

Minnesota Child Support Division Grant Evaluation Report

Grantee: Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Support Division

Date of Report: September 18, 2023

Intervention 1: Information Gathering

Duration: October 1, 2018 – September 30, 2023

Number: 90FD0213-01-11

Key Staff:

- Shaneen Moore, Deputy Assistant Commissioner, Project Sponsor, shaneen.moore@state.mn.us
- Bruce Erickson, Policy and Communications Coordinator, Project Lead, bruce.t.erickson@state.mn.us

Background

The Digital Marketing grant program, sponsored by the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, was a 24-month demonstration project with the goal of researching how digital marketing may help the child support program more effectively reach and serve families. In September 2018, OCSS awarded funds to 14 child support agencies to test digital marketing approaches and partnerships to reach parents that could benefit from child support services, and create or improve two-way digital communication and engagement with parents. The Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Support Division (CSD) was one of the grant recipients.

Minnesota's child support program has seen a steady decline in its caseload over the last several years. From 2012 to 2017, Minnesota's caseload dropped from 250,000 cases to 221,000. However, it's likely there are many parents and families who could still benefit from its services. From 2014 to 2016, the number of births in Minnesota was nearly 70,000 per year (about 47,500 to married parents and 22,500 to unmarried parents). Given the national average of 20% of children participating in the child support system, 14,000 of the 70,000 could benefit from Minnesota's child support program, yet only 8,700 per year participated in that timeframe.

CSD didn't know if potential participants were aware of the program, who could use their services, or what services were available. The division also had little data about participants' perspectives and experiences. CSD thought lack of program awareness, branding, and customer misperceptions had been ongoing challenges with several contributing factors including information hard to find and understand, program history and reputation, confusion of single parents about how the program can help them, and inconvenient ways to enroll.

With any outreach and marketing campaign, it's critical to know and understand the target audiences and answer questions like:

- Who is the child support program trying to reach?
- Do they know the program exists and who can use its services?
- What do single parents and program participants know and understand about the program?
- What do they think about it? And
- What's the best way to reach them?

CSD staff knew answering questions like these required information gathering or market research and was foundational when deciding on marketing and program improvement.

Intervention

The goals of this intervention were to better understand:

- Minnesota residents' and potential participants' awareness of child support services and the likelihood they would sign up for them
- The experiences of program participants, how the program has benefited their families, and the challenges they have experienced

CSD met these goals through collaborations with the University of Minnesota Center for Survey Research and its annual Minnesota State Survey and with the state's Management Analysis and Development (MAD) division that collected information from program participants using individual interviews and a broader survey.

Between October 2018 and February 2019, CSD placed nine questions in the Minnesota State Survey, a representative survey of all Minnesota residents administered by the University of Minnesota. Survey results show 65% of Minnesotans were aware their county has a child support agency. Forty-five percent said they would be likely to apply for child support services if separated from the other parent of their child.¹

In January and February 2021, MAD staff interviewed 20 program participants to talk about whether or how the program benefited their families, the challenges they experienced, and changes they would recommend. In January and February 2022, about 1,200 of 9,810 participants from the 12 pilot counties responded to the survey MAD consultants emailed to them with questions similar to the ones used for the interviews.

CSD, University of Minnesota, and MAD staff examined and analyzed the results from the surveys and interviews to gauge the awareness of Minnesota's child support program and interest in signing up for services of Minnesota residents and better understand the perspectives of program participants. This evaluation report addresses each goal separately including details, results, and lessons learned.

What State Residents and Potential Participants Know and Think about the Child Support Program

For the **first goal** of this intervention, CSD collaborated with the University of Minnesota's Center for Survey Research to develop nine questions specific to the state's child support program and services. The center then included these questions in the Minnesota State Survey, an annual telephone survey conducted for over 35 years and designed to obtain information about characteristics of all Minnesota adults.

