
Parent perspectives in the child support program

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Executive summary

In January and February 2021, the Department of Human Services (DHS) Child Support Division (CSD) invited a sample of parents with an open child support case to participate in an interview about their experiences with the program. Management Analysis and Development (MAD) interviewed 20 of these parents about whether and how the program has benefited their families, the challenges they have experienced, and what changes they would recommend.

About half of the interviewees were custodial parents receiving child support payments and about half were non-custodial parents making child support payments. Custodial parents more often reported positive overall experiences with the child support program than did non-custodial 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. Non-custodial 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 non-custodial 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**: Both custodial and non-custodial parents described the application process as burdensome.
- During the **payment determination stage**: Both custodial and non-custodial 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. Non-custodial 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. Non-custodial parents described challenges with the burden of penalties and the "snowballing" nature of enforcement remedies. In addition, both custodial and non-custodial parents described specific challenges with payment logistics.
- When **communicating with the child support program**: Both custodial and non-custodial parents described challenges with a lack of status updates and a lack of connections to other resources and supports. Non-custodial 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**, both custodial and non-custodial parents described updating support amounts to reflect changed income or life events as challenging. Non-custodial parents also described challenges with the program being unresponsive to economic or health hardships.

These and other findings are described in the “[Findings](#)” section of the report.

MAD developed recommendations for the child support program based on input from interview participants. The program should explore these recommendations in the broader context of programmatic goals, priorities, feasibility, and available resources. These recommendations include:

- 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 offices 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.
- 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 child support program should continue to work to understand the findings of this study and implement recommendations.

These recommendations are further discussed in the “[Recommendations](#)” section of the report.

Background

Child support in Minnesota

Minnesota's child support program administers and enforces child support payments between parents. A variety of levels and branches of government play roles in the child support program:¹

- The **federal government's** Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) sets minimum standards for state child support programs and provides the majority of program funding.
- The Minnesota **legislative branch** establishes child support laws in Minnesota.
- The Minnesota **judicial branch** interprets and applies child support laws in individual cases. This includes district court judges, family court referees, and child support magistrates.
- The Minnesota **Department of Human Services** (DHS) Child Support Division (CSD) oversees the state's program, maintains PRISM (the case management system), manages administrative enforcement tools (such as driver's license suspensions), establishes program policies, provides training and assistance to counties, and maintains relationships with the federal government, other country and state programs, and other Minnesota state agencies.
- **County** child support agencies administer the program. County workers work directly with participating parents and their cases.

Courts can order child support during a divorce or separation of a married couple with minor children or when parentage is established for unmarried parents, either voluntarily or through a contested paternity process. Courts can also establish child support orders when a child is in the legal custody of an individual other than a parent.

In Minnesota, DHS CSD and county child support offices serve 346,000 parents and 240,000 children.² However, they are not involved in all child support cases. Any parent can voluntarily apply to the child support program to administer and enforce child support. In addition, custodial parents who participate in certain public assistance programs are required to use the child support program to administer and enforce child support. When the child support program is not involved, parents instead directly handle the administration of child support payments and privately settle enforcement concerns. Once the child support program is involved, it will support parents in establishing parentage (if applicable), establishing child support orders, processing child support payments, and enforcing child support orders.

¹ This section is adapted from Aves, L. (2015). Minnesota's Child Support Laws: An Overview (State of Minnesota, Minnesota House of Representatives, Research Department). St. Paul, MN.

<https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/pubs/chldsupp.pdf>

² Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Support Division. (2018). Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program. St. Paul, MN.

Terminology

Participants in the child support program and county workers are referred to using different terms by the program and by parents themselves.

Legally, participants are defined as either “obligors” or “obligees.” According to Minnesota Statute 518A.26, subdivisions 13 and 14³:

- “Obligee means a person to whom payments for maintenance or support are owed.”
- “Obligor means a person obligated to pay maintenance or support.”

Within DHS CSD, participants are referred to either as the “custodial parent” or the “non-custodial parent.” Contrary to the naming convention, these terms are not related to the amount of custody a parent has (or does not have). Instead, these terms refer to which individual receives child support (i.e., custodial parent) and which individual pays child support (i.e., non-custodial parent).⁴

Among program participants, individuals are generally referred to as “paying parents” and “receiving parents.” Table 1 displays the different ways in which child support participants are described in different contexts.

Table 1. Typical terms for child support participants in different sources/contexts

Source/Context	Term for those who receive child support	Term for those who pay child support
Statute	Obligee	Obligor
Department of Human Services Child Support Division	Custodial parent	Non-custodial parent
Participants	Receiving parent	Paying parent

This report generally analyzes data using the terms “custodial parent” and “non-custodial parent.” Quotes from participants have been included throughout, which often refer to participants as the “paying parent” and the “receiving parent.”

In addition, county child support workers are sometimes referred to by parents as “case workers” or “case managers,” although these terms are not necessarily ones that counties or DHS CSD use for these positions. This report generally uses the terms “case worker” when describing what parents said in interviews and uses the term “county worker” when making recommendations about how the program can best support these roles.

³ Minnesota Statute 518A.26, subdivisions 13 and 14: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/518A.26>, Minnesota’s Child Support Laws: An Overview: <https://www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/pubs/chldsupp.pdf>.

⁴ For example, a parent who makes child support payments to another parent would be described as a non-custodial parent within DHS CSD, even if this parent had majority legal custody of the child. This situation could occur when a parent with majority (but not full) custody has greater income than the other parent.

Project background

CSD engaged Management Analysis and Development (MAD) in summer 2020 to identify ways the child support program could be improved. MAD is a management consulting practice housed in Minnesota Management and Budget. In the first phase of this effort, MAD consultants interviewed program participants to understand their overall experiences, as well as opportunities and barriers experienced related to the program.

