

# Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program

## Research Brief

Road Test 2 | March 2021

Jordan Engel and Kate Stepleton



Sacramento's Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) received a digital marketing grant from the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The purpose of the grant, which was awarded to 14 child support programs around the country, is to research how digital marketing strategies may help child support programs more effectively reach and serve families.

DCSS proposed four sequential tests, each examining the effects of a different digital marketing approach on enrollment in the child support program. The aim of the tests is to increase applications and voluntary case openings among custodial parents who are eligible for child support but who are not participating in the program. This report details methods and descriptive findings from the second test. More information about the project and the previous test can be found in the project's [first evaluation report](#).<sup>1</sup>

Each of the tests involve deploying a video advertisement via different communications channels. The video highlights how DCSS can help busy parents

### Key Findings

1. A targeted email campaign can successfully reach potential child support clients
2. Impressions from an email campaign are largely observed in the first few days following delivery
3. Of the people who opened the message from DCSS, a small percent went on to click any of the three links in the email related to the child support program
4. The email campaign was a low cost method of marketing child support services

<sup>1</sup> Stepleton, Kate, Jordan Engel, and Asaph Glosser. "Evaluation of Digital Outreach and Media Engagement in Sacramento County's Child Support Program," February 2020.

## Test 1: Paid Social Media Advertising

DCSS conducted its first digital marketing test in July 2019. DCSS placed the video as a paid advertisement on Facebook and YouTube, targeting parents with low incomes in Sacramento County. Key findings include:

- DCSS's advertisement was widely viewed in Sacramento County.
- The ad performed differently on the two platforms, with YouTube garnering far more views than Facebook; meanwhile the Facebook ad had a higher click rate.
- We cannot know conclusively whether the placement of the ad drove viewers to submit child support applications and voluntarily open child support cases.

provide for their children. DCSS has and will continue to modify the video between each test to refine its core message.

DCSS aimed to refine its targeting of parents in Sacramento County who could benefit from receiving child support but were not currently using the Department's services.<sup>2</sup>

DCSS partnered with the county Department of Human Assistance (DHA), which administers CalFresh, the county's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Medi-Cal, California's Medicaid program. DHA identified SNAP and Medicaid recipients with children under 18, with the assumption that parents who qualified for food assistance and/or Medicaid could likely benefit from the added income of child support.<sup>3</sup>

The parents DHA identified received an email linking them to the video advertisement, to DCSS's website, and to California's Virtual Online Application for child support services. Following the intervention period, we analyzed engagement with the email campaign, video views, and child support case openings to observe program involvement following DCSS's digital marketing efforts.

## Approach

We describe three elements of our approach: how the audience was targeted, the method of digital communication, and the message, which was contained in the video.

### Audience Targeting

DCSS's target audience for the intervention was potentially eligible parents without active child support cases who were recipients of food assistance or Medicaid. DCSS and DHA believed this was a population that could benefit from the establishment and enforcement of child support orders. DCSS partnered with DHA to identify clients with active CalFresh and Medi-Cal cases who also had children under 18.

There were limitations to the precision of this targeting strategy. Privacy considerations meant that it was not possible to match DCSS data with CalFresh or Medi-Cal data to screen out recipients of food assistance or Medicaid who already had active child support cases. Likewise, of the 11,016 recipients identified by CalFresh and Medi-Cal in Sacramento County, we do not know what proportion were eligible for child support services or had a private party order in place. Although it was unclear if the CalFresh and Medi-Cal recipients in the email distribution list already had active child support cases or

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<sup>2</sup> Email recipients were parents of a child whose other parent is not on the same Medi-Cal or CalFresh case. Another adult, such as a stepparent, could be present on the case.

<sup>3</sup> Medi-Cal and CalFresh are not mandatory referral programs. Recipients of Medi-CAL or CalFresh would need to voluntarily open a child support case.

were eligible for a new child support order, our hypothesis was that CalFresh and Medi-Cal recipients could benefit from child support services if they were not currently receiving them.