¹ Minnesota Child Support Division (2019). *2018 Minnesota state survey – Child support division summary*. <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfsrserver/Public/DHS-7585P-ENG>

Center staff conducted the interviews between October 2018 and February 2019, and administered surveys to 802 individuals. While the results represent individual responses, each percentage point represents an estimated 40,200 individuals in the state, that can be generalized to the entire population of Minnesota.

Results from the Minnesota State Survey

University of Minnesota interviewers read the following script before asking the child support-related questions: “The next questions are about child support, which is money one parent pays to their child’s other parent to support that child, when the parents are no longer together.”² Please see the [Minnesota Child Support Division 2018 Minnesota state survey – Child Support Division summary](#) for all the tables and results.

Question 1: Are you aware that each Minnesota county has a government child support agency?

- 65% - Yes
- 34% - No
- 1% - Don’t know

CSD staff were expecting more state residents to be aware of the county child support agencies. Staff don’t know how many respondents were enrolled in public assistance programs that automatically refer cases to child support or how many were not receiving any public assistance. Some of the lower-than-expected awareness may be confusion between child support, child protection, and child care assistance programs as well. The results for this question may change with increased public awareness and marketing.

Question 2: As far as you know, are county government child support services available only to people who receive public assistance, or available to all county residents?

- 66% - All county residents
- 26% - Don’t know
- 7% - Only people who receive public assistance

CSD expected more residents to know child support services were available to all county residents. These results reinforce rumors and misinformation that only parents who receive public assistance can use the county child support services. The results for this question may change with increased public awareness and marketing.

² Minnesota Child Support Division (2019). *2018 Minnesota state survey – Child support division summary*. <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfsrver/Public/DHS-7585P-ENG>

Question 3a: Are you aware Minnesota's county government child support agencies establish paternity and court orders for child support?

60% - Yes
37% - No
3% - Don't know

CSD staff were not surprised 37% didn't know about establishment services. Average residents probably don't think about these services unless they need them. The results for this question may also change with increased public awareness and marketing especially if the program can clearly explain the benefits.

Question 3b: Are you aware Minnesota's county government child support agencies collect and record the child support paid by one parent and send it to the other parent?

59% - Yes
38% - No
3% - Don't know

The "Yes" results were lower than staff expected. Collecting, recording, and sending support payments from one parent to the other are fundamental to the child support program. Increasing efforts to help be aware and understand how this service works may help parents decide to sign up, especially if all they want is income withholding.

Question 3c: Are you aware Minnesota's county government child support agencies enforce court orders for child support?

74% - Yes
23% - No
3% - Don't know

The results for this question were the least surprising. When child support is "in the news" it usually involves enforcement remedies, especially in high-profile or celebrity cases. Unfortunately, these results reinforce the brand of child support pursuing parents who don't pay by suspending driver's licenses or contempt of court.

Question 4: If you were separated from the other parent of your child, how likely is it that you would apply for the county government child support services that I just asked about ... very likely, somewhat likely, or not very likely?

54% - Likely
46% - Unlikely

CSD staff were not totally surprised by the results to this question given the trend of decreasing caseloads given the estimated need.

Those who answered “very likely” or “somewhat likely” received Question 4a: Why would you be **likely to apply for child support services?** Center staff categorized the answers into these themes:

- 32% - “Because it’s there and/or all benefits should be fully utilized”
- 15% - “Accountability and/or oversight and/or assurance money will be paid”
- 15% - “Make things equal and/or fair”
- 15% - “Ensures quality of life for the child”
- 6% - “Makes the transaction easier”
- 1% - “Helps resolve custody rights”
- 16% - “Other”

The top four results for this question might suggest the program could do more to reinforce these reasons to help “normalize” the need for child support services and saying or implying most parents who pay support are willing to pay but many may not be able.