This work is part of a project funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services to increase participation in Minnesota's child support program in 12 pilot counties. This broader project includes information gathering and program evaluation (including this research) as well as targeted digital marketing and one-way and two-way text messaging. The results of this research will be used to inform future phases of the digital marketing program as well as inform improvements to the child support program overall.

Methodology

Response rate

In January and February 2021, CSD invited parents to participate in an interview, and MAD contacted parents who expressed interest to schedule and conduct interviews.

Two hundred participants received emails from CSD inviting them to participate in an interview. Twenty-three of the 200 invited participants completed an online interview interest form (11.5 percent of those invited). Of the 23 participants who completed an interview interest form, MAD was able to schedule interviews with 21 participants (91 percent of those who expressed interest) and completed interviews with 20 participants (95 percent of those scheduled and 10 percent of the original invited participants). [Appendix A](#) contains the full interview guide.

Participants were asked to select their preferred language for the interview. Nineteen interviews were conducted in English. One interview was conducted with the assistance of a Somali language interpreter.

Sampling approach

CSD used administrative records from PRISM, its case management system, to gather a sample of participants from the 12 pilot counties to invite to interviews who had an open case in the enforcement phase with current support due.⁵

CSD excluded participants meeting any of the following criteria from the sample:

- 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 (that is, cases that are not using the child support program to administer and enforce support)
- Parents living outside of Minnesota (that is, non-custodial out-of-state parents paying support to custodial Minnesota parents and custodial out-of-state parents receiving support from non-custodial Minnesota parents)
- Individuals with no email address on file
- Duplicate records
- Participants who are incarcerated
- Non-custodial parents who have contempt proceedings against them

⁵ The 12 pilot counties are Becker, Cottonwood Crow Wing, Dakota, Hennepin, Jackson, Koochiching, Mower, Olmsted, Pine, Ramsey, Scott, and Wright.

- Cases with good cause granted/pending⁶
- Tribal cases
- Cases outside of pilot counties

CSD used a non-proportional stratified random sample, which selected equal-size groups of participants in four distinct categories:

1. Non-custodial parents with no enforcement remedy history
2. Non-custodial parents with a case history of at least one enforcement remedy in the past five years
3. Custodial parents with no enforcement remedy history
4. Custodial parents with a case history of at least one enforcement remedy in the past five years

CSD sent invitations in two waves, with the first wave of 100 participants sent in January 2021, and the second wave sent in February 2021. In the first wave of interview invitations, participants from all racial and ethnic groups were included. The second wave of interview invitations oversampled people of color to ensure that their voices were included in the research.

Note that while administrative data was used by CSD to develop its sample and invite participants to express interest in an interview, MAD did not have access to any data on individuals other than the information they volunteered in the interview interest form or in interviews themselves.

Interpreting findings

Participants interviewed for this report represent a cross-section of parents with a currently open case among the 12 pilot counties. However, interviewees are not proportionally representative of all program participants.

Quantitative descriptions (such as “almost all” or “a few”) describe the approximate share of participants interviewed who discussed a topic or described a specific experience or opinion. These quantitative descriptions provide a sense of magnitude and relative prevalence of an experience among interviewees but may not be generalizable to the general participant population.

Participants sometimes expressed both positive and negative perceptions about a topic, for example saying that something met their needs while also raising concerns about it. In these cases, both the positive and negative perceptions are included in proportions. In responding to questions, participants sometimes were referring to the child support program as a whole, while in other responses they were describing experiences with specific elements of the system, such as courts, counties, or DHS CSD.

The report discusses experiences with the child support program from the perspective of parents. This report does not reflect any analysis of administrative data or records. Interviewees’ perceptions and descriptions of program procedures may vary from program staff’s perceptions or descriptions of program procedures. Rather

⁶ Parents participating in public assistance programs must help pursue child support unless they have good cause for not cooperating. Good cause exists in cases such as when the parent is a current participant in the Safe at Home address confidentiality program for people who fear for their safety, when the parent conceived the child as a result of rape or incest, or when legal proceedings for the adoption of the child are pending.

than being seen as errors or omissions on the parts of interviewees, these differences should be seen as indicators of where the child support program could better communicate its practices and policies to participants.

Parents sometimes raised a topic across several different sections of an interview. In addition, for the “[Challenges](#)” and “[Changes requested](#)” sections, MAD analyzed interview responses by topic regardless of where in the interview the topic was raised. As a result of these factors, some topics are discussed in several different sections of the report.

Findings

Involvement in the child support program

Two-thirds of custodial parents interviewed became involved with the child support program through initiation of a court order (generally related to divorce), or by applying for the program at a later date. Nearly all custodial parents said they chose to involve the program because they needed financial help and the non-custodial parent would not pay child support without an order or enforcement. One custodial parent involved the program so that the state would handle the case and so that personal costs would not be incurred.

One-third of custodial parents interviewed became involved with the child support program through automatic enrollment on their behalf (e.g., after seeking financial support for food, after completing early neutral intervention⁷). In two of these cases, the custodial parent did not want to involve the child support program in their case, either for safety reasons or because they did not believe the state would actually enforce the order.

Just over half of non-custodial parents interviewed became involved with the child support program after the custodial parent applied. In just over half of these cases, the custodial parent applied for the program some time after separation or divorce (e.g., months to years). A few non-custodial interviewees mentioned they had worked out a payment amount and plan with the custodial parent individually, and they had been making payments regularly prior to becoming involved in the program. However, in each of these cases, the non-custodial interviewee said the custodial parent realized (or thought) they could receive a larger payment through the child support program, so they later applied. One non-custodial interviewee noted concerns about racial inequities in the courts as a reason not to participate in the child support program. Another non-custodial interviewee avoided the program while pregnant and early during the child's life to avoid engaging the child's other parent for safety reasons. This interviewee also discussed racial inequities in the courts.

