation. This included: whether the attorney engaged in legal activity (e.g., filing motions), whether the attorney advocated for certain placements (e.g., sibling or fit and willing relative), whether the attorney discussed visitation for the child with the parent(s) or other siblings, and how often the placement of the child changed during the entirety of the case.

Finally, to assess the attorney's engagement in the case, a series of questions were asked pertaining to GAL advocacy for various assessments, treatment or services for the child or his or her family. Finally, for educational well-being the tool asked questions regarding school changes.

Data will be analyzed using a combination of inferential and descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics will be run to answer a majority of the questions (e.g., differences in caseload, supervision, requested services). Inferential statistics, such as t-tests and regression, will be used to analyze whether certain variables (e.g., time between cases and presence at hearings) are different between MDLO and Independent Contract GALs.

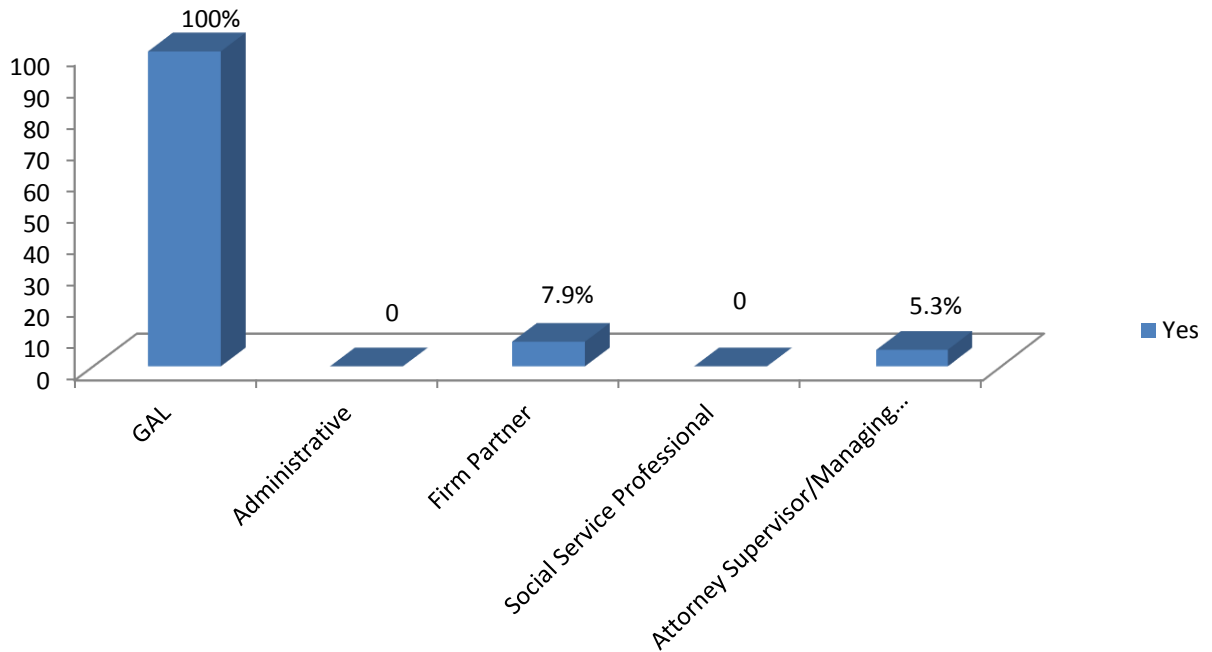
Results

GAL Survey

A total of 38 participants completed the GAL survey. Surveys were sent to GALs who work in MDLOs and independent contractors who use a social worker on their D&N cases. Participants were asked about their position and were told to choose all positions that applied to them. As indicated in Figure 1 below, 100% of participants indicated they were GALs, 7.9% indicated they were firm partners, and 5.3% indicated they were attorney supervisors or managing attorneys.

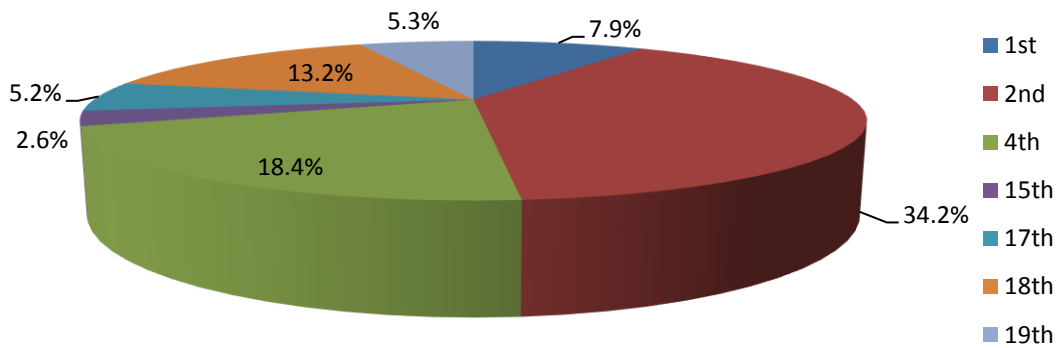
Of those who indicated they were GALs, 64.7% indicated they worked in an MDLO office (n = 22), 11.8% indicated that they did not work in an MDLO office (n = 4), and 23.5% indicated they worked in an office that uses social work staff but does not have a specific MDLO contract with the OCR (n = 8). A total of 4 participants did not indicate whether or not they worked in an MDLO office.

