Child Support Report

OFFICE OF CHILD SUPPORT ENFORCEMENT

Vol. 34 No. 10 October - November 2012

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Inside This Issue

Commissioner's Voice: Change management in the child support program 3

In Oklahoma, choosing to make 'healthy families' our overarching goal 4

'Rapid Process Improvement' is changing the culture in Georgia 5

Tribal child support and domestic violence, sexual assault 7

San Francisco reaches out to both parents in domestic violence cases 8

Training helps Texas staff 'nurture hope' in survivors 9

Tribal settlements prompt Coeur d'Alene staff to act quickly 11

Collaboration project helps homeless veterans with child support issues 12

How do we manage change?

In this issue of the Child Support Report*, we begin a series of articles on "change management." Three state child support directors—Illinois Director Pamela Lowry, Oklahoma Director Gary Dart, and former Georgia Director Keith Horton—begin the series with stories about managing change in their child support programs.*

'Change is a journey'

In Illinois, rebalancing the program through conversation with all staff

By Pamela Lowry, Director
Illinois Division of Child Support Services

It may come as no surprise that the Illinois child support program committed to a culture of change early in this 21st century. In 2003, when we embarked on our business process reengineering, we acknowledged widely to all staff our goal to change the culture of our organization. Once they heard that (scary) sentiment, we added, "Change is a journey, not a destination."

We believe that public service organizations need to plan change continuously to be responsive to customers. Positive change occurs only when leaders inform and engage the entire organization. Cultures don't only change from the top; they change from the bottom, middle, top, across intra-organizational segments, across partner organizations, and sometimes from the outside in. Organizations (and the people in them) will experience change; the key is to recognize the potential for change and harness it for positive outcomes.

When change begins from the outside in, it almost always signals a policy shift; for example, from a change in administration, a court decision, or a legislative change. In Illinois, we began to see a broad policy shift several years ago when national and regional policy discussions began to show concern for the impact of child support policies on low-income fathers.

Decision to rebalance

Once Commissioner Turetsky began speaking about the broader goals of the federal child support program, it became clear that the Illinois child support program needed to rebalance the program. The rebalancing played out in many forms. We consolidated our noncustodial parents unit with our community outreach function and renamed the section Parent Support Services. We created a poster

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for all of our offices and added a statement that we will be fair to all parents. We revamped our approach to helping unemployed noncustodial parents find jobs, although the economy constrains those efforts. Most importantly, we streamlined our process for noncustodial parent modification review, when the reason for the request is unemployment.

All of these changes underscored the evolving culture change around including both parents in service delivery and prepared us for the changes required by the *Turner v Rogers* decision. Illinois child support staff, including our legal representatives, closely reviewed the filings in the *Turner* case. Although Illinois courtroom practices did not exactly mirror the practices in the *Turner* decision, some of our practices were problematic. Even before the *Turner* decision, we were preparing to make changes that would align us with the Solicitor General's opinion. (The Office of the Solicitor General, in the U.S. Department of Justice, supervises and conducts government litigation in the U.S. Supreme Court.)

Informing and engaging all staff

We began with a policy memorandum to staff to inform them that contempt filings needed to be based on a belief that the nonpaying parent possessed the means to pay. We understood, however, that culture change this important required more than a memorandum.

Every year, I visit each regional office and share with staff thoughts about the preceding year and plans for the future. In 2011, Diane Potts, Deputy Attorney General for Child Support in the Office of the Attorney General, joined me as a speaker at these visits. We also asked our attorneys to join us in the audience, so Diane and I could speak to our own staff and to each other's in a united voice.

For my part, I explained that it did not make policy sense or fiscal sense to pursue jailing for indigent parents. I shared with staff that some people around the nation believed that child support programs created modern "debtor prisons" for indigent parents. I said that while I personally thought that was a bit strong and I did not entirely agree, I did think we needed to reflect seriously on what we were trying to do. It is not in the best interests of families to use the civil process to take away the liberty of poor parents. That simply exacerbates the problems of the family, to no good effect. The underlying concept behind jailing for civil contempt of child support orders is that the person jailed holds the key to the jailhouse doors. In fact, not all parents hold the key. If they do not have resources to pay, the jailing can be seen as punishment for poverty. I shared some statistics that illustrate that we actually spent more in pursuing contempt from poor parents than we collected. In fact, the deficit was more than $300,000 per year.

I appealed to our legal representatives to understand that we do not ask them to "prosecute" parents. We ask them to help us use our civil powers to establish reasonable orders and to take reasonable steps to enforce those orders. We ask them to seek solutions for families that are fair and equitable. We ask them to listen to both parents, and to help us forge agreements and orders that promote economic stability for children in a way that recognizes the actual circumstances of parents. I also made it clear that when a nonpaying parent does have the means to provide support, contempt can be a good remedy.