Less than half of non-custodial parents interviewed became involved with the child support program shortly after divorce proceedings. One non-custodial interviewee suggested participating in the program for convenience—that participation would allow for automatic payment, which would allow for easier budgeting. Additionally, this interviewee was interested in an automated system where they would not have to remember to make a payment, which they noted would be easier for the custodial parent as well. Another non-custodial interviewee said there is nothing that would have made them interested in applying for the child support program because the custodial parent has a higher income and it is unfair for a parent with a lower income to make payments to a parent with a higher income.

One interviewee, who has been both a custodial and non-custodial parent, said that when they were the non-custodial parent, they became involved in the program when the custodial parent applied for child support.

⁷ One interviewee used the term “early neutral intervention.” Early neutral evaluation is “a confidential, voluntary, evaluative process designed to facilitate prompt dispute resolution in custody, parenting time (visitation), and financial matters.” For more information, visit <https://www.mncourts.gov/Help-Topics/ENE-ECM.aspx>.

When they were the custodial parent, they became involved with the program again when they initiated the child support process through the courts.

Overarching program experience

Interviewees were asked about their overall experience with the child support program, including the ability to easily find information about the program and the ability to easily interact with the program.

Overarching experiences

Similarities and differences exist in the overarching experiences with the child support program described by interviewees:

- Custodial interviewees more often reported positive overall experiences with the child support program compared with non-custodial interviewees.
- Custodial and non-custodial interviewees reported mixed experiences with case workers.
- Custodial and non-custodial interviewees said finding information and navigating the program could be improved, particularly in relation to the program's website and with case workers. However, custodial interviewees seem to have more positive experiences finding information and interacting with the program compared with non-custodial interviewees, who tended to feel less supported in these areas.
- When discussing overall experience in the program, non-custodial parents commonly had the perception that the program is biased against men specifically and non-custodial parents broadly, that the program moves quickly to threatening non-custodial parents, and that they have not received adequate support from the program.

Custodial parents

All custodial interviewees said they have had a good or okay overall experience with the child support program; none of the custodial interviewees said they have had a bad experience with the program. One interviewee cited positive case worker experiences as a contributing factor to their overall experience, noting fast response times and helpfulness in explaining processes and answering questions.

"It's been really positive. When I've called my worker, she's been good at getting back to me."

Conversely, among custodial interviewees who said they have had an okay experience with child support, most cited challenges with their case worker, including a perception of inappropriate questioning, challenges in serving the non-custodial parent with child support documents, challenges with enforcing child support orders, and changes in case worker assignment without notification.

"Personally, with my case, it's been...interesting. I mean, the support I'm supposed to get, it doesn't come with any regularity. I can reach out to my case worker over email and they get back to me in a couple days [...] so I know where to go to ask questions on why I'm not getting support, but it's always a matter of them just not paying. So that's what it comes

down to. But when I ask about enforcement, they say we just have to wait. But now I'm in a place where I need support because I can't get it from the county and I can't reach out to the parent directly because they don't care. When I get [child support], it helps, but I'm used to not getting it."

More than half of custodial interviewees said it is easy to find information about the program, with a few noting that some information is easier to find than other information. Interviewees who felt it was easy to find information about the program discussed the following:

- The information packet received on how to navigate the website and who to contact is helpful.
- Being able to message case workers through the website (instead of having to call them) is helpful.
- Case workers are helpful in answering questions and finding information.

Custodial interviewees who had more mixed opinions on the ease of finding information noted the following:

- It is easy for find information on payments.
- It is not easy to identify next steps when faced with challenges (e.g., how to start the enforcement process).
- Initial communication was problematic because autoenrollment was not made clear.
- The child support website is difficult to navigate; if it were a better resource, it could help minimize reliance on case workers.

One custodial interviewee said that, though the information on the child support website is not always helpful, it is intuitive, easy to use, and well laid out. One-third of custodial interviewees discussed challenges with the child support website, noting that it is difficult to navigate and not intuitive, that it does not provide a lot of information or that the information provided is too generic, that the personal identification number (PIN) system is cumbersome, and that it does not provide real-time status updates about cases.

Half of custodial interviewees said it was easy to interact with the child support program, with one interviewee reiterating the benefits of a positive case worker relationship. One interviewee said it is difficult to interact with the program, noting that they are unaware of who their assigned case worker is, that they are not able to get program staff on the phone and must interact through the mail, and that they've experienced administrative challenges, such as difficulty changing banking information and accessing the child support website with their PIN.

When discussing their overall experience with the child support program, just over half of custodial interviewees discussed specific programmatic challenges. These challenges are discussed in the "[Challenges](#)" and "[Changes requested](#)" sections of this report.

Non-custodial parents

Among non-custodial interviewees, half said their overall experience with the child support program has been negative, a few discussed both positive and negative experiences with the program, and one-third were indifferent to the program. None of the non-custodial interviewees said their overall experience with the child support program has been positive.

Non-custodial interviewees who said they have had a negative experience with the program most commonly said they had the perception that the program is biased against men specifically and non-custodial parents broadly.

Non-custodial interviewees who discussed both positive and negative experiences with the program echoed the perception that the child support program is biased against men specifically and non-custodial parents broadly. These interviewees also said that the program moves quickly to threaten non-custodial parents and that they did not receive sufficient help from the program when they initially joined, missing information that would have been helpful to understand or be aware of. Experiences with county workers were mixed among these interviewees, with one feeling that their current caseworker has been helpful in explaining information well, and another feeling that their caseworker does not explain information or answer questions beyond what is publicly available. Positive experiences with the program noted by these interviewees included the ease of automatic payments and the web portal being helpful for finding one's currently assigned case worker.