*The Sacramento County Department of Child Support Services would like to thank the Sacramento County Department of Human Assistance and the Sacramento Department of Technology for their valuable contributions to the project.*

## Email Campaign

DCSS designed the email communication to be delivered to the target audience. On February 24, 2020, 11,016 CalFresh and Medi-Cal recipients with children under 18 received an email from Sacramento County with the subject line, “Sacramento County – Get Started Today! Learn More about Child Support Services.” The message included short, simple text (e.g., “Do you know what Child Support can do for you?) and a screen capture from the video advertisement (See Appendix A). Recipients could click on several links to including one to DCSS’s home page, one to the YouTube page housing the full video, and one to the online application. To send the campaign DCSS used GovDelivery, a digital communications tool that allows government agencies to construct email, social media, and SMS messages for recipients.

## Video Advertisement

Following the first test, DCSS revised the video based on feedback from viewers of the first video on social media and DCSS employees. While the video in the first test featured a single actress portraying a mother moving through her busy morning routine, the revised [thirty-second ad](#) included a child interacting with the adult actress<sup>4</sup>. This was intended to speak more directly to viewers’ roles as parents. The final frame of the advertisement in the second test displayed the URL of California’s state-run child support website with information about applying for services. There was no clickable link in the video or its description.

## Research Questions

Our evaluation of this test focuses on the following four research questions:

### Research Question 1: Using standard email campaign metrics, how did the targeted email campaign perform?

To assess the effectiveness of an email campaign, it is necessary to understand how recipients engaged with it. Did they open it or disregard it? Once opened, did they click the links contained in the message? These are standard email campaign metrics that can yield insight about how well the email’s messaging engaged recipients.

### Research Question 2: How did the video perform on YouTube?

Although DCSS did not anticipate that all email recipients would follow the link to the YouTube video, DCSS was interested in understanding the behavior of viewers who navigated to the YouTube video from the link in DCSS’s email campaign. Did they watch the video through to completion or click away

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<sup>4</sup> In the first test, there was no clickable link to DCSS’s website in the video ad itself. Viewers would need to click on the advertisement to DCSS’s YouTube page, where they could follow another link to the DCSS website in the description of the video.

## Indicators

### Email Analytics

**Percent Delivered:** The percent of all emails sent that were successfully delivered (e.g., were not bounced back to sender).

**Open Rate:** The percent of all recipients who opened the email. This can be calculated using the number of unique recipients who opened the message or the total number of the times the email was opened. The latter accounts for recipients who opened the email multiple times.

**Clicks:** The number of clicks (from unique recipients or in total) on links embedded in the email.

### YouTube Analytics

**Views:** The number of times the ad was interacted with or viewed in its entirety.

**Average View Duration:** Estimated average time of the 31-second video watched.

**Traffic Source Type:** How viewers navigated to the YouTube video.

### DCSS Administrative Data

**Case Openings:** New voluntary DCSS enrollments. Includes online and paper applications.

**Demographics:** Descriptive information about DCSS enrollees. Includes gender, age, and race of the custodial parent; and the number of unemancipated children on the case. This also includes information about the custodial parent at the time of enrollment, including whether the parent has had a child support case before, whether there is a court order prior to opening the case, and whether the custodial parent has an existing Medi-Cal or CalFresh case.

quickly? On what types of devices did email recipients view the video? Answering these questions may provide insight into how much the video's message aligned with viewers' interests.

### Research Question 3: Compared to the year before, did engagement with DCSS differ during the intervention period?

The ultimate aim of the email campaign was to encourage eligible custodial parents to apply for and open a child support case. Did email recipients submit applications for child support and open cases? Software and data limitations do not allow us to answer such causal questions with certainty. However, comparing enrollment volume after the email was delivered to previous periods can offer DCSS insights into trends in child support case openings.

### Research Question 4: Who are DCSS enrollees?

Since we specifically targeted CalFresh and Medi-Cal recipients in the email campaign, we were interested in the portion of new DCSS clients with active CalFresh or Medi-Cal cases. Did the proportion of new case openings with active Medi-Cal or CalFresh cases during the intervention period differ from the same time period the year before? DCSS is also interested in learning more about the characteristics of their new enrollees. In addressing this research question, we also looked at applicant characteristics and demographic information of custodial parents who enrolled voluntarily.