Those who answered “not very likely” received **Question 4b: Why would you not be likely to apply for child support services?** Center staff categorized the answers into these themes:

- 27% - “Don’t need the money and/or can provide for the child without support”
- 23% - “My children are adults”
- 17% - “Other options are available”
- 6% - “Would likely be the one paying and/or not receiving support”
- 3% - “Both parents should be trusted to pay voluntarily”
- 2% - “Already tried, didn’t work”
- 1% - “Takes too much time and/or not worth it”
- 21% - “Other”

The results for this question suggest some parents don’t need or want child support services and the program may have a hard time convincing them otherwise if it’s appropriate. The results also indicate using a tool that can reach single parents since 23% said their children were adults.

Question 5: Minnesota courts consider the number of children two parents have had together when they determine the amount of child support one parent pays to the other parents. They also consider income. As far as you know, is that the income of both parents, the income of the father, the income of the mother, or the income of the parent who makes the most money? To reduce bias, interviewers changed the order of the possible answers.

- 48% - Income of both parents
- 19% - Income of the parent who makes the most money
- 18% - Don’t know
- 8% - Income of the father
- 7% - Other

The results for this question suggest most people understand Minnesota's child support program uses an income shares model. However, 18% didn't know and 8% think the support is based only on the income of the father. The program would like to change this perception by increasing awareness and understanding.

Please see the [Minnesota Child Support Division 2018 Minnesota State Survey – Child Support Division summary](#) for all tables and results.

Lessons Learned from the State Survey and Next Steps

This survey is a “benchmark” in terms of what average Minnesotans know and understand about the child support program. The plan was to conduct another survey with the Survey Center at the end of the grant to see if the marketing efforts “moved the dial” on the respondents’ answers but CSD couldn’t complete it because of staffing shortages and competing priorities.

Division staff considered the results of this survey in its digital marketing efforts later during the grant including creating videos conveying “Why parents should sign up for services?” and explaining “What services does Minnesota’s child support program offer?” CSD should consider setting SMART goals for future survey results before conducting future surveys like aiming for 75% of residents being aware county government child support agencies. Division staff also recommend conducting surveys and research like this regularly, especially targeted at single parents, to gauge awareness before and after campaigns to better understand the impact of marketing efforts.

Experiences of Child Support Program Participants

For the **second goal** of this intervention, CSD collaborated with MAD within the state’s Management and Budget office to collect information and feedback from parents in the program using individual interviews and a broader participant survey. They also worked with MAD to analyze, review, and evaluate the findings to make recommendations on future marketing strategies and program improvements.

In January and February 2021, division staff invited a sample of parents with an open child support case to participate in an interview about their experiences with the program. CSD excluded participants meeting the following criteria from the potential interviewee list:

- Participants currently in the intake process
- Alleged fathers for whom paternity has not yet been established
- Cases that do not have an order for support
- Closed cases
- Non-IV-D cases
- Participants living outside of Minnesota (that is, noncustodial out-of-state participants)

paying support to custodial Minnesota parents and custodial out-of-state parents receiving support from noncustodial Minnesota parents)

- Participants with no email address on file
- Duplicate records
- Participants who are incarcerated
- Noncustodial parents who have contempt proceedings against them
- Participants with cases where good cause has been granted or is pending
- Tribal cases
- Participants with cases outside the 12 pilot counties (Becker, Cottonwood, Crow Wing, Dakota, Hennepin, Jackson, Koochiching, Mower, Olmsted, Pine, Ramsey, Scott, and Wright)

Two hundred participants from the pilot counties received emails from CSD inviting them to participate in an interview. MAD staff then contacted parents who expressed interest to schedule and conduct interviews about whether and how the program has benefited their families, the challenges they have experienced, and what changes they would recommend.

Twenty-three (11.5%) of the 200 invited participants completed an online interview interest form. Of those who completed an interview interest form, MAD scheduled interviews with 21 participants (91% of those who expressed interest) and completed interviews with 20 participants (95% of those scheduled and 10% of the original invited participants). The full interview guide is included at the end of this report. See the attached document, “Parent Perspectives: Child Support Participant Survey” for more details about the participant interviews, including background, methodology, findings and recommendations.