Non-custodial interviewees who were indifferent toward the program mentioned similar negative experiences as other non-custodial interviewees, including the perception that the program is biased and that the program moves quickly to threatening non-custodial parents. They also discussed experiences with case workers being inconsistent, with experiences varying based on who is assigned to the case. It was noted that some case workers appear to be more responsive when lawyers are involved compared with non-custodial parents interacting with the program independently. Interviewees who were indifferent toward the program said they understood the importance of child support and why the program exists, and that they feel their payments are being used appropriately to support their children's well-being. The seamlessness of the payment process was discussed as a positive attribute of the program among those indifferent to it.

"I understand the essence of child support and why it's needed, especially in a divorce with kids, and so I understand the importance. Although at times I feel maybe the child support folks are more in-tune with the person receiving it versus the person that needs to pay it. The reason I say that, I've had different case workers tied to my case and some are abrasive, and some are not. I think the level of understanding needs to go both ways."

While one-third of non-custodial interviewees said it is easy to find information about the program, a few expressed more mixed opinions, and half said it is difficult to find information about the program. Interviewees who said it is easy to find information about the program discussed being savvy about finding and reviewing state statutes and policies, understanding the child support calculator, feeling comfortable using Google to find answers, and using other non-custodial parents as information resources. One interviewee said they had not had to interact with the program often but were able to easily find information when they did.

Interviewees who had more mixed opinions about the ease of finding information said they have learned more about the program over time, but that information (e.g., necessary forms and documentation, child support calculator, case review) was generally not explained well when they entered the program and they had to learn on their own. One interviewee noted that while it is possible to find information on resources and supports on the program's website (e.g., support groups, what to expect), finding that information requires a lot of searching and case workers do not offer to find the information or assist with finding it. Interviewees who said they had a difficult time finding information about the program echoed challenges discussed elsewhere, including:

- Being unable to access information sought and having to contact the program multiple times to find it (e.g., often speaking to multiple people, including case worker supervisors)
- Ease of finding information being dependent on the assigned caseworker (e.g., how helpful they are in finding information and explaining it)
- The website does not reflect payments quickly, which makes it difficult to ensure payments are occurring on time
- The child support website is difficult to navigate independently and requires case worker assistance
- The program requests a lot of information (e.g., forms, documentation), but it is unclear how or if it is being used

One-third of non-custodial interviewees said it is easy to interact with the child support program, with a few expressing mixed opinions, and half saying it is difficult to interact with the program. Interviewees who said it is easy to interact with the program said case workers are very responsive. One interviewee noted that it can be easier to interact with smaller counties than larger counties, though larger counties have responded in a fairly timely manner. Another interviewee said they have not had to interact with the program with much frequency. One interviewee who discussed mixed experiences interacting with the program noted that while it was challenging early on, it has improved, and they now sometimes receive more assistance than expected. Another interviewee who mentioned mixed experiences said case workers are difficult to get ahold of over the phone, but that messages can be sent online. However, this interviewee said the responses they receive are not particularly helpful.

Interviewees who experienced difficulties interacting with the program often noted challenges centered on case workers, including:

- Case workers in some counties are more supportive than case workers in other counties. While some reach out to parents, providing suggestions and resources, others seem less interested in helping.
- It feels like talking to a “brick wall” when trying to get some case workers to answer questions, or it feels as though parents are bothering case workers.
- Case workers could do more to provide resources and supports to non-custodial parents.
- There are no open lines of communication with the program. There are long wait times on the phone and parents cannot email case workers directly. Overall, case workers are unavailable to help parents.
- The perception among non-custodial parents that case workers are less helpful to non-custodial parents.

When discussing their overall experience with the child support program, all non-custodial interviewees discussed specific programmatic challenges. Most commonly, interviewees discussed a variety of concerns about how child support payments are calculated. These interviewees discussed the ripple effects associated with payment calculations, including negative impacts on career and educational trajectories. These challenges are discussed in more detail in the [“Challenges”](#) and [“Changes requested”](#) sections of this report.

Other interviewee

Similar to custodial interviewees, one interviewee, who has been both a custodial and non-custodial parent, noted that it is easy to find the child support payment calculator and other programmatic information. This interviewee also said that while it can vary by case worker, overall, interactions have been positive (e.g., they are easy to reach). Like other interviewees, this interviewee said it is possible participants do not always know who their case worker is, or that their case worker has been reassigned.

Benefits of participating

Interviewees were asked how participating in the child support program benefited them or their families, if the program has met their needs, and which aspects of the program have been the most helpful.

Overarching experiences

Similarities and differences exist in the perceived benefits of participating in the child support program:

- Custodial interviewees more often said that participation in the program benefited them or their families, while non-custodial interviewees more often said there was not a benefit. Custodial interviewees said program participation was beneficial for enforcing child support payments, which they otherwise would not receive. Non-custodial interviewees commonly wondered if payments were being used to support their child's needs.
- Custodial interviewees more often said the program met their needs, whereas only one non-custodial interviewee said the program met their needs.
- Custodial and non-custodial interviewees commented on the ease and convenience of automatic payment methods.

Custodial parents

Nearly all custodial interviewees said participating in the child support program has benefited them or their families. One of these interviewees said that while receiving child support payments is beneficial for covering costs such as clothing and groceries between paychecks, payments are not regularly received and cannot be counted on. Another interviewee said it is beneficial to not have direct communication about payment amounts with the other parent and that use of the child support calculator to determine payments has resulted in less conflict. Most interviewees who said participating in the program has been beneficial said it is helpful to have case workers find non-custodial parents and enforce child support payments, which they would not be able to do on an individual basis and, therefore, would not otherwise be receiving financial support. These interviewees also commented on the convenience of automatic payment methods, which ensure child support payments are made. One interviewee was unsure how participating in the program had been a benefit, but later noted that the program had met the need of receiving child support payments.