Diane explained the *Turner* case, its legal implications, and the importance of a child support practice reaching the Supreme Court. It was a sobering moment for all our staff to realize that some of our practices had serious constitutional implications.

As you may imagine, our remarks were not received with unanimous acclaim. Staff had deep concerns and asked thoughtful questions. Many heard our message as "don't pursue contempt," in part because they perceived our remarks as an indication that they had done something "wrong." Some staff believe that jail time is "deserved" for anyone who doesn't pay support—no matter what the circumstances of the debtor. Others believe that the parent will "shake the trees" of family members (asking them for money) to get the purge amount. Some worry that custodial parents will be unhappy because they want to punish the other parent by jailing.

We needed to respond to these reactions in a respectful manner. Of course, we were not abandoning contempt as a remedy, we told staff. Rather, we were adjusting the cast of our net. Experience and data showed that we cast our net too wide. We were catching poor schools of fish more often than the sharks we hoped to catch. And, we did not believe anyone had been wrong in the past, but we do believe we have a better understanding now and that should inform our practices.

As for indigent parents "shaking the family tree," we know that the family members most likely are low-income as well. We don't want a father's grandmother to mortgage her home. It isn't her debt.

Finally, we aren't in the business of punishment no matter how much some of our customers may wish for us to be. We are a taxpayer funded program designed to effectively collect support. Vengeance is not in our job description—thank goodness!

Where we are today

Today, I would say this culture change is widely accepted. Had Diane and I not held statewide conversations with all staff, I believe this would still be a highly contentious issue. As it is, I believe that many staff have a greater understanding of the reasons underlying the change and actually support the policy. I imagine there are some who do not agree, but they also had the opportunity to listen and be heard. In the end, when it comes to culture change in a large organization, the best that we can hope for is transparency and dialogue. Without that, culture change is only skin-deep.

Commissioner's Voice

Commissioner's VOICE Blog

Change management in the child support program

"Managing change in the workplace" is a catchphrase in government and business worlds. Within our child support community, we, too, are exploring ways to manage change in our program.

In many ways, the child support program exemplifies a "culture of change." Child support has steadily evolved over the decades from a welfare cost-recovery model to a major family support program in a technologically savvy environment. We are combining traditional and automated child support tools with innovative, family-focused approaches to promote parental responsibility, to move more nonpaying cases to paying status, and to increase the reliability of child support payment. The "bubble chart" illustrates this approach.

At the same time, the child support program in a number of states and counties has been grappling with another set of changes related to staff reductions, limited resources, and reorganization. While our bubble chart helps us envision the program's culture change, our challenge is to create an environment that stimulates this new approach in the context of more constrained program resources.

Managing change in the child support world means creating a workplace where all staff understand and value the program's increased emphasis on obtaining regular support payments for children, rather than its traditional focus on debt threshold-based enforcement. Quite simply, we know that programs can collect child support more reliably when a noncustodial parent receives a regular paycheck and when an income withholding order is in place. The program collects 70 percent of payments through income withholding.

Managing this shift in emphasis requires a more complex case management environment—one where the computer helps caseworkers stratify caseloads and select the right tool for the right person at the right time to increase the likelihood of reliable support. The shift means implementing early intervention strategies, sensible policies and practices, and service delivery approaches to address barriers to payment. It means more collaboration with other programs and agencies. It means accepting both parents as our customers in the best interest of their child and finding the right balance of enforcement and engagement to get the results families need. It means believing that what we all do—as individuals and together—makes a profound difference in the well-being of the children and families we serve.

Our child support colleagues across the country are managing change in many ways. Some are implementing strategies, continuous process improvement tools, and performance assessments to increase program efficiencies and the potential for positive outcomes. Others are creating strategic collaborations that respond to specific challenges of our diverse customer population, such as poverty, poor health, incarceration and joblessness. Programs are making organizational changes throughout, adopting new agency names and new ways of working together, in order to promote a more family-centered and effective approach to obtaining reliable support. Many programs are effecting change, from program administrators to line staff, through cross-agency discussions, strategic planning, and employee training and mentoring.

This newsletter begins a series of articles about managing child support program change. Illinois Director Pam Lowry explains how she and other leaders encouraged staff to think about how to rebalance the program through dialogue. They held conversations throughout the agency as a logical next step in a progression of service delivery improvements and spurred by the recent *Turner v. Rogers* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court. On page 4, Oklahoma Director Gary Dart tells us about the driving force behind his state's overarching, strategic goal—*healthy families.* On page 5, former Georgia Director Keith Horton explains streamlined processes to give customers faster, friendlier and easier services.

The articles that follow highlight domestic violence, in honor of Domestic Violence Awareness Month; tribal programs, in honor of Native American Heritage Month; and veterans, in honor of Veterans Day. In those topic areas, too, child support managers are changing their approach to help staff work with parents who experience a variety of situations.