2021 Participant Interview Results

About half of the interviewees were custodial parents receiving child support payments and about half were noncustodial parents making child support payments. Custodial parents more often reported positive overall experiences with the child support program than did noncustodial parents. Nearly all custodial interviewees said participating in the child support program has benefited them or their families, for example by enforcing child support payments they otherwise would not receive. Noncustodial interviewees more often said there was not a benefit in participating in the child support program.

The automated administration of child support payments was a commonly discussed benefit of participating in the child support program. Both custodial and noncustodial parents described appreciating having an independent entity automatically collect, distribute, and track child support payments.

Parents described a range of challenges with the child support program, and MAD grouped these responses around stages of a parent’s journey with the child support program:

- During the **awareness and intake stage**, custodial and noncustodial parents described the application process as burdensome.
- During the **payment determination stage**, custodial and noncustodial parents described a variety of challenges, including a lack of understanding of how child support amounts were determined, a lack of understanding of how other forms of support were classified, and fairness concerns for parents across the income spectrum. Noncustodial parents also described concerns about the financial burden of child support and an uncertainty over how custodial parents use child support payments.
- During the **payment processing and enforcement stage**, custodial parents described challenges with inconsistent payments and inconsistent enforcement, as well as with a lack of information about payments and enforcement remedies. Noncustodial parents described challenges with the burden of penalties and the “snowballing” nature of enforcement remedies. In addition, both custodial and noncustodial parents described specific challenges with payment logistics.
- When **communicating with the child support program**, custodial and noncustodial parents described challenges with a lack of status updates and a lack of connections to other resources and supports. Noncustodial parents also described challenges with the tone of communications and a perception that the program is biased toward custodial parents.
- When **maintaining cases and orders over time**, custodial and noncustodial parents described updating support amounts to reflect changed income or life events as challenging. Noncustodial parents also described challenges with the program being unresponsive to economic or health hardships.

Lessons Learned from the Interviews and Next Steps

- The interviews are a “benchmark” in terms of what participants know and understand about the child support program.
- Division staff also recommend conducting interviews like this regularly to gather participant feedback to see how their awareness, understanding and perception of the program change especially after action on their recommendations.
- The child support program should proactively communicate with parents throughout their time in the program.
- The child support program should consider opportunities to connect parents with other programs and resources.
- CSD should continue to consult with county child support staff to identify opportunities to improve parent interactions with county workers, such as through improved resources and training.

- The child support program should explore simplifying application and modification processes. *CSD created an electronic application that made it easier for people to sign up for services.*
- The child support program should review the existing payment system to determine if participant suggestions about payment logistics can be incorporated.
- As DHS and policymakers implement changes in statute to calculating child support payments, they should further explore the differences in opinion among parents regarding payment calculations. *The Minnesota legislature and governor passed a change in the state's guidelines for calculating child support in 2022.*
- Division staff considered the results in its digital marketing efforts later during the grant.
- Division staff also discussed the results with staff from the 12 pilot counties to build on the interviews with the wider participant survey.

2022 Participant Survey Results

In January and February 2022, MAD consultants emailed 9,810 participants with an open child support case in one of the 12 pilot counties to invite and remind them to participate in a survey about their experiences with the program. A total of 386 email addresses bounced. Of the 9,424 email addresses that worked, 1,206 individuals provided at least a partial response to the survey (12.8% of those with a working email responded). Partial surveys (respondents did not complete the entire survey) were included if individuals provided responses to four or more statements or questions. Survey questions are included at the end of this report. CSD excluded participants meeting the same criteria for the interviews listed above.