"The benefit is I don't have to deal with trying to track down money from my ex, it's just taken from his check regardless of what he's doing, and I receive it for my daughter. That alone is huge. Without this service, I would not be receiving money for her."

Just over half of custodial interviewees felt that the program had met their needs, with one-third noting that the program had met their needs in some ways but not in others. Those who said the program has met their needs generally did not provide additional detail beyond the assistance received in enforcing payments and reducing interactions between parents. A few interviewees who said the program has met their needs in some ways but not others said that while they would not otherwise be receiving financial support without participating in the program:

- Child support payments are not consistently enforced (i.e., payments are not consistently made).
- Non-custodial parents hide income from cash jobs and refuse voluntary case reviews, and it is not worthwhile to incur legal fees by going to court.
- The process for medical reimbursement is cumbersome and has not been worthwhile to pursue. An online submittal option that does not involve mailing forms between parents and the program would streamline the process.

Two-thirds of custodial interviewees discussed aspects of the child support program that have been helpful, including:

- Assistance in settling child support payment amounts and processes
- Assistance from the child support program being less expensive than paying an attorney
- Automatic payment and direct deposit—the program enforces and tracks payments for participants
- Ability to reach out to case workers and receive a timely response
- An informational packet on how to navigate the website and who to contact with questions

A few of these interviewees mentioned that they thought the upcoming option for text reminders would be helpful for participants.

Another interviewee who discussed aspects of the child support program that have been helpful said that while information on who to contact is provided and case workers are helpful when contacted, the program does not actively reach out to parents with information about resources, events, or updates. This interviewee felt that without two-way communication, parents are largely on their own.

A few interviewees were unsure which aspects of the program had been the most helpful or did not have feedback on additional aspects of the program that have been helpful beyond those discussed above.

Non-custodial parents

A few non-custodial interviewees said participating in the child support program has benefited them or their families. One of these interviewees noted that the program has helped both parents support their child well and that they are willing to do whatever it takes to support their child. Another interviewee said that automatic payments have been beneficial because it helps with weekly budgeting and planning.

A few non-custodial interviewees had mixed opinions on the benefits of the program. One of these interviewees said potential program benefits depend on the relationship between the parents. They noted that the system works well when the parenting relationship is strong, and the focus is on supporting the child. However, if a co-parenting relationship does not exist, they said the experience is more challenging because the focus is on money, and not on how to benefit the child. Another interviewee said that while child support payments are generally being used well, there have been questionable uses of funds. This interviewee also said that participating in the program does not benefit a new family non-custodial parents may be part of, where other dependents rely on financial support as well.

Half of the non-custodial interviewees said participating in the child support program has not benefited them or their families. Most commonly, these interviewees said payments are not being used to support the child (e.g., provide new clothes) or invest in their future, and are instead being used for other purposes (e.g., vacations,

new vehicles). One interviewee mentioned that their children still ask for additional money because the payments are not being spent on their needs.

“Some women put you on child support to be spiteful. She got a brand-new car right after I got on child support. But my son still had the same clothes on. So, I’m saying, where is the money going?”

Other reasons interviewees said the program is not a benefit include:

- The perception that the program does not care about extenuating circumstances in a non-custodial parent’s life (e.g., illness that may prevent or limit employment temporarily or long-term)
- The custodial parent not being originally involved for safety reasons
- It is wasteful to involve the program in cases where payments have been faithfully made in full prior to participation. This limits program resources available to families that need the enforcement support.

One non-custodial interviewee said the program has met their needs. This interviewee did not provide additional details beyond the general benefit of being able to support their child.

Half of non-custodial interviewees felt that the program has met their needs in some ways but not in others. One interviewee said the ease and convenience of the program is nice, but participation has resulted in long-term consequences that have had negative impacts on the family and are not easily resolved. Another interviewee said that while they generally understand the need for the program and why it is beneficial, it does not always operate as planned from an administrative perspective. This interviewee also mentioned that the child support website does not use plain language, which can require the involvement of a lawyer to understand the content. Another interviewee said the program does not meet needs when payments are not supporting the child, but it does meet needs when payments do support the child. Finally, one interviewee said the program meets their needs because their child is financially supported. However, it does not meet their personal needs because it is affecting their career choices.

One-third of non-custodial interviewees said the program has not met their needs. All of these interviewees said the program is not meeting their needs because it is unclear that the payments are being used to support the child. One interviewee noted the challenges of splitting custody with the custodial parent and having a smaller income than the custodial parent while still being responsible for child support payments.

Half of non-custodial interviewees discussed aspects of the child support program that have been helpful, or improvements that would make it more helpful, including:

- Automated processes
- That case worker can be helpful if they feel non-custodial parents are engaged and serious about their responsibilities.
- That case workers could be more helpful if they were easier to get ahold of.

One interviewee said The Father Project⁸, separate from the child support program, has been helpful for collecting forms and documentation, preparing for court, understanding what to expect, and attending court dates.

Other interviewee

Similar to non-custodial interviewees, one interviewee, who has been both a custodial and non-custodial parent, discussed concerns about how child support payments are utilized, and the inability to confirm that funds are being used to support the child.






Challenges related to the program

Interviewees were asked explicitly about what challenges they had experienced related to the child support program. In addition, many interviewees discussed challenges when responding to questions about how they became involved with the child support program, their overall experience with the child support program, and if the program has met their needs.

MAD analyzed interview responses and grouped them by the stages of the parent journey, beginning with their awareness of the program and initial intake, continuing to the process of determining child support payment amounts, processing and enforcing these payments, communicating with the child support program, and maintaining cases and orders as life circumstances change over time.