Figure 1. Position



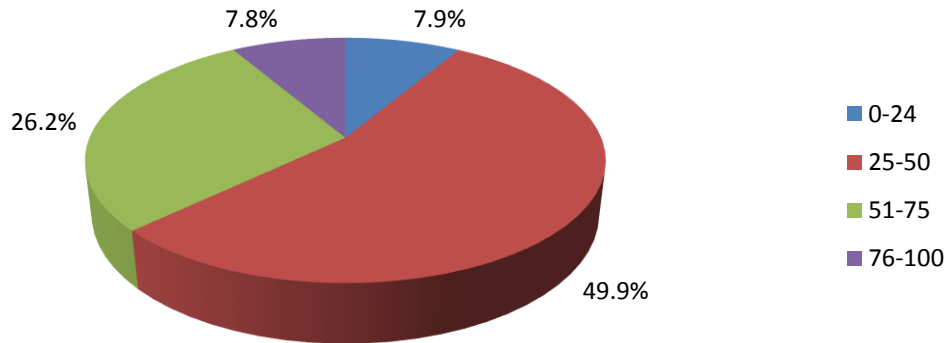
Participants were also asked what judicial district they worked in. As evidenced in Figure 2, the majority of the participants were from the 2nd judicial district (34.2%). Other participants were from the 4th (18.4%), 18th (13.2%), and 1st (7.9%) judicial districts.

Figure 2. Judicial District



Participants also indicated how many cases they were currently assigned to. The majority of participants, as depicted in Figure 3, indicated they had between 25 and 50 cases (49.9%). Roughly 26.2% of participants indicated they had between 51 and 75 cases.

Figure 3. Caseload



Caseload was broken down by whether a participant was an MDLO GAL or an Independent Contract GAL. For MDLO GALs, the majority of participants (58.8%) indicated they had between 25-50 cases. About 22.6% indicated they had between 51-75 cases and 13.5% indicated they had between 76-100. For Independent Contract GALs, the majority of participants (41.6%) indicated they had between 25-50 cases. About 25% of participants indicated they had between 51-75 cases, 16.7% indicated they had 0-24 cases, and 16.6% indicated they had 76-100 cases.

Participants were also asked about how many hours they receive supervisions, whether they believe the supervision they receive is appropriate to their caseload, and whether they have a system of supervisory observation in court and in the field. With regards to MDLO Gals, 31.7% indicated that they receive roughly 2-3 hours of supervision a month; roughly 27.2% of MDLO GALs indicated they receive between 0 and 1 hours of supervision per month. The majority of Independent Contract GALs indicated they did not receive any supervision (58.3%); about 8.3% of Independent Contract GALs indicated they receive twelve hours of supervision a month.

Furthermore, the majority of MDLO GALs either agreed (31.8%) or strongly agreed (31.8%) that they receive supervision appropriate to their caseload. Only 9.1% strongly disagreed that they receive supervision appropriate to their caseload. With regards to Independent Contract GALs, 12.5% agreed that they receive supervision appropriate to their caseload; another 12.5% strongly agreed with this statement. The remaining Independent Contract GALs (75%) indicated the neither agreed nor disagreed that they receive supervision appropriate to their caseload.

Finally, 50% of MDLO GALs indicated that they have a system of direct supervisory observation in court; 18.2% of MDLO GALs indicated that they have a system of direct supervisory observation in the field. With regards to Independent Contract GALs, 100% indicated they did not have a system of direct supervisory observation in court and 33.3% indicated they did have a system of direct supervisory observation in the field.

Participants were asked about their knowledge and familiarity of the four principles of Cornerstone Advocacy (i.e., placements, visits, services, and education and life skills). Roughly 97.1% of participants indicated that they were familiar with the four principles of Cornerstone Advocacy; 2.9% of participants indicated that they were unfamiliar.