Results from the Participant Survey

Nearly two-thirds of respondents were parents receiving child support payments (receiving parents, often referred to as custodial parents within CSD) and just over one-third were parents making child support payments (paying parents, often referred to as noncustodial parents within CSD). Nearly three-quarters of respondents had participated in the program for four or more years and just over two-thirds of respondents identified as White. An equal proportion of respondents reported making more than or less than \$50,000 annually.

Average ratings on statements about overall experience, logistics, payments, and communications ranged from mixed (neither agree nor disagree) to negative (disagree to strongly disagree); none of the statements received a positive average rating across all respondents.

Broadly, survey findings are directionally consistent with findings from interviews conducted with program participants in January and February 2021. Findings from interviews and the survey provide

concrete suggestions for better serving participants like proactively communicating with parents throughout their time in the program using a range of communication methods.

Other key findings from the survey include:

- Respondents who identified as American Indian, Native American, Alaska Native, or Indigenous consistently rated statements lower than respondents that identified with another racial or ethnic group, on average. Respondents who identified as having an “Other” race or ethnicity also often rated statements lower than respondents who identified with another racial or ethnic group, on average.
- Custodial parents consistently rated their overall experience more positively than noncustodial parents, and statements about overall experience included some of the greatest levels of disagreement between these two groups.
- Nearly three-quarters of respondents agreed that child support is an important program for ensuring the financial needs of children are met. Fewer respondents said they trust the child support program to do what is in the best financial interest of their children, or that the program is fair and unbiased.
- Parent perceptions of program logistics were generally neutral. While nearly two-thirds of respondents said they understood how to provide updates about a change in their address or contact information, only half said they understood how to provide updates when they experience a life event.
- About one-third of respondents said they would be interested in referrals to other programs and resources. Across all subgroups, the number of parents interested in referrals was greater than the number who reported having been connected with other programs and resources.
- Over two-thirds of respondents agreed that it is helpful when the child support program collects and records payments on their case. Perceptions of automatic payments and income withholding and consistently collecting payments were also among the highest-rated statements overall.
- Respondents’ ratings on statements about communications ranged from mixed to more negative. Statements about general communication and information were rated lower by respondents (there was less agreement) than statements about county child support officers, which were rated higher (there was more agreement).
- While custodial parents consistently rated statements about communications higher than noncustodial parents, these statements included some of the lowest levels of disagreement between these two groups.
- Over half of respondents expressed interest in receiving email and text messaging communications from the program, and some said they already receive these communications.
- Most commonly, respondents selected email as their preferred communication method and monthly and quarterly communications as their preferred frequencies.

Lessons Learned from the Participant Survey and Next Steps

- The survey is a “benchmark” in terms of what participants know, understand, and perceive about the child support program.
- Division staff also recommend conducting surveys like this regularly to gather participant feedback to see how their awareness, understanding and perception of the program change especially after action on their recommendations.
- The child support program should proactively communicate with parents throughout their time in the program.
- The child support program should consider opportunities to connect parents with other programs and resources.
- CSD should continue to consult with county child support staff to identify opportunities to improve parent interactions with county workers, such as through improved resources and training.
- The child support program should explore simplifying application and modification processes. *CSD created an electronic application that made it easier for people to sign up for services.*
- The child support program should review the existing payment system to determine if participant suggestions about payment logistics can be incorporated.
- Seek to better understand the experiences of parents who identify as American Indian, Native American, Alaska Native, or Indigenous.
- As DHS and policymakers implement changes in statute to calculating child support payments, they should further explore the differences in opinion among parents regarding payment calculations. *The Minnesota legislature and governor passed a change in the state’s guidelines for calculating child support in 2022.*
- Build on parents’ appreciation for automated payments and review suggestions about payment logistics to determine if they can be incorporated.
- Division staff should build on the findings of this study and move toward action planning and implementation.
- Division staff considered the results in its digital marketing efforts later during the grant.
- Division staff should explore other methods of parent engagement that would complement interviews and surveys.