## Analysis

We conducted descriptive analyses of data from several sources. GovDelivery metrics and YouTube analytics describe the performance of the email campaign and the video, respectively. DCSS administrative data provides information about new cases. The adjacent text box defines key analytic indicators.

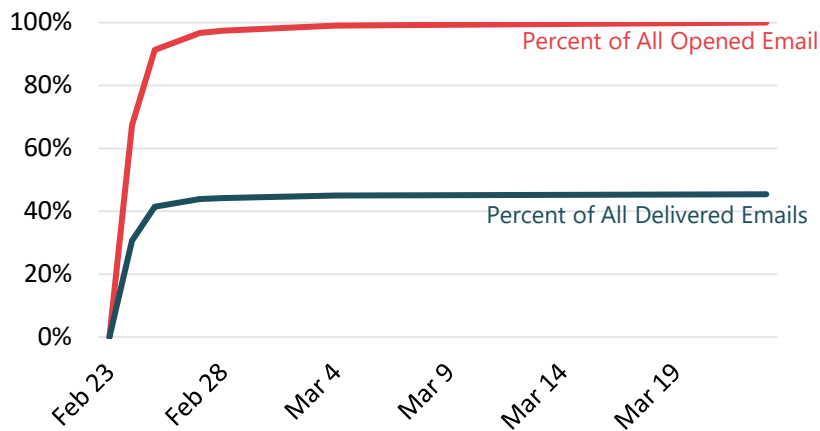
### How did the email campaign perform?

DCSS launched the email campaign on February 24, 2020 and sent the message to 11,016 active CalFresh and Medi-Cal clients with addresses in Sacramento County. The email successfully reached 96 percent of attempted recipients (10,528). Within one month, 4,781 unique recipients opened the email, representing a 45 percent open rate. Compared to an average industry benchmark of 29 percent for email campaigns associated with

government entities,<sup>5</sup> DCSS’s email successfully engaged audiences. Many users appear to have opened the email repeatedly, yielding 8,017 total opens. It is possible that these recipients, who returned to the email after opening it once, found the content especially salient.

We monitored email analytics for thirty days following the email’s delivery, but most activity occurred within the first few days. Of all the unique emails opened, 97 percent were opened between February 24 and February 27 (see the red line in Figure 1). Importantly, as noted above, over half of the emails that were delivered were not opened. The blue line in Figure 1 shows what percentage of all emails delivered were opened over time.

**Figure 1: Percent of unique email opens over study period (2020)**



The second measure of email performance helps us understand the extent to which recipients engaged with the content. Of the people who opened the message from DCSS, a small percentage went on to click any of the three links in the email related to the child support program.<sup>6</sup> The three links of interest in this study garnered 220 clicks. We present the distribution of clicks across the three links in Table 1. Most link clicks occurred within the first few days following the email’s delivery.

**Table 1: Unique and Total Link Clicks**

| Link                             | Clicks from Unique Recipients | Total Clicks |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| Online Child Support Application | 95                            | 117          |
| Child Support website            | 24                            | 24           |
| YouTube                          | 72                            | 79           |

## How did the video perform on YouTube?

Between February 24 and March 24, 2020, the advertisement was viewed in its entirety (average view time: 30 seconds) 27 times by recipients of DCSS’s email. Of these views, 93 percent took place on the

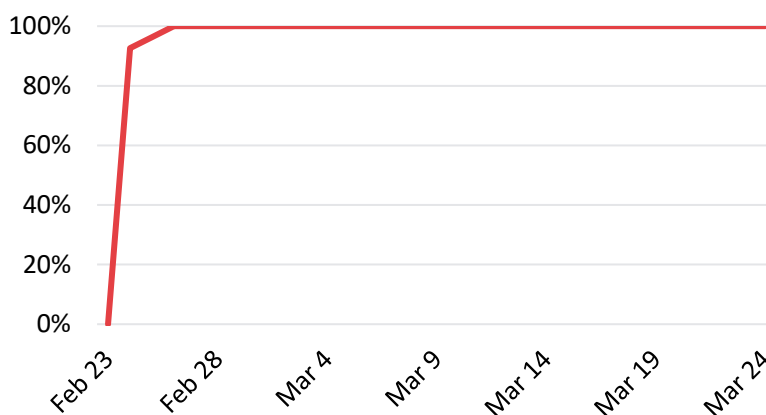
<sup>5</sup> Mailchimp. “Email Marketing Benchmarks.” Accessed November 20, 2020. <https://mailchimp.com/resources/email-marketing-benchmarks/>.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the links related to the child support program, the email included several links related to subscription preferences. Clicks on subscription preferences links are not included in the total clicks reported here.