Participants were also asked about how often they engage in specific behaviors. For example, participants answered questions such as “I am given sufficient notice to have enough time to prepare for court” and “I meet with my clients outside of court.” Participants answered these questions on a five point scale from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). Table 1 depicts the means of the answers to these questions based on whether a participant is part of an MDLO firm or not. Participants who previously indicated that they either did not work in an MDLO office or did not have a specific contract with the OCR (n = 12) were grouped together.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the means between MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs were very similar for the advocacy questions. Indeed, significance testing indicated that MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs were not significantly different from one another on these measures. This non-significance should be taken with caution, however, as the sample size is small and each group does not have equal sample sizes (i.e., there are more participants in the MDLO group than in the Independent Contract group). If sample sizes are equal, it is possible the results would be similar to, or different from, the current results.

Table 1. Mean Agreement Advocacy Questions

	MDLO	Independent Contract
I file motions, petitions, and requests on my client’s behalf.	4.09	3.91
I am able to be present for my client’s hearings (e.g., other attorneys rarely substitute for me).	4.77	4.36
I advocate for placement that supports connections (e.g., educational and physical) the child had prior to placement.	4.50	4.55
I advocate for services for children that are specifically tailored to each family.	4.68	4.64
I advocate for the child’s educational needs.	4.68	4.73
I advocate for services that will address my clients’ specific needs.	4.77	4.82
I use resources to increase the frequency of visits with parents, guardians, and siblings.	4.14	4.30
I encourage the participation of the child or youth in court proceedings (when appropriate).	4.59	4.55
I encourage the participation of the child or youth in team meetings (when appropriate).	4.45	4.64
I am given sufficient notice to have enough time to prepare for court.	4.50	4.36

My caseload allows me to dedicate the appropriate amount of time to each child.	3.59	4.09
I am present at the Initial Hearing.	4.91	4.64
I meet with my client prior to the first hearing in the case after I am appointed.	4.23	4.45
I meet with my clients outside of court.	4.91	4.91
I have a good understanding of my clients' situations and needs.	4.68	4.91

Participants were also asked about their attitudes toward collaborating with other staff in their office. They answered a series of 7 questions including questions such as “Collaboration between staff is difficult” and “I believe that we achieve an institutional presence.” Responses were on a 5 point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 2 below describes the mean agreement to each question, and is broken down by MDLO and Independent Contract GALs. Significance testing indicated that the two groups were not different from one another on these questions; again, this non-significance should be taken with caution. If sample sizes are equal, it is possible the results would similar to, or different from, the current results.

Table 2. Mean Agreement To Collaboration Questions

	MDLO	Independent Contract
GALs and Social Service Professionals (SSPs) in my office communicate well with one another.	4.76	4.6
GALs and SSPs in my office work well together.	4.76	5.00
I enjoy collaborating with other staff.	4.86	5.00
Collaboration between staff is beneficial for the children we serve.	4.81	4.80
Collaboration between staff is difficult.	1.81	2.20
I believe that we achieve an institutional presence.	4.76	3.50
This institutional presence helps in our ongoing advocacy.	4.71	4.00

Participants were also given an opportunity to explain some of the barriers and successes they have had in collaborating between staff. One of the biggest barriers discussed by MDLO GALs is a lack of time and high caseloads. For instance, one participant said “[t]urn over of staff. Work overload or

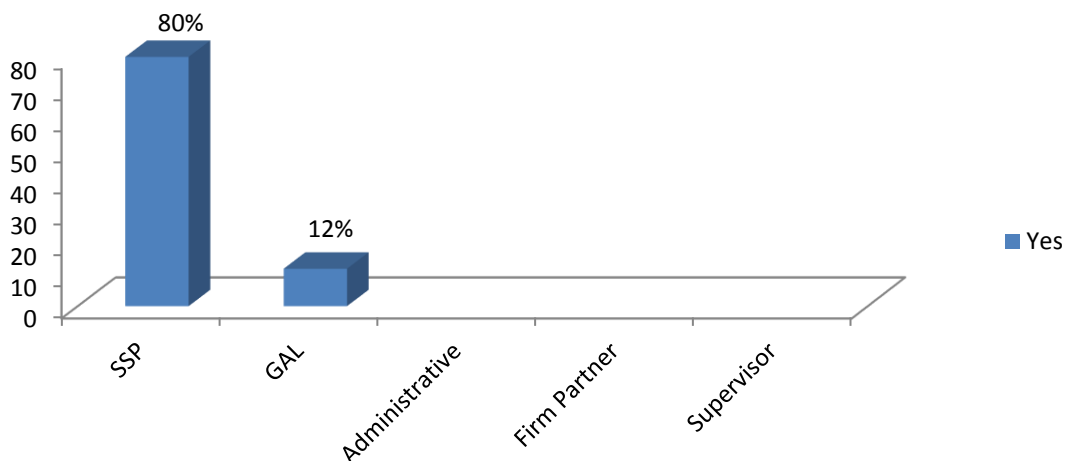
many cases “blowing up” at once. A little downtime allows for a lot more communication.” Another participant said “Caseloads! The more cases we have, the less time we have to meet each cases’ needs.” Independent Contract GALs did not list any barriers.