Change management is key to helping us move toward a family-centered child support services model that recognizes that parents pay child support more reliably when they have a job and stay connected to their children. I hope you consider some of the ideas in our series of articles in the coming year. Let me know how your agency is managing change by sharing your thoughts on the Commissioner's Voice blog.

Vicki Turetsky

In Oklahoma, choosing to make 'healthy families' our overarching goal

By Gary Dart, Director
Oklahoma Child Support Services

Some may not realize it, but the OCSE "bubble chart" is actually more a part of our lives than just a "daisy from D.C."—every program has signed a Performance Agreement to support its goals with available child support program funding. But unless you happen to win one of those wonderful OCSE grants, there is no new money to pursue those "petals"; so how do we get there, especially when we have to make our existing funding go further than ever to try to help our already expanding caseloads?

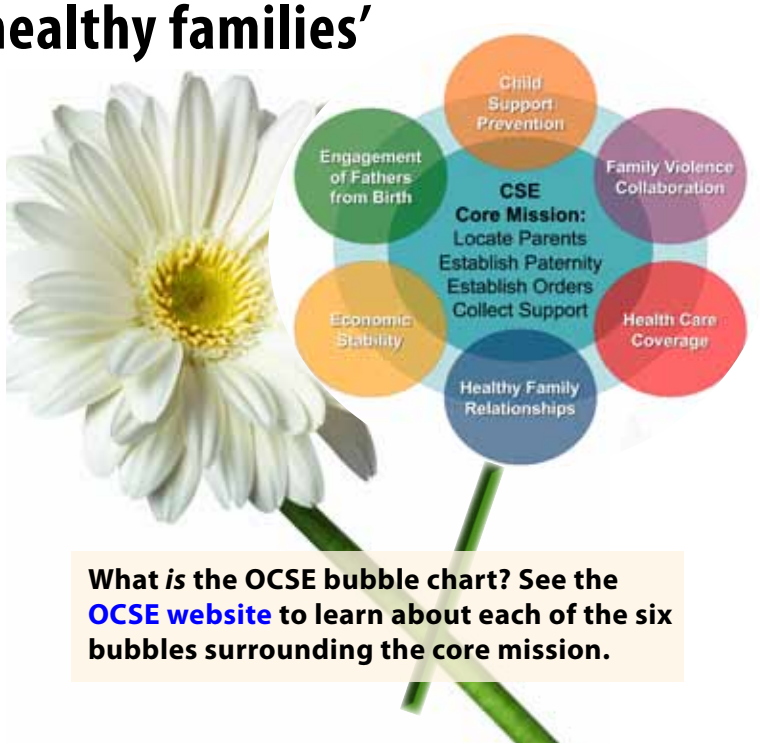
In Oklahoma, we answered the question through strategic planning efforts and establishing what we call *"healthy families"* as our overarching goal for all we do. What do we mean by *healthy families*? Two things: first, the goal—that our customers could become well-functioning families, whether they choose to be an intact family or not; and second, a test, a lodestar, a viewpoint to use in making choices about what we will do for our customers in our work. In the latter sense, *healthy families* is about using our resources and our choices to do those things that will best allow the families we encounter to approach that well-functioning ideal of our overarching goal.

Choices? What choices? Everything we do is automated! Well, not exactly. We make choices every day, and thinking about what we can do to facilitate a healthier family can guide us in what we choose. On the contrary, if we don't consider the possible impact on the families involved when we make choices in our work, sometimes we can cause actual harm.

What's best for the family

In almost every situation where we have some discretion, we make choices that invariably fall within one of three areas: 1) those that benefit us as individuals; (2) those that primarily benefit our agency or program; and 3) those that are best for our customers. Some examples will help illustrate how our choices may tilt toward one or another of these interests instead of what may be best for the family.

When we are taking care of ourselves, we are usually just following policy, not getting in trouble, but not looking at the impact of our work either. Should I answer all those call-center messages in order as we are supposed to, or do I deal out of sequence with the innocent grandfather needing access to the bank account (identified through the Financial Institution Data Match, or FIDM) he shares with his delinquent noncustodial-parent grandson so he can buy his medications? Adhering to the directions of inflexible policy may keep us out of trouble, but does it get in the way of helping families be as strong as they can be?



What *is* the OCSE bubble chart? See the OCSE website to learn about each of the six bubbles surrounding the core mission.

How can benefitting our agency not be the best thing to do? Consider these choices. Do I keep the FIDM in place on the long haul truck driver who has been seriously in arrears, or do I release it as requested by the custodial parent so he can pay his tolls, keep working, and continue to make his current support payments? She says they are just now getting along and he has begun interacting with his kids when he is in town, so she wants to leave him alone and working, but aren't we supposed to collect support when we can? Isn't this the bird in the hand that will help our performance measures just as they taught us? Should I ever turn down any collection opportunity?