day the email was sent (see Figure 2). With 72 clicks on the link to YouTube in the email, it is likely that 63 percent of users clicking the link navigated away before the video played in its entirety. This is an essential insight, as information about accessing DCSS’s services, including the URL to California’s child support website, did not appear until the final seconds of the video.

We explored additional data about the video’s viewers who navigated to YouTube from a link in the email and found that a large majority of viewers watched the video on a mobile device. Of the 27 viewers, 74 percent (20) viewed the video on a mobile device, 27 percent (six) viewed the video on a computer, and four percent (one) viewed the video on a tablet. This finding emphasizes the importance of designing marketing materials that can be successfully viewed across device types and especially in mobile formats.

**Figure 2: Percentage of total video advertisement views over study period (2020)**



## Compared to the same time period the year before, did engagement with DCSS differ during the intervention period?

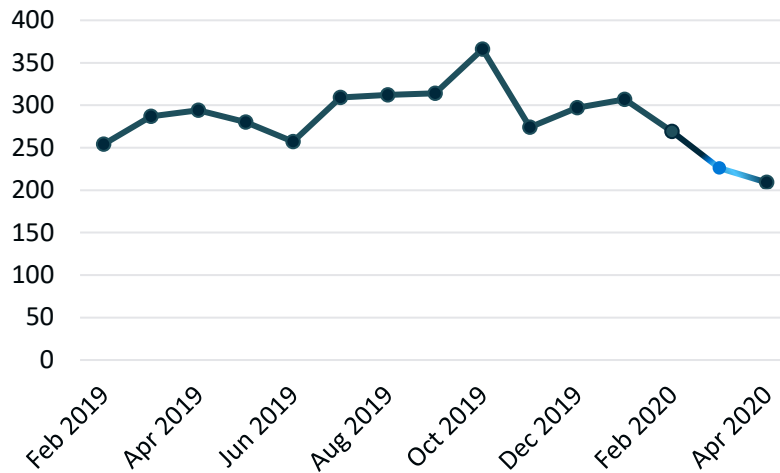
We compared case openings in the weeks following the email campaign’s deployment and the same time period the previous year.<sup>7</sup> We hoped to see an increase in voluntary case openings among members of the target population. Due to data limitations, we were not able to track email recipients through the application and enrollment process. However, if we were to see an increase in voluntary enrollments, it would provide some preliminary support for our hypothesis that the email message led to more voluntary enrollments among CalFresh and Medi-Cal recipients. Compared to the same time period the year before, we saw a slight decrease in applications during the weeks following the email campaign’s deployment. Compared to the previous year (February 24 – March 20, 2019), DCSS saw 4 percent lower voluntary enrollment (1 percent fewer online applications and 10 percent fewer paper applications) between February 24 and March 19, 2020.

Without any external factors influencing engagement with DCSS, if the ad had the desired effect, we would expect to see an increase in voluntary enrollments during the intervention period compared to the same period in the previous year. There was a slight decrease in case openings during the intervention period compared to the same time period in 2019, though DCSS case openings fluctuate each month, by as many as 150 voluntary cases (see Figure 3). Further, outside factors, such as the

<sup>7</sup> We originally intended to study the full month after the email campaign’s deployment, from February 24 until March 24, 2020. However, DCSS staff were sent home due to COVID-19 on March 19 and enrollments were paused after March 20, 2020. As such, we limited the observation period to February 24 through March 19 in 2020. To account for the extra day in February 2020 due to the leap year, we compared February 24 to March 19, 2020 with February 24 to March 20, 2019.