With regards to successes, MDLO GALs believed that some of the successes with collaboration revolve around advocacy for children. For instance, one participant indicated that “We have discovered unsafe situations by having two people assigned to a case. We have made extra contact with kids because of the availability of additional professionals to a team.” Another participant said that one success that they are able to “find kin, more contact with kids, more observation of contact with family, and brainstorm appropriate resources.” Only three out of five Independent Contract GALs answered the success question. Of those three, it appears as though communication also helps with advocacy. One participant said that communication helps “find placement with relatives, advocate for IEPs, and help connect to tribes.”

Social Service Professional (SSP) Survey

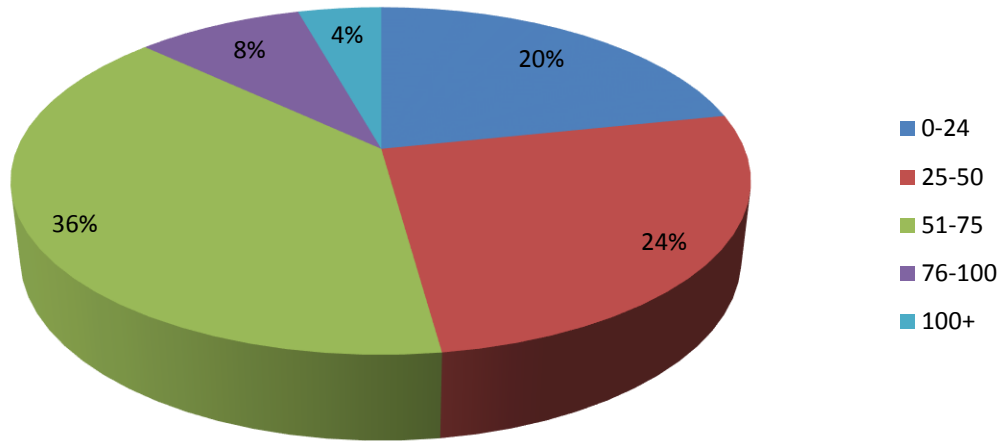
A total of 25 participants completed the SSP survey. Participants were asked about their position and were told to choose all positions that applied to them. As indicated in Figure 4 below, 80% of participants indicated they were SSPs, and 12% indicated they were GALs. If a participant indicated they were a GAL, their response options were discarded since they were not the indented audience of the survey. Of those who indicated they were SSPs, 75% indicated they worked in an MDLO office (n = 15), and 25% indicated that they did not work in an MDLO office (n = 5).

Figure 4. SSP Survey - Position



Participants also indicated how many cases they were currently assigned. The majority of participants, as depicted in Figure 5, indicated they had between 51 and 75 cases (36%). Roughly 24% of participants indicated they had between 25 and 50 cases; 20% of participants indicated that they between 0 and 24 cases.

Figure 5. SSP Caseload



Caseload was also broken down by whether a participant was an MDLO SSP or Non-MDLO SSP. MDLO SSPs most often had either 25-50 cases (40.2%) or 51-75 cases (40.1%). Roughly 13.4% of MDLO SSPs indicated they had 100+ cases and 6.7% of MDLO SSPs indicated they had 0-24 cases. Non-MDLO SSPs were split between having 0-25 cases (40%) and having 51-75 cases (40%); data was missing for the remaining 20% of respondents.

Questions were also asked pertaining to how many hours of supervisions SSPs receive per month, whether SSPs agree or disagree that they receive supervision appropriate to their caseload, and whether their office has a system of direct supervisory observation in the field. For MDLO SSPs, the majority of participants (40%) indicated they received about 2 hours of supervision a month; 20% indicated they received 1 hour of supervision, 6.7% indicated they received about 3 hours of supervision a month, and 13.3% indicated they received 4 hours of supervision a month. For Non-MDLO SSPs, 40% indicated they receive 4 hours of supervision of a month, 20% indicated they receive 2 hours a month, and 20% indicated they receive 3 hours a month; data was missing for the remaining 20% of participants.

Furthermore, 46.7% of MDLO SSPs indicated they agree that they receive supervision appropriate to their caseload; about 33.3% of participants strongly agree with this statement and the remaining 20% indicated they neither agree nor disagree with the statement. For Non-MDLO SSPs, 40% agree that they receive supervision appropriate to their caseload and 40% strongly agree with this statement. About 20% of Non-MDLO SSPs neither agree nor disagree with this statement.