Using *healthy families* as a test to guide our choices means doing things to facilitate that goal. Think of a family that gets reliable and dependable support voluntarily paid because both parties believe that the obligation is fair and just; a family where the parties interact and work things out in constructive ways; a family that, with the help of community partners, is able to address their needs.

If we always choose to do the things that will achieve the best long-term outcome for the family, we will invariably also do what is best for ourselves and our program or agency overall. Working for ***healthy families*** has to be everybody's job and requires us to make choices without cookie cutters but with our eyes open and a goal in mind. It also requires that we change our focus from ***us*** to ***them***; performance

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measures are important, but they are all about what we did. Focusing on outcomes is about the differences that we can make for our customers, not by changing what we do, but by changing why we do it and what we want to achieve.

Focusing on outcomes changes both the inquiry and the answers; there is a huge difference between customers who get responses from us such as, "We don't do that here, but I know where you can get help with that" instead of "That's not my job." We don't need extra funding to know where we can refer our customers to get help with food, utilities or clothing, or to make a referral to a mediation service so they can get past how they split the sheets to start working together for the sake of their child.

Hopefully, by looking beyond ourselves and our program to seek the best possible solutions for those we serve, we can get the children all of the benefits of growing up with supportive parents, and we may incidentally also get customers who are more cooperative with us.

Changing our program culture

So how do we get our staffs to change their focus? It won't happen overnight. In Oklahoma, we are trying to talk about *healthy families* at all of our leadership, attorney, and supervisor meetings, and, as our overarching goal, *healthy families* will continue to be a prominent part of our strategic planning process.

However, if looking at customer outcomes is to be more than "this month's flavor," then we have to change the culture. Unfortunately, our messages are mixed (and mixed-up to some!). As long as our heavily measured program is still driven by counts of what we do, it will be hard for us to capture and promote the outcomes we hope to achieve.

Our programs and OCSE need to develop an outcome measurement system and let staff know that it is valued. We are missing a huge opportunity by not being able to talk about our program in terms other than numbers. In these days of budget tightening at both state and federal levels, it behooves us to be able to talk about the differences we make for healthier families.

The director prepared this article from thoughts he delivered at the 2012 National Child Support Enforcement Association's Policy Forum and at the National Council of Child Support Directors' annual meeting, and from an article he prepared for the NCSEA Child Support Communiqué *publication*.

'Rapid Process Improvement' is changing the culture in Georgia

By Keith Horton, Former Director
Georgia Division of Child Support Services

In 2006, leaders in the Georgia Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) had to make a difficult choice after several years of stagnant performance. How could we give our customers faster, friendlier and easier services and improve the efficiency of our agency, while developing a culture of continuous improvement?

The new leaders at that time realized that the agency was either going to stay on the "burning platform" and continue down the status quo path to its peril or take a calculated risk of escaping to an environment where it could thrive. The leaders chose to take the riskier path of embracing a concept of continuous improvement that would change the culture of the agency and the way that it conducted business.

They adopted Rapid Process Improvement (RPI), a "lean management methodology," to streamline processes through eliminating waste. They identified types of waste through an exercise called "value stream mapping," which analyzes all tasks in a focus area.

The leaders went on to introduce RPI to more than 1,100 staff. Trainers helped managers understand this process of continuous improvement. Managers selected "RPI Champions" and trained and deployed them to ease employees' fear of this new concept, and they championed the efforts of staff who fully embraced this change.

The RPI initiative would eventually standardize all child support processes statewide.

Working smarter, faster, together

The agency experienced its share of employees who could not or would not adapt to change. But the leadership stayed the course and avoided the temptation of going back to the old way of conducting business.

DCSS began to imbed RPI into the way it does business. RPI requires standard operating procedures with employee-led ideas. Subject-matter experts (employees doing the work), along with RPI Champions, conducted RPI "events" to develop uniform and standard processes. An RPI implementation team developed a plan to deliver and implement RPI training statewide.

Data and success stories gathered from the RPI events were broadcast to every employee to demonstrate the

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effectiveness of the initiative. As new leaders began to emerge, Georgia DCSS not only experienced increased performance, but also a new spirit of continuous improvement and data-driven decisions.

It is exciting to see the enthusiasm and ownership of frontline staff in the RPI process. DCSS staff has been empowered to make decisions concerning new processes. All are working smarter, faster and together.

Prior to the RPI efforts, interaction between the custodial and the noncustodial parents was more likely approached from an adversarial viewpoint. By implementing the changes and educating staff, the adversarial approach has dramatically decreased and become more of a partnership method.

Examples of the RPI events

Five examples of the 12 RPI "events" (or aspects of the program) demonstrate why staff is thrilled with its success.

- Same Day Service is the process that moves a request for services from application or referral up to legal filing in one business day, versus the previous 71 business days. DCSS has given Same Day Service to more than 275,000 custodial parents and worked over 50,000 backlogged establishment cases through this process.