COVID-19 pandemic, economic changes, and other DCSS or state child support agency outreach, may have influenced whether parents enrolled or reengaged with DCSS during the intervention period. We cannot know whether the observed decrease in case openings would have happened in the absence of our intervention, or whether our intervention influenced voluntary enrollment.

**Figure 3: Voluntary Child Support Openings February 2019 – March 2020**



## Who are DCSS applicants?

To understand the context of the intervention, we compared demographic and descriptive information about voluntary enrollees during the month of the intervention period and the same time period in the previous year (Table 3, Figure 4). We did not see a noticeably different portion of DCSS applicants with active CalFresh or Medi-Cal cases in the observed period in 2020 compared to 2019.

**Table 3: Descriptive Information about Voluntary Enrollees  
February 24 – March 20, 2019 and February 24 – March 19, 2020<sup>8</sup>**

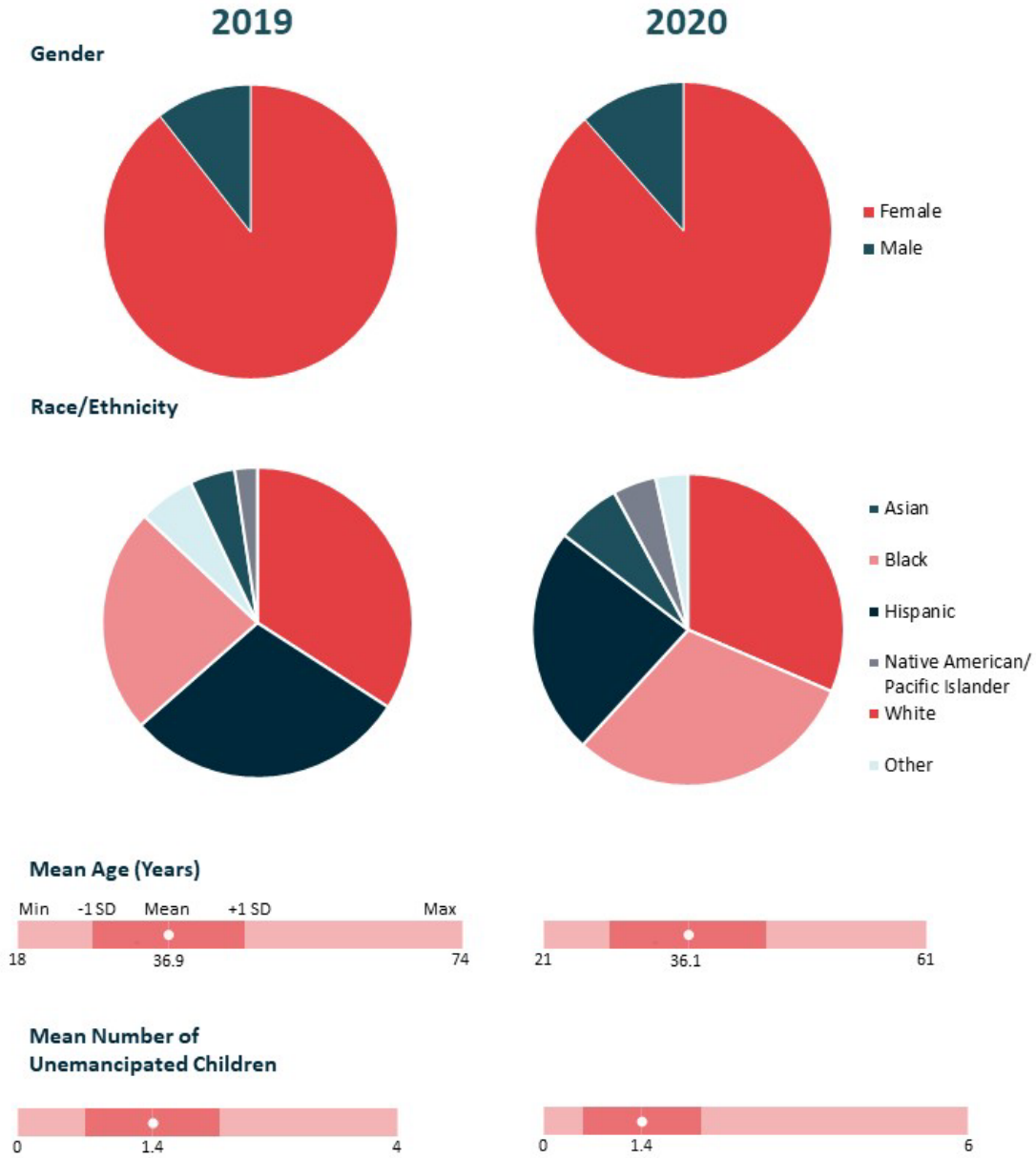
|   | %                    |                      |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|
|   | 2019<br><i>N</i> 162 | 2020<br><i>N</i> 156 |
| Medi-Cal/CalFresh Receipt                 | 36                   | 33                   |
| Prior Cash Aid Recipient                  | 40                   | 31                   |
| Custodial Parent Had Existing Court Order | 47                   | 42                   |
| Applied Online                            | 71                   | 69                   |
| Previously Received Child Support         | 40                   | 38                   |