Finally, 26.7% of MDLO SSPs indicate they have a system of direct supervisory observation in the field. About 20% of Non-MDLO SSPs indicate they have a system of direct supervisory observation in the field.

Participants were asked about their attitudes toward collaborating with other staff in their office. They answered a series of 7 questions including questions such as “Collaboration between staff is difficult” and “I believe that we achieve an institutional presence.” Responses were on a 5 point scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Table 3 below describes the mean agreement

to each question, and is broken down by MDLO and Non-MDLO SSPs. Significance testing was performed and indicated that MDLO and Non-MDLO SSPs were not different from one another. Caution is warranted in interpreting these results, however, as the sample size was small and the number of participants in each group was not equal (i.e., there were more participants in the MDLO group than in the Non-MDLO group).

Table 3. Mean Agreement To Collaboration Questions for SSPs

	MDLO	Non-MDLO
GALs and Social Service Professionals (SSPs) in my office communicate well with one another.	4.57	4.75
GALs and SSPs in my office work well together.	4.57	4.75
I enjoy collaborating with other staff.	4.64	4.5
Collaboration between staff is beneficial for the children we serve.	4.78	4.75
Collaboration between staff is difficult.	1.78	1.75
I believe that we achieve an institutional presence.	4.28	4.00
This institutional presence helps in our ongoing advocacy.	4.43	4.00

Participants were also given an opportunity to explain some of the barriers and successes they have had in collaborating between staff. One of the biggest barriers discussed by SSPs in MDLOs is a lack of time. For instance, one participant said “Our busy schedules can make it difficult at times to collaborate...” Another participant said “Time and availability. Everyone is very busy, the court docket eats up a lot of time, it hinders ability to staff cases as frequently as I would like.” SSPs in non-MDLO settings did not list any barriers.

With regards to successes, MDLO SSPs believed that some of the successes with collaboration revolve around advocacy for children and increased knowledge. For instance, one participant indicated that “Having SSPs with this level of diversity to best address the needs of our children and families is a strong asset to this office. Collaboration to fully utilize this level of expertise certainly increases the probability that our client receives the best services and service providers to meet their specific needs....” Another participant said that one success is that they have “increased knowledge of what is occurring in each case based on differing skill sets of individuals teaming cases; ability to strongly advocate for clients based on solid assessments of needs and best interest.”

Of the Independent Contract SSPs who answered this question the majority also agree that collaboration benefits children. For instance, one participant said “the successes we have achieved are always on the children’s behalf...”

Court File Review

With regards to the court file review, roughly 39.9% of the files reviewed were of Independent Contract GALs; 60.1% of the files reviewed were of MDLO GALs. Furthermore, there was often no other children on the petition (47.2%); 26.9% of the time, there was 1 other child listed on the petition and 14.5% of the time there were 2 other children listed on the petition. Children ranged in age from a few days old to almost 17 years old (the average age was about 8 years old).

Table 4 demonstrates the differences between MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs with regards to time between cases, and overall time to case closure. Numbers were obtained by subtracting one date from another. For instance, in order to obtain the time between removal and the shelter hearing, the shelter date was subtracted from the removal date.

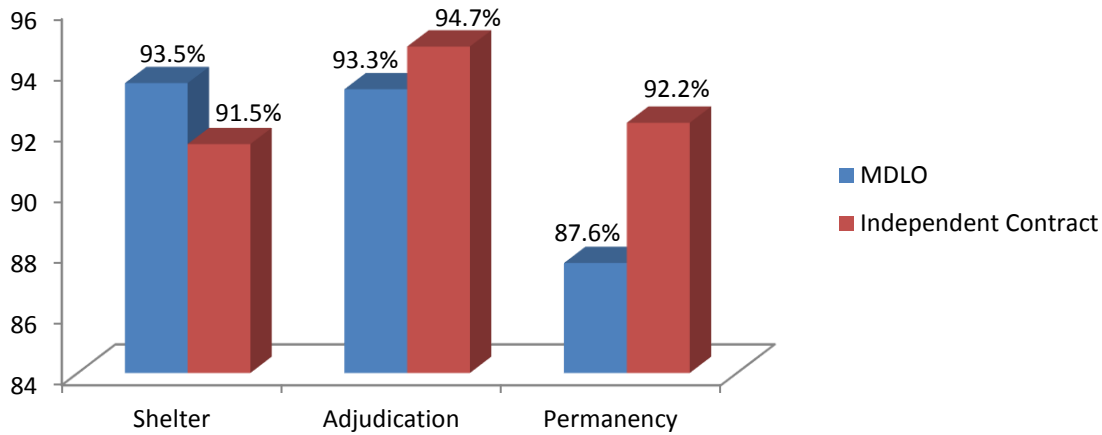
As indicated in table 4, there was less time between hearings in which the child had an MDLO GAL versus an Independent Contract GAL. For instance, overall time of case (from filing of petition to case closure) was 438 days for MDLO GALs and 498 days for Independent Contract GALs. Even so, the differences between the two groups were not statistically significant.