- Enforcement: Early Intervention requires that employees contact noncustodial parents to educate them about the DCSS services. This education supports the "soft glove" approach to lessen the adversarial approach, respond early to changes in circumstances and reduce the overall enforcement processing time from 126 days to 90 days.

- Locate is defined in terms of quick (various online resources) and in-depth (requiring more research and investigative work). All staff perform a quick locate on a case before advancing it to the in-depth function if needed. This practice has reduced the number of referrals to the locate unit. The agency no longer clings to the postal service as the primary source for locate. The percentage of cases needing locate has since been reduced from 17 percent to 4.1 percent of the total caseload.

- Legal: RPI eliminated five hand-offs in the legal secretary process and saved the cost of 10 work-hours per week.

- Financial: RPI has streamlined case management procedures for customers to pay online resulting in a decrease of undistributed collections (unidentified or funds in error) by 92 percent.

Change can be tough

RPI represents change; change can create fear; and fear can lead to resistance. Agencies that consider the RPI processes should anticipate resistance and prepare for a very "tough road" to organizational change. "Buy-in" at every level is vital to the initiative's success. During implementation and performance assessments, employee feedback may lead to many changes to the standard operating procedures. Reporting to track and monitor the correct data elements may be difficult but critical to the success of this initiative.

The benefits of RPI lead to quality and improved workflow, productivity, and employee morale through teamwork. In DCSS, the level of service delivery quickly increased through the Same Day Service and Locate RPI events. The remaining events assisted the agency with reducing "rework," eliminating hand-offs and increasing performance.

For more information about Rapid Process Improvement, contact Georgia DCSS Deputy Director Tanguler Gray-Johnson at 404-657-3861 or tsgray@dhr.state.ga.us.

The number of tribal child support programs continues to grow. Now 58 tribes operate child support programs; 45 comprehensive programs offer a full range of child support services to families and 13 others are in the start-up phase. Tribal child support programs can find resources in the Tribal Agencies section on the OCSE website.

In Focus

Tribal child support and domestic violence, sexual assault

By Tami Lorbecke, Technical Specialist
Forest County Potawatomi Tribal Child Support Agency

She came into my office quietly, reluctantly, and sat on the edge of the chair across from me. She was so young and looked so nervous sitting there. I could sense her anxiety and intuitively knew there was a sad story behind her failure to cooperate with our agency.

She had applied for TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) through the tribe's Economic Support program; our tribal child support agency received an automatic referral. She had failed to come to either of the previous two appointments I scheduled for her, and now she was in jeopardy of losing her cash benefit (pursuant to TANF guidelines) for herself and her 9-month-old daughter.

I was grateful that day for the knowledge and practical experience at a domestic violence and sexual assault (DV/SA) shelter. It helped me recognize that look in her face ... the look of fear, humiliation and desperation.

I talked gently to her, explaining why she was being forced to come to my office to tell me intimate information about her daughter's conception and birth. I asked if there was any reason why she was afraid to cooperate and give the name of the putative father.

She stuttered, barely audible, and told me she had been raped.

Rape…domestic violence…economic support…child support. In Indian Country, these sometimes go hand-in-hand. It's important that the service providers in these programs understand how each other's program functions. It is also helpful for them to understand their court system. Fortunately for the young woman who walked into my office that day, I knew about the other programs.

Our tribal child support agency had a strong working relationship with our economic support program as well as our local DV/SA shelter and the tribal court.

I spoke to her economic support worker and was able to get her case flagged as a "good cause" case, allowing me to close the child support case and prevent any further harm or victimization to her and her child. I referred her to the DV/SA shelter, where she could find the crucial help to cope with her trauma. She was able to continue getting cash benefits to raise her daughter without an identified father, as she tried to put her life back together.

For child support workers, it can be a challenge to learn how to recognize the subtleties of domestic violence or sexual assault. Domestic violence can be especially difficult to recognize as it often includes coercive power and control that doesn't leave visible evidence on the victim. Non-physical abuse related to child support and paternity establishment include threats such as "You name me as the daddy and I'll get custody of the kid!" These threats can be especially frightening to a non-Indian mother when the putative father is an enrolled member of the tribe because she is afraid the tribal court will 'side' with the father. Forcing an abuser to be accountable and responsible for his or her children may trigger irrational anger toward everyone involved.

More often than not, Native American women will not access any legal system out of distrust and fear of being "re-victimized." DV/SA shelters and programs can assist victims to obtain protection orders and coordinate services with the child support agency to expedite the order establishment for financial support and/or health insurance coverage. Child support payments can be paid through the tribal child support agency or a state disbursement unit, protecting the whereabouts of the victim and child(ren).

Tribal child support workers can:

- Work with local domestic violence/sexual assault programs to learn about the dynamics of abuse.
- Coordinate the referral process between agencies to minimize client re-victimization of clients.

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Statistics matter ...