<sup>8</sup> Descriptive and demographic data in Table 3 describe new DCSS enrollees in February 24 – March 20, 2019 and February 24 – March 19, 2020.



**Figure 4: Demographic Information about Voluntary Enrollees**  
 February 24 – March 20, 2019 and February 24 – March 19, 2020<sup>9,10,11</sup>

*Despite slight enrollment differences, the population of voluntary DCSS applicants in 2020 was similar to the population of applicants in 2019.*



<sup>9</sup> Data presented in Figure 4 describes new voluntary DCSS custodial parents from February 24 – March 20, 2019 and February 24 – March 19, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Race/ethnicity is mutually exclusive. Enrollees could only select one response. Asian includes Asian, Asian Indian, Cambodian, Filipino, and Vietnamese. Native American/Pacific Islander includes Native American, Pacific Islander, and Samoan. We combined categories which had fewer than three responses.

<sup>11</sup> Unemancipated children refer to children in the custodial parents’ care. Cases with 0 unemancipated children refer to custodial parents seeking arrears for their formerly unemancipated children.



## Impact of COVID-19 on the Intervention and Evaluation

Notably, the deployment of the advertisement and email campaign coincided with the onset of COVID-19 in the U.S. The study period, from February 24, 2020 to March 24, 2020 was a period of tremendous upheaval in the lives of Californians. On March 4, 2020, Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state of emergency. On March 20, 2020, DCSS staff were required to work from home, and enrollments were temporarily paused through the rest of the intervention period. Over the next month, many adults experienced job disruption and associated loss of income as stay-at-home orders were issued.

As the crisis spread in March, there was evidence that more families were struggling to make ends meet. CalFresh saw a dramatic increase in applications for food assistance.<sup>12</sup> A national study has shown job loss and drastic reductions in work hours in the first months the pandemic.<sup>13</sup> While the full impact of the coronavirus on the use of social service systems is still unknown, it is possible that COVID-19 affected parents' interest in learning more about the child support system and making use of its services.

The findings from our evaluation may have been influenced by these factors, but it is not possible to know this with certainty. We do not know conclusively whether the email campaign drove viewers to submit OLA applications and voluntarily open child support cases. Considering the unprecedented changes to the economy and to families' lives due to COVID-19, we are unable to determine whether the email campaign had an effect on the number of new, voluntary child support case openings between February 24 and March 19, 2020.

## Lessons Learned

Our investigation of DCSS's email campaign yields several insights to inform efforts to digitally market child support services, specifically those conducted via email campaign:

**A targeted email campaign can successfully reach potential child support clients.** With nearly half of all recipients opening the email from DCSS, we can conclude that, at minimum, the sender and subject line were compelling to the audience. It is possible that the email's open rate surpassed the industry standard because it was sent to recipients who were more likely than the general public to find the information it contained to be of interest. Had more precise targeting been possible—for instance, had we been able to screen out CalFresh and Medi-Cal recipients who were already receiving child support services—engagement with the email might have been even higher.