Table 4. Time Between Hearings

	MDLO	Independent Contract
Petition		
Petition to Shelter	1.56 days	6.91 days
Petition to ADJ	27.47 days	51.56 days
Petition to Perm	130.19 days	153.78 days
Shelter		
Shelter to ADJ	38.82 days	34.16 days
Shelter to Perm	144.95 days	146.81 days
Overall Time Of Case		
Petition to Close	438.34 days	498.23 days

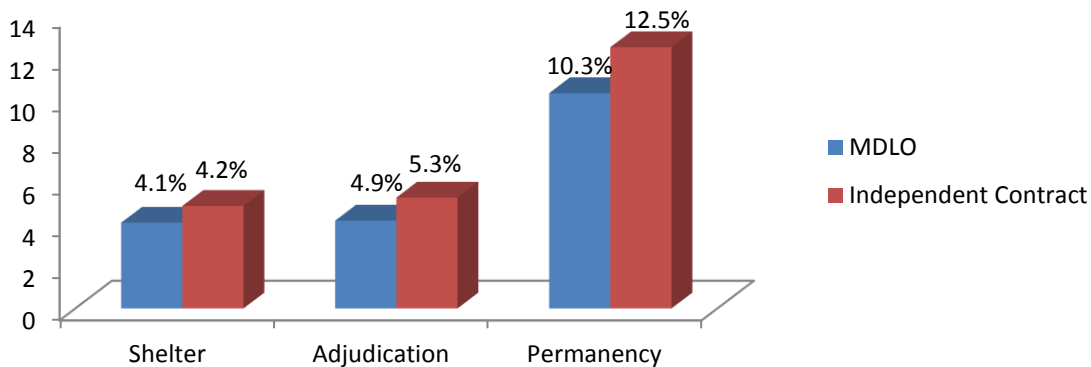
Researchers compared how often the GAL of record and child were present at each hearing. As demonstrated in Figure 6, the GAL of Record for both Independent Contractors and MDLO attorneys were present at equal rates during the shelter, adjudication, and permanency hearings (there were no significant differences between the two groups). The OCR values continuity of representation as a practice standard; this measure illustrates how often substitute counsel appeared on behalf of the GAL of Record.

Figure 6. GAL of Record Present At Hearing



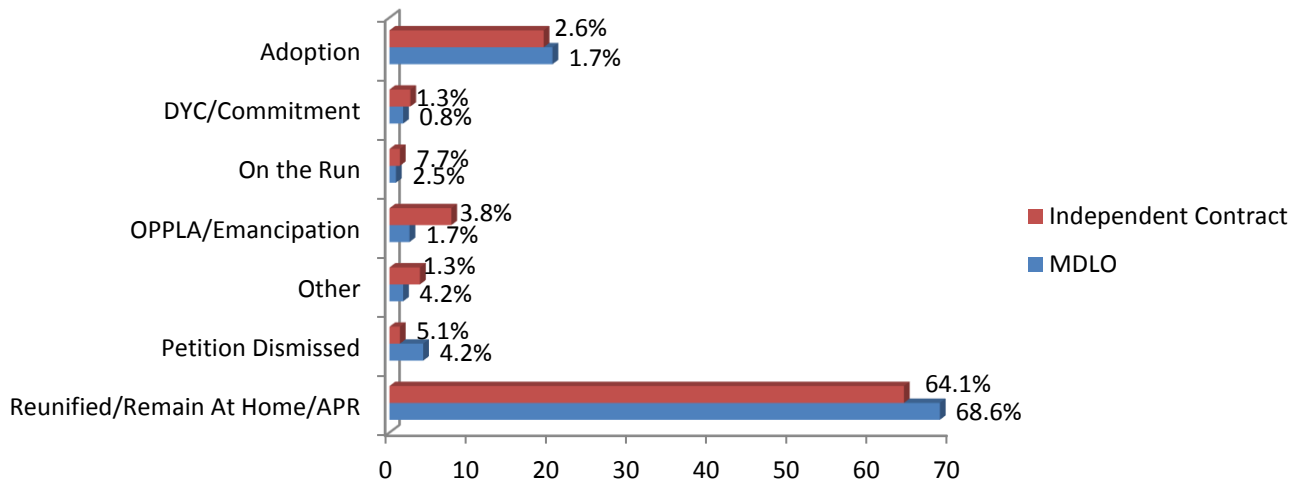
As demonstrated in Figure 7, children were also present at hearings at equal rates regardless of whether the child was represented by an MDLO GAL or Independent Contract GAL. There were no differences between MDLO and Independent Contract GALs on whether or not a child was present at each hearing type.