⁸ The Father Project: <https://www.goodwilleasterseals.org/services/family-stability/father#>

Table 2. Challenges across stages of the parent journey

Stage	Common Challenges	Custodial Parent Challenges	Non Custodial Parent Challenges
 Awareness and intake	Burdensome application process	Awareness of fees	Preference for alternative mechanisms
 Payment determination	Lack of understanding of how amounts were determined, what information is considered Classification of other support and purchases Fairness for parents with higher incomes; fairness for parents with low incomes Concealed income		Financial burden of child support Uncertainty over use of child support
 Payment processing and enforcement	Payment logistics	Inconsistent payments and inconsistent enforcement Lack of information about payments and enforcement	Burden of penalties; snowballing enforcement
 Communicating with program	Lack of status overview and updates Lack of connection to other resources		Perception that the program is biased toward custodial parents Tone of communications
 Maintaining cases and orders over time	Difficulty updating support amounts to reflect changed income or life event		Unresponsive to economic or health hardships

Awareness and intake

Common themes

Burdensome application process

Many interviewees described the documentation requested as part of the application process as burdensome. These interviewees described gathering the necessary documentation as complicated, confusing, and time-consuming.

“When I got [the] packet, I had to provide every document under the sun. All my utilities, all these paystubs.”

A few parents also noted that they were particularly frustrated by the burden of collecting requested documentation because they felt it was not considered. “At the end of the day,” one interviewee said, “despite providing all of that detail the calculation really just came down to the online calculator”; this person said it was frustrating “to have to go through all that work and then feel like it was not factored in at all.”

One parent, who had received a court Order for Protection, also noted that they felt uncomfortable providing all the documentation knowing that their ex had access to the documentation.

Custodial parents

Awareness of fees

One custodial parent expressed frustration with the fees charged to certain custodial parents⁹ and the lack of clarity about these fees when they applied.

“Nowhere did I see... that money would be removed (from what I was owed) for payments. They don’t tell you that if you fill out this form, you’ll lose a portion of what you are entitled to for collection fees.”

Non-custodial parents

Preference for alternative mechanisms

A few non-custodial parents expressed a preference for alternative methods for child support. One parent felt that there should be mediation services to guide parents through the process during the initial stages. Another

⁹ Parents receiving full child support services are charged a cost recovery fee of two percent of the amount of child support as well as an annual \$35 fee, but these fees are waived for parents receiving public assistance. Participants can instead choose to apply for income withholding-only services for a monthly fee of \$15 charged to the non-custodial parent.

said the state should not force non-custodial parents to pay child support if the parent with custody does not want the support and the non-custodial parent does not want to be a part of the child's life.

Payment determination

Common themes

Lack of understanding of how amounts were determined and what information is considered

Many interviewees expressed frustration with a lack of clarity around how payment amounts were determined and about what information was used in making the determination.

"From the get-go, there needs to be a clearer process for explaining how they arrive at the figure that you pay."

A few of these interviewees were frustrated because they felt like the payment amount did not sufficiently reflect their income or the income of the other parent. "It felt like my income was never considered," said one non-custodial parent. "If it considered my income, [I] would want to understand how they got to the figure." Conversely, for a few other parents, their frustration was driven by the fact that they had provided a range of requested documentation, but they felt that their income was the *only* thing that was considered. "You get this [whole] sheet, but it feels like nobody reviews it," said one non-custodial parent. This interviewee went on to say, "Just ask for a paystub if that's all you are going to use."

For a few other parents, participants' sense of what they were paying or receiving relative to other parents they know in the child support program was a contributing factor to their sense of frustration about their own payment amounts. "If I didn't know all my friends were getting so much more, it wouldn't bother me so much," said one custodial parent. Similarly, a non-custodial parent said, "I have friends where I know I pay a lot more than they do; I know someone with three to four kids, and they are not paying as much as I am." This parent went on to say that, "It's an issue of both calculation and communication—they said it should be this, but it was unclear why."

Classification of other support and purchases

One-third of parents expressed dissatisfaction with how their in-kind support or purchases, such as for childcare or healthcare, were classified or considered.

"You can show years of receipts of paying for childcare or things like that. They disregard that stuff. It's a formality. So when she asked for back child support, they went back two years—that automatically puts men in arrears."

For example, a few non-custodial parents described paying for childcare costs but not having these payments considered in situations such as the determination of back child support. A few other non-custodial parents raised similar concerns around the classification of health care costs. One custodial parent expressed dissatisfaction that they were paying for all activities and medical costs, without contributions from the non-custodial parent.

Fairness for parents with higher incomes

One-third of participants raised questions about the fairness of the current income-based nature of child support for parents earning more than another parent. In general, people with higher relative incomes¹⁰ expressed a preference for the payments to be flatter—non-custodial parents with higher incomes wanted the payments they make to rise less if they earn more, and custodial parents with higher relative incomes wanted the payments they receive to remain stable if they earn more.

“The more I make, the more they take. I think we should look at how much does it cost to raise a child. It would be more flat. Let’s have some financial responsibility.”

Many of the interviewees concerned with the fairness of the income-based payment determination system were concerned about the impact of income-based payments on parents’ career and education decisions. Both custodial and non-custodial parents were concerned that income-based payments decreased incentives for parents to work full-time or pursue career advancement.

“I don’t understand the division of income. [I] don’t understand why someone who gets a mediocre job pays less than the other person who is providing for the child the way they should. [It] feels like you are letting the person off the hook.”

A few parents also raised questions about the relationship between payment amounts and the cost of raising children. “It doesn’t take more money to raise the child all of a sudden, just because the paying parent got a raise,” said one non-custodial parent. Another non-custodial parent questioned the fairness of different children receiving vastly different levels of support. One custodial parent suggested that the state should “raise the minimum amount and then it’s up to the person on how they will raise that money.”

Fairness for parents with low incomes

One-third of parents raised questions about the fairness of the child support program for parents earning a low absolute level of income.¹¹ As discussed in more detail in the later section “[Financial burden of child support](#),” these concerns were most often raised by non-custodial parents about the financial burden of child support on low-income payers.