The rate of sexual assault and rape among American Indians is over 2.5 times higher than any other race or ethnic group.

Domestic violence is reported to be at least seven times higher for Native American women than any other race.

70 percent of sexual assaults are not reported.

American Indians and Crime, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004

- Work with a local economic support program to coordinate the "good cause" process.
- Collaborate with the tribal court to ensure client safety before, during and after hearings.
- Share program brochures across agencies so they are available to clients.
- Develop safety plans for clients and staff to protect everyone from retaliation by the perpetrator.
- Create a safe office environment for both clients and staff.
- Abide by all confidentiality policies.

For victims living in a DV/SA shelter, obtaining child support can make the difference between becoming financially stable enough to make it on their own versus returning to their abuser. When child support, economic support, and DV/SA agencies work together, along with their courts, they can provide the support needed to help victims leave abusive situations.

For more information on tribal child support enforcement, contact the National Tribal Child Support Association.

Resources: Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault in Indian Country

Mending the Scared Hoop

American Indians Against Abuse

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence

National Coalition Against Sexual Assault

"Building Domestic Violence Health Care Responses in Indian Country: A Promising Practices Report"

Community Connections

San Francisco reaches out to both parents in domestic violence cases

By Thomas Wolf, Program Coordinator
San Francisco Department of Child Support Services

In July 2011, the San Francisco Department of Child Support Services began a new program to reach out to the parents in our caseload who have domestic violence associated to their case. Director Karen Roye, who envisioned the outreach initiative, had identified a nearly 300-percent increase in the number of child support cases with reported family violence since 2008—a sobering statistic.

Our goal for the program is to offer noncustodial parents the opportunity to meet their financial responsibilities to their children while fostering confidence with the custodial parents so they can address child support issues safely through our office. We offer both parents the opportunity to work with a trained, dedicated case manager.

As the department expands efforts to reduce incidents of domestic violence, we hope our new outreach program will reduce the frustration around the issue of child support and the possibility of future domestic violence.

To begin the outreach program, we organized the domestic violence caseload, almost 2,000 as of July 2011, and assessed each of the 700 cases in which the noncustodial parent was living in San Francisco. Although 77 percent of these cases had current child support orders, nearly 30 percent of the noncustodial parents had not made a payment in three months or more, some in over a year.

Next, we began outreach on each case, starting with the survivor of domestic violence. We contacted as many of the custodial parents as possible to assess the degree and history of family violence. We offered referrals to various San Francisco services to help them cope with their domestic violence issues, and we talked about our renewed outreach efforts to the noncustodial parent. We explained our goal in contacting the noncustodial parent to redirect their frustrations away from the custodial parent by engaging with our agency in a non-putative manner.

The custodial parents overwhelmingly approved of our outreach program. They welcomed the idea of receiving financial support from the other parent for their children and our efforts to redirect the noncustodial parent's frustrations and issues related to child support to our agency.

In addition to the standard enforcement remedies, we

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began to call the noncustodial parents in these cases to reengage with our office so we could address their barriers to employment and educate them about the child support program and best practices to interact with our office and the Family Court.

Progress report

In the past year, our office has attempted to call or meet with every parent with a family violence case, many of them repeatedly. We have referred the noncustodial parents who reengaged with our office to One Stop Career-Link centers. The centers assist with resume building, job leads and referrals to fatherhood programs and to educational programs for those who want to obtain a high school diploma. Some noncustodial parents participated in the Enhanced Transitional Job Demonstration grant project that provides the possibility of transitional employment. In addition, we looked at child support orders to determine whether it reflected the parents' actual income.

Because of this outreach program for custodial and noncustodial parents in the family violence caseload, we have seen a 5.5 percent increase in child support payments since January 2012. Custodial parents speak favorably of our renewed outreach. Most importantly, we have had no reports of safety issues or any domestic incidents due to our outreach efforts.

As this demographic continues to change, the department will continue to expand our efforts to help reduce incidents of domestic violence and to ensure that domestic violence victims can safely get child support.

For more information about this initiative, contact Thomas Wolf, program coordinator, at 415-356-2759, or Freda Randolph Glenn, operations manager, at 415-356-2901.

Promising Practices

Training helps Texas staff 'nurture hope' in survivors

By Ruth Anne Thornton, Program Specialist
Janece Rolfe, Communications Manager
Texas Office of the Attorney General
Child Support Division

For many victims of family violence, child support represents an opportunity to establish and maintain economic independence from an abusive partner. At the same time, the child support process may introduce safety concerns for some victims.

The Texas Office of the Attorney General's Child Support Division (CSD) in collaboration with the Texas Council on Family Violence (TCFV), developed policy, procedures and resources to help victims obtain child support services as safely as possible. The most significant outcome of the collaboration with TCFV has been developing family violence training for child support staff.