Figure 7. Children Present At Hearing



With regards to outcomes, APR, Remain at Home, and Reunification were all combined. As evident in Figure 8, the outcomes of the children were relatively equal among MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs. “Other” outcomes included things such as a lack of jurisdiction. Furthermore, APR was often to a parent such as the Mother (33.8%) or relative (41.9%); reunification was also most frequently to a mother (60.9%).

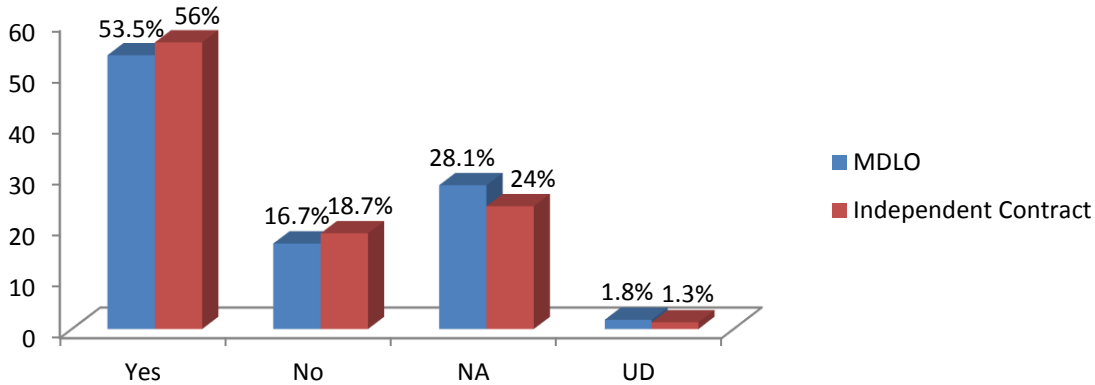
Figure 8. Outcome



MDLO GALs and IC appeared at the shelter hearing at nearly equal rates (93.5% for MDLO compared to 91.5% for Independent Contract GALs). The numbers of continuances due to the attorney were also equal between MDLO and Independent Contract GALs. Roughly 97.3% of MDLO GALs had zero continuances; 98.7% of Independent Contract GALs had zero continuances. MDLO GALs were also appeared to be more likely to file a motion (32.5%) compared to Independent Contract GALs (20.3%). Significance testing indicated this difference was ultimately not significant. Motions filed by MDLO GALs included things such as privilege, CASA appointment, education privilege, education decision making, or education surrogate, and substitution of counsel. Motions filed by Independent Contract GALs included things such as patient privilege, out of state travel, responses, and substitutions of council.

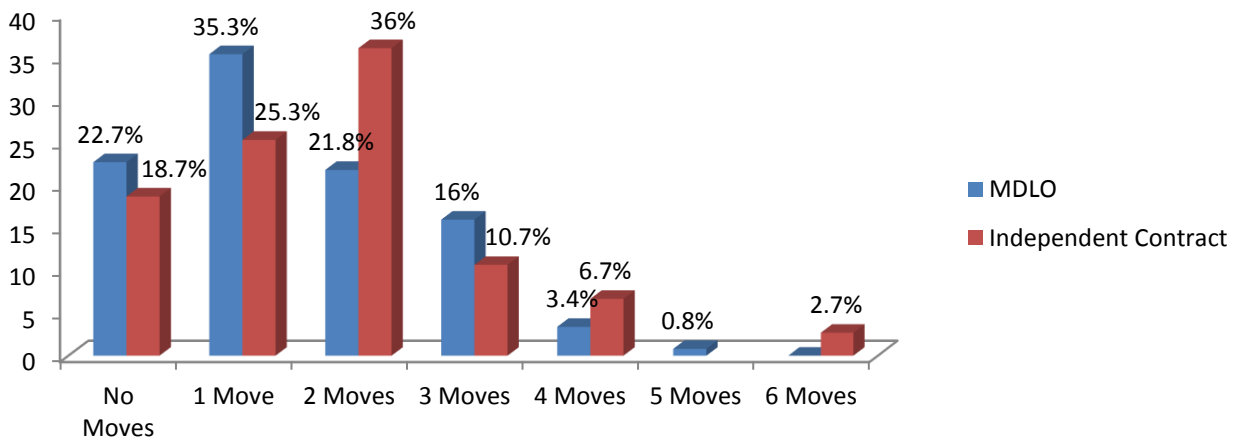
With regards to records on educational progress of child, MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs were relatively equal (see Figure 9). MDLO GALs (17.8%) were slightly more likely than Independent Contractors (13.2%) to have findings on the record related to impact of change of placement on educational stability. However, these differences are not statistically significant.