A few non-custodial parents with low incomes and interviewees who were broadly discussing the challenges facing non-custodial parents with low incomes expressed a preference for the payments to be more variable—

¹⁰ MAD did not have access to participants’ income data or ask them explicitly about their income; this section is based on how interviewees proactively described their incomes relative to their child’s other parent.

¹¹ MAD did not have access to participants’ income data or ask them explicitly about their income; this section is based on how interviewees proactively described the challenges facing low-income parents (whether themselves or others). While interviewees generally described fairness issues for parents with higher incomes as an issue of relative income (as fairness for parents earning more than another parent, even if both would be considered low- or high-income on an absolute basis), interviewees generally described fairness issues for parents with low incomes as an issue of absolute income (of fairness for parents who are closer to the poverty line, regardless of the other parent’s relative income).

for payments to be lower than they are today during periods when payers made less money. These interviewees described the amounts low-income payers are asked to pay as an unreasonably large burden.

While the topic of fairness for parents with low incomes was most often directly raised by non-custodial parents, the current system also presents challenges for custodial parents with low incomes. As discussed in the later section [“Inconsistent payments and enforcement,”](#) more than half of custodial parents described inconsistent payments from non-custodial parents or inconsistent enforcement from the child support program as challenges. While this was generally not framed through the lens of income, one custodial parent made the point that regardless of the income status of the paying parent, the bills and costs of raising a child continue for the custodial parent. “[Even] if someone is unemployed, bills still have to be paid,” they said. Another custodial parent said that while they were not themselves reliant on child support, if they had been then they would “be homeless by now” because of the lack of enforcement in their case.

Concealed income

A few interviewees raised concerns about the ability of other parents to conceal income from the child support program. This included tips and other cash income, as well as situations where people own their own businesses and can manipulate how their wages or expenses are classified.

“My ex works side jobs for cash and hides all of his income.”

Non-custodial parents

Financial burden of child support

Two-thirds of non-custodial parents raised concerns about the financial burden that child support places on parents.

A few of the parents concerned about the financial burden of child support described the actual or potential implications of this financial burden, such as an inability to afford rent or car payments, and the longer-term impacts of these challenges, including homelessness.

“I’ve seen men lose their homes, sleeping out of their cars, because they couldn’t afford their apartments because of child support.”

A few non-custodial parents concerned about the financial burden of child support described a frustration with the inflexibility of the program to respond to individual circumstances such as a need to work fewer hours while undergoing medical treatment. “You can’t go, oh you don’t have a way to pay this,” said one parent. “It gets garnished. You have to find a way to make it work.”

While a few parents with relatively higher incomes expressed concern that the current structure disincentivizes career advancement by taking more income as payers earn more, a few non-custodial parents with low incomes expressed a reverse concern: that the current structure disincentivizes the pursuit of career advancement by making it difficult to go back to school or pursue additional training by having a minimum payment level based on a parent’s potential income and by considering some forms of student assistance to be income.

One non-custodial parent raised a concern specifically about cost of living adjustments, noting that child support payments can go up for a cost of living adjustment even if the non-custodial parent did not receive a cost of living raise at work.

Uncertainty over use of child support

Half of non-custodial parents expressed uncertainty around whether the payments they were making were solely being spent for the benefit of their children.

For a few of these parents, they were specifically frustrated by the lack of visibility into how child support was being spent.

"I'm comfortable knowing that the money I support for [one of my children] goes to [the child's] needs regardless of the amount, because [the custodial parent] uses specific account that I can request last 2 years of transactions from. But there's nothing in the State of Minnesota that requires parents to do that, which I think is [wrong]. You should be able to see where that money is going digitally. There should be a website or link for both parties to monitor the amount."

Various other issues

Many non-custodial interviewees also raised other specific concerns around the determination of child support amounts. These concerns included:

- Incongruity between child custody and child support payments¹²
- Not accounting for new dependents through a subsequent marriage
- Not accounting for the child not being in daycare
- Inclusion of military entitlements as income
- Inclusion of prior performance bonuses as income even when they are not guaranteed in future years
- The date to which child support is backdated

Payment processing and enforcement

Common themes

Payment logistics

One-quarter of parents discussed specific tactical challenges related to payment logistics:

- The payment process for medical reimbursement being "archaic and difficult" to navigate
- The lag time between when a wage is deducted by an employer and when it shows up as paid online
- Delays that can exist in setting up payments with a new employer
- The lack of availability of autopay options for parents who are self-employed

¹² For example, a parent making child support payments to a parent who has a higher income for a child in 50/50 custody or a parent paying child support for a child for whom they have temporary full custody.

- A refund being issued by paper check, even when electronic payment would be preferred
- Processing errors that can inadvertently result in a payer going into arrears

Custodial parents

Inconsistent payments and enforcement

More than half of custodial parents described inconsistent payments from non-custodial parents and/or inconsistent enforcement from the child support program as challenges.

“There is no consistency. No way to predict what day or how much gets deposited.”

Because payments to custodial parents are based on when a non-custodial parent makes a payment, one parent noted that, “Sometimes I’ll get [a payment] on the first of the month, sometimes on the 20th—it varies that way.” This inconsistency created challenges for interviewees. “I’ve had times where he pays two at once,” one parent said. “So it is just hard to count and budget.”

A few custodial parents also described challenges around inconsistent payments as an issue of enforcement. One parent said the child support was not fair and objective “because of the lack of enforcement.”

“He was behind three months and no action was taken. He finally paid one month of child support, and that was enough to stop them from taking action... It almost feels like you are victimized as the recipient and they just allow your abuser to keep doing it.”

Lack of information about payments and enforcement

One-third of custodial parents raised a separate concern around the lack of information available about the status of payments and enforcement. These parents expressed a desire for more information, particularly about what enforcement options are available and what enforcement actions had already been taken.