**The immediate effects of an email campaign are largely observed in the first few days following delivery, while more indirect effects may be unobservable.** It is unsurprising that recipients' interaction with the email happened shortly after delivery. If a child support agency aims to create extended engagement, additional communications would be necessary. While email opens and link clicks are direct measures of recipient engagement, there may have been more indirect or protracted effects. For instance, a recipient may have been introduced to child support services by the email, beginning a longer stage of contemplation preceding eventual application. This process would not be fully reflected in email metrics, YouTube analytics, or DCSS data.

**It is challenging to plan, execute, and evaluate a sophisticated digital marketing campaign within a bureaucratic environment.** By partnering with DHA, DCSS was able to access a population of potential

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<sup>12</sup> America, Code for. "COVID-19's Impact on the Social Safety Net." Code for America, April 7, 2020.

<https://www.codeforamerica.org/news/covid-19s-impact-on-the-social-safety-net>.

<sup>13</sup> "Snapshot of the COVID Crisis Impact on Working Families | Econofact," March 30, 2020. <https://econofact.org/snapshot-of-the-covid-crisis-impact-on-working-families>.

clients it might not have otherwise reached. However, working across agencies brought certain challenges. For example, because of privacy concerns, DHA was not able to share the names and email addresses of the participants identified to receive the email. As such, the email had to be sent by DHA staff from DHA's digital communications platform, GovDelivery. This decentralization delayed the launch of the campaign. Similarly, because DHA and DCSS use different data systems and matching across these systems was not approved, it was not possible to identify those recipients of the email who went on to open child support cases.

**It is important to understand what analytic data can—and cannot—say about the effectiveness of a digital marketing effort and to consider the implications for the campaign's design.** Because we only viewed email analytics at the aggregate level, we cannot fully understand individual responses to the email. For instance, there were three child support-related links embedded in DCSS's email: a link to DCSS's home page, a link to DCSS's YouTube page, and a link to the online application for child support services. GovDelivery provides information about the number of unique and total clicks for each link, but we are not able to determine how many users clicked on multiple links. Such information would allow us to understand whether recipients who engaged with the material were likely to do so on a deep or more superficial level. It is important to consider these limitations when designing digital marketing campaigns, as they will affect what is possible to say about the effects of any communication.

**To truly understand whether the email affected child support applications or enrollments in Sacramento County, more sophisticated evaluation design, technology, or coordination would be needed.** To answer this study's third research question, at least one of the following would be necessary: (1) a way to track users from exposure to the digital marketing communication through application and enrollment (in this case, matching names of email recipients with new applicants and enrollees); or (2) an evaluation design capitalizing on randomization to compare the effects of exposure to the digital marketing effort to business as usual. Barring those, descriptive studies like this one can offer insights into engagement with digital marketing.

**Even if it had only a minimal effect on applications and enrollments, the email campaign was likely a low-cost method of marketing child support services.** Because DHA already had a platform for communicating by email with participants in its programs, the email campaign's only costs were associated with staff time involved in designing, launching, and monitoring the effort. The email campaign could be replicated at even lower cost in the future by sending the same campaign periodically (e.g., twice a year) or automatically to new CalFresh or Medi-Cal enrollees. An investment of staff time would be necessary for any digital marketing approach. Meanwhile, other strategies, such as advertising on social media or streaming platforms, have additional costs. By garnering even minimal engagement, the email campaign served as an inexpensive and cost-effective means of pushing out information about DCSS's services.

## Looking Ahead

Next steps, besides sharing the findings in this report, include launching two additional tests of digital marketing approaches. In the first of these tests, to be mounted in late 2020, DCSS will place a paid video advertisement on Hulu, a streaming platform that allows advertisers to target content to specific audiences. We will examine the advertisement's reach, along with concurrent online applications for child support services and new, voluntary case openings. The advertisement will alert viewers to the department's recently launched, fully online application process. Results will be shared in a future research brief.

## Appendix A. Email Campaign

### Do you know what Child Support can do for you?

Learn about your options.

February 2020 | Find out more about DCSS services.



### Getting started is easy...

You can learn more about us at: [DCSS You Tube Channel](#)

Ready to enroll? It is easy, secure, and private. Click the link to visit the [online portal](#).

Child Support Services - 3701 Power Inn Rd. Sacramento, CA 95826 - 1-866-901-3212

<https://childsupportservices.saccounty.net/>