Empowering survivors

Domestic disputes over child support have resulted in tragic outcomes for children and families. Proper training gives staff the tools to recognize family violence cases and respond appropriately. The goal of the Texas program is to create a system that empowers survivors to make informed, safe choices about pursuing child support.

In the words of Erin Goodison, a family violence advocate from Austin:

> *"We want to nurture hope in every survivor, because it's hope that gets them to safety. Without hope, folks would never leave an abusive relationship. If they didn't hope that things could be better, they would never reach out for services. If we nurture hope, we can help folks sustain themselves through the long process of meeting needs through systems."*

Within the limits of child support agencies, what role can they realistically play in nurturing hope? What can inspire agencies to nurture hope? What is it about the concept that might cause discomfort?

A video on YouTube, produced by the Texas Office of the Attorney General, features the state child support program director, and domestic violence advocates and survivors.

Components of training

Child support employees who attend CSD's family violence training answer those thought-provoking questions. Called "Fundamentals of Family Violence for Child Support Staff," the interactive, four-hour curriculum includes

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video clips from Texas survivors who share their personal experiences about the role of child support in helping them leave abusive relationships. Hearing directly from our customers makes a lasting impression on staff about the impact they can have to change a person's life.

In addition to video clips, class discussion and interactive exercises help participants to understand the dynamics of family violence, which serve as the basis for updated policies on handling at-risk cases.

The first half of the training focuses on the dynamics of family violence by exploring different facets of abusive relationships through a child support lens. The Power and Control Wheel, developed by survivors of family violence, illustrates various tactics abusers can use to dominate their partner. Obvious tactics include physical or sexual assault, but often psychological, economic or emotional abuse can have equally devastating consequences.

Power and Control Wheel

Participants apply various tactics from the Power and Control Wheel to the child support process. For example, one small group might be assigned the tactic "intimidation" and identify two or three concrete examples of the role intimidation can play in the child support process. A survivor might never apply for services for fear of retaliation, might agree to an order that is below guidelines to get through the process, or might be pressured to close the case and forego services.

The second half of the training connects the concepts discussed in the first half to CSD's newly updated "Family Violence Policy and Procedures." Class participants bring the new policy to life by searching it for answers to questions about handling family violence cases and presenting their findings to the group. They also spend time in a coached role-play activity that makes employees more comfortable discussing safety issues with customers.

Throughout the training, participants watch video clips of interviews with CSD administrators and family violence advocates and survivors who address family violence dynamics, child support-specific concerns, and best practices from their unique perspectives. Each video segment yields enlightening, and sometimes challenging, discussions.

Going on the road

In June, staff from CSD's Family Initiatives and Training sections began traveling to offices across Texas to provide the new training to CSD employees. They have since trained over 700 employees. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with 93 percent of respondents rating the training "excellent" or "good."

In addition to the high rating, comments from employees demonstrate the training's effectiveness:

"Very informative ... eye opening in more ways than you can imagine." ... "Awesome training! It provided a better understanding (insight) for me to be more sensitive and attentive to customers who are victims of family violence." ... "Very interesting and made me realize there are all kinds of abuse besides physical. I came from an abusive marriage and wish I would have had this information back then. Thank you." ... "The class was great. I have a greater understanding of what falls under family violence and got to put some of what I learned to use as I took calls that afternoon."

Survivors' testimony

Above all, the greatest testimony of the training's value comes from survivors, who express appreciation for CSD's work to help Texas families get support safely.

- Courtney, a survivor who is now a family violence advocate, said, "I'm more than pleased that the OAG's office has taken such an active role to make sure they don't disclose addresses and they don't tell the noncustodial parent or abuser where the survivor is. So thank you, OAG's office."

- Michelle, another custodial parent, said, "What the attorney general had to enforce was a huge blessing in my case. It took the spotlight off of me. I was no longer the bad guy, the attorney general's office was the bad guy. And I don't want anybody to be in that place but I figure they have a little more power than I do."

- Tiffiny, who lived in a family violence shelter while pursuing services, wanted child support staff to know that their actions to help families have a lasting impact. She said, "Even though I went through that process and it was lengthy and it was scary, at the end I held on and it paid off. I bought my first home about six years ago by myself with the help of child support."

Family violence presents unique challenges for child support agencies, but by working with victim advocates, the Texas Child Support Division has made significant progress in meeting those challenges head-on.

Tribal settlements prompt Coeur d'Alene staff to act quickly

By Nancy Mathieson
OCSE Region X

The Coeur d'Alene Tribe is one of 41 tribes that recently received part of more than $1 billion in a federal settlement over mismanagement of tribal money and trust lands. In April 2012, the Department of the Interior published this press release about the settlement, titled "Secretary Salazar and Attorney General Holder Announce $1 Billion Settlement of Tribal Trust Accounting and Management Lawsuits Filed by More Than 40 Tribes."