Figure 9. GAL Raising Issue of Educational Stability for Child



The total number of placement changes for the child was also compared between MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs. For Independent Contract GALs, children most often experienced two placement changes throughout the case (36%); for MDLO GALs, children most often experienced one placement change (35.3%). Figure 10 below provides a breakdown of total placement changes based on whether the GAL was from an MDLO or Independent Contract office.

Figure 10. Total Placement Moves



Finally, MDLO GALs and Independent contract GALs were compared on how often they advocated for certain services for children. Table 5 demonstrates how often each of these GAL types advocated for certain services. It appears as though MDLO GALs were more likely to advocate for visits with parents (23.2%) than were Independent Contract GALs (16.9%). This difference was not, however,

statistically significant. It does appear as though the two types of representation are similar on other services.

Table 5. Frequency of Requested Services

	MDLO	Independent Contract
Drug/Alcohol Assessment	-	1.2%
Drug/Alcohol Treatment	-	-
Random UAs	-	-
Parenting Skills	-	-
Psychological Evaluation	2.4%	4.8%
Individual Counseling	8%	8.4%
Family Counseling	4%	3.6%
Employment	-	-
Suitable Housing	2.4%	-
Medical	3.2%	3.6%
Dental	-	-
Educational	16%	16.9%
Independent Living	1.6%	2.4%
Visit with Parents	23.2%	16.9%
Visit with Siblings	4.8%	6%

Discussion

This evaluation was conducted to determine how the multi-disciplinary law offices (MDLOs) in Colorado are performing compared to Independent Contract offices. Research indicates that children who receive quality legal representation are more likely to achieve permanency than the comparison group (children who did not receive such representation due to legal conflicts; Zinn & Slowriver, 2008). Other studies have found that children who receive quality legal representation reach permanency at a rate 1.59 times higher than comparison children (Zinn & Peters, 2015). Furthermore, research notes that children with quality legal representation experience less time between hearings than do children without quality legal representation. Finally, research indicates

that training program representatives in what defines quality legal representation was associated with an increase in “advocacy” behaviors (Duquette & Ramsey, 1986). This, in turn, led to expedited times between case hearings (i.e., there was less time between case hearings) and increased court orders for treatment and assessment (Duquette & Ramsey, 1986).

The results of this evaluation do not appear to support the prior literature. Indeed, there were no significant differences between MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs on any of the measures assessed in this evaluation. For instance, it appears as though MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs have similar perceptions of collaboration, similar time between hearings, and are equally likely to be present at hearings. Furthermore, MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs were equally likely to request services for children and were likely to have similar case outcomes. While there did appear to be differences on some measures (e.g., Independent Contract GALs were present at the permanency hearing 92.2% of the time whereas MDLO GALs were present at 87.6% of the hearings), these differences were ultimately non-significant.

These differences appear to indicate that both MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs engage in quality legal representation. Because of this engagement in quality legal representation, it was difficult to establish that there were any differences between the two models. Thus, it is understandable that the results did not follow prior literature. This evaluation compared instances in which children all receive quality legal representation rather than comparing instances in which children receive quality legal representation and either do not receive quality representation or receive no representation.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations to this evaluation. The first is that the sample size for the stakeholder surveys was small. The GAL survey had a total of 38 responses; of those responses who indicated they were also GALs only 22 worked in an MDLO office whereas 4 did not work in an MDLO office. Thus, not only is the sample size small for the GAL survey, but there is a notable difference between the number of participants in each group. This is also true for the SSP survey. A total of 25 people answered the SSP survey; of those who indicated they were SSPs (and not GALs), 15 worked in an MDLO office and 5 worked in a non-MDLO office. Because of the small sample sizes and the difference between the number of participants in each group, significance testing performed on the stakeholder surveys should be interpreted with caution.

Another limitation is that the court files contain limited information. Furthermore, the files consisted primarily of minute orders, pleadings, and court files. This information likely varied between judicial officers. Thus, it is difficult to determine consistency in representation across a case.

Conclusion

In conclusion, though it does appear as though there are some differences between MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs with regards to filing motions, rates of reunification, and perceptions of collaboration and engagement in advocacy behaviors these differences are ultimately non-significant. Rather, the data appears to suggest that MDLO GALs and Independent Contract GALs are

equally likely to provide quality legal representation to the children they serve. This could explain why the results did not follow the prior literature: children all received quality legal representation, and thus there were no differences to be found between the two models.

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