The tribe's settlement fund distribution was not eligible for garnishment, so the Coeur d'Alene tribal child support program found another way to convince noncustodial parents that paying their child support debt is a good financial management decision.

As soon as staff learned about the Coeur d'Alene Tribe's plans to distribute funds from the settlement, they realized that the tribe would send some of this money to noncustodial parents in their caseload. Although this settlement money was not eligible for withholding, staff recognized an opportunity. As part of their communication strategy, they contacted all noncustodial parents in their caseload, by phone and letter, to encourage parents to discuss debt management of their case(s) and voluntary payments to reduce or eliminate their child support debt.

The strategy worked. As a result of their conversations with clients, and the parents' willingness to invest some of the settlement funds in their child support debt, the Coeur d'Alene program's 3rd quarter 2012 collections increased 76.25 percent over 2nd quarter. This meant money for families and children that otherwise would not have been collected this year. The staff members don't ask for praise or recognition, but they deserve it just the same.

The Coeur d'Alene tribal child support program in Northern Idaho became federally funded in January 2010. With the permanent appointment of Misty Lowley as the program manager this year, the program has made great strides in strengthening policies for collection that support children and families. Director Lowley and the others in the office (in the photo) form a quiet "let's get the job done" team. Several have degrees and advanced degrees in social work, sociology and criminal justice. Each has the education, experience and passion for helping people.

Coeur d'Alene child support staff, from left: Tamara Curtis, case specialist; Carol Pluff, financial specialist; Toni LaDeaux, case specialist; Misty Lowley, program manager; Carmel McCurdy, staff attorney; Briana Havier, intake specialist; and Mona Daniels, senior case specialist

Child support agencies can refer veterans in their caseload to employment resources at the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor.

Coordination Points

Collaboration project helps homeless veterans with child support issues

By Michael Ginns
OCSE Region I

Since January 2010, OCSE, in a partnership with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the American Bar Association, has worked to assist homeless veterans with their child support issues through pilot projects in nine cities across the country: Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, San Diego, Seattle and the District of Columbia.

The initial results, published in a 2011 OCSE fact sheet, are spurring further research into the number of veterans in the child support program caseload and how the program can build effective relationships with military families, veterans, and the organizations who work on their behalf. The stories below, from members of the project team, give glimpses into the breadth of issues veterans and their families face every day and how child support agencies are making a difference in their lives.

Four success stories

DJ is a 63-year-old veteran who served in the U.S. Army in Vietnam. He was honorably discharged and raised his four children as the custodial parent. When he came to our program, he was living with his adult child and her partner; he experienced a stroke 6 months earlier. An out-of-state child support agency had been intercepting 50 percent of his only source of income—$1,000 per month in Social Security Retirement benefits. Through the project, we determined that the underlying out-of-state child support debt was based on a fraudulent welfare grant going to the mother. As a result, $65,000 in child support debt was set aside and the state halted the garnishment of the monthly Social Security monthly benefit. We connected DJ with the VA HealthCare system for his medical needs.

SC is disabled and served in the U.S. Army during peacetime in the 1970s. He received SSI and was living in a clean and sober VA-funded transitional housing shelter. He had a history of mental health and substance abuse, but now under control, he could address his child support issues through the project. He was responsible for four children by three different relationships. Although it took nearly a year to resolve, the state forgave all $38,000 of state-assigned child support due to his circumstances and modified his remaining child support order from $264 per month to $50 per month. He's happy to have these issues under control, as is the state child support agency.

JP served in the Iraq War and was discharged several years ago. He has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He was overwhelmed with health issues and a large monthly child support order. JP's case is a good example of all project partners collaborating. JP came to us with significant health issues. He dropped off this project's radar for about 11 months until those health issues were under control, then, through the help of a VA Social Service psychologist, JP reconnected and addressed his lingering child support issues. The child support agency worked closely with the custodial parent who lived out of the country to get the paperwork in place to modify his support order.

A Gulf War veteran who receives service-related disability payments recently started receiving Social Security Disability. After getting help at a state assistance council for veterans pro se clinic, he successfully filed pro se motions to address his child support obligations on two separate cases in two counties. The veteran filed motions to address his obligations and arrears due to job loss. Before filing his motion, his obligation was $648 per month with a public assistance arrears balance of $1,900. The veteran's motions were granted. For one of the cases, the county reserved (set aside) his child support obligation and set payment of arrears at $25 per month. The minor children receive disability payments of $257 each. For the other case, the county reserved the current support and reduced the payback on the nonpublic assistance arrears to $50 per month.

Child Support Report

Child Support Report **is published monthly by the Office of Child Support Enforcement. We welcome articles and high-quality digital photos to consider for publication. We reserve the right to edit for style, content and length, or not accept an article. OCSE does not endorse the practices or individuals in this newsletter. You may reprint an article in its entirety (or contact the author or editor for permission to excerpt); please identify *Child Support Report* as the source.**

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