“What is not easy is—he’s 3 months behind, what are the enforcement options? Do I need to do anything?”

In addition, one parent expressed a frustration about not knowing more about the enforcement process earlier on. “I wish [it] had been clear that there is not as much enforcement as they make it seem,” they said. “I would like to see the enforcement information upfront—it says, ‘we may,’ what does that mean?”

Non-custodial parents

Burden of penalties; snowballing enforcement

Half of non-custodial parents described challenges with the penalties and enforcement actions taken by the child support system. In particular, interviewees described frustration with how penalties can “snowball,” with an enforcement action making it more difficult to earn the wages needed to make child support payments.

“It’s a trickling effect. You lose your license. Then you get tickets. Then you get in jail.”

The most common enforcement actions described as a concern by non-custodial parents were the suspension of a driver's license and credit reporting. "Losing your license is not right," one parent said. "The first thing they do is to cut off your license, but how are you supposed to get back and forth to work?"

Regarding credit reporting, one parent said, "To put it on someone's credit can hurt someone's chance for a job, and that makes it harder to pay support."

One non-custodial parent expressed frustration that their child's medical bills had been processed through the child support system, which "converted" what would have been medical debt into child support debt, which had different enforcement ramifications than would typically be used to collect medical debt.

Communicating with child support program

Common themes

Lack of clear status overview and status updates

Many interviewees described challenges around the lack of clear communication about a parent's status from the child support program.

"[The program] and case workers do not actively reach out—you're on your own [un]less you contact them."

Many parents felt uncertain about various aspects of the program and felt that they could benefit from a holistic review of their program status. Several parents suggested their county case worker or the state should provide proactive high-level status updates. "Provide a quick review of where everything is—where standing is and where you are, a helpful review," suggested one non-custodial parent. "Call people to check in every six months or once a year to see how things are going and what your concerns are," suggested one custodial parent.

A few parents said clear communication was a particular need at milestones and life events, such as a child turning 18 or a parent getting remarried. "At a minimum, explain what is happening and what is changing or what is not changing at that milestone" and what the options are, suggested one non-custodial parent.

For a few parents, clear status updates were important in relation to specific issues or transactions.

"Provide status updates—even if [it's] that I'm in the queue and they can't respond yet."

Regardless of the specific topic, parents wanted more frequent, more proactive updates. "Tell participants when their case worker changes," one parent said. "Don't make them find out by not having their calls returned."

One parent noted the website could be updated in with "real time status updates" on more types of information, even down to "today we tried to serve this person" with court papers.

Lack of connection to other resources

A few parents said the child support program does not do enough to connect parents to other resources and supports. "The Minnesota child support program doesn't set anyone up for success," said one parent.

“Anybody who has to do this needs as much information as possible,” another parent said. This includes not just directly related topics such as “how things are tabulated, what happens if you miss a payment, and what the consequences of that are”—but also broader resources. “If you need support,” the program should tell you “other programs you may be eligible for,” this parent said.

“Provide people information on other benefits they may be able to access when child support is decreasing their resources—SNAP, utility support. I wish that were there, it would have made the first few years [more manageable] for me.”

Another parent said the program should connect families with other types of supports, such as financial counseling and mental health services.

Non-custodial parents

Perception that the program is biased toward custodial parents

Almost all non-custodial parents said they have the perception that the child support program is biased toward custodial parents.

For a few of these parents, the program’s design, structure, and policies were what was biased. “When you look at it,” said one non-custodial parent, “the child support system favors one parent over the other.” Another said, “the child support system is designed to protect the other parent and the children.”

“Feels like the ref is intervening in the game. Why am I getting a cost of living increase when she still makes more money?”

A few other parents said there are biases in how the quickly the program responds to parents. These parents described the time it took for non-custodial parents to receive a response relative to custodial parents. “After my daughter entered school, if I had put in a form it would have taken months [to process], but my ex put in a form, and [it was processed] within a couple of weeks,” said one parent. It “feels like there is a different response time for non-custodial parents,” he said. “I’m more than happy to be wrong if there is a certain protocol, but that is how it comes off.”

A few parents said they felt greater weight was given to custodial parents’ concerns.

“When children live with one parent, the court leans towards what that parent says. Even if there are a lot of lies, they do not bother to verify everything. Even when you submit an affidavit.”

Another said they wished “there were more people advocating for men in the system,” echoing a concern a few parents expressed that the program was not just biased against non-custodial parents generally but biased against men specifically.

One parent described paying child support even though they had 50/50 custody and the other parent made more than they did. They said the court used their earning potential rather than their actual earnings, while

using the other parent’s actual income rather than their earning potential. “I’m automatically guilty—a Black man in Minnesota,” they said. “Minnesota is a very pro-woman state.”

Tone of communications

Related to concerns about bias against non-custodial parents and against men, two-thirds of non-custodial parents also expressed concerns around the tone of communications from the child support program. “The letters they send you—it always comes with a threat,” said one parent.

“I was in arrears for two weeks. I got [a] letter about having my driver’s license suspended if I didn’t pay. It came as a shock to me, but they told me it was just a form letter, but it caused me not to sleep for three days.”

These parents also mentioned the implicit assumptions that they saw embedded in communications to non-custodial parents. “There’s an idea that I’m not going to pay it, that I am trying to find a way to miss a payment,” said one non-custodial father. “But I had to fight custody—it was the only thing I wanted from the divorce: having a relationship with my kid.”

Maintaining cases and orders over time

Common themes

Difficulty updating support amounts to reflect changed income or life event

Many parents thought the process of updating support amounts to reflect a change in income or life event was difficult.

Parents described the process of updating orders as expensive because of the costs of going to court. “I don’t want to go back to court,” said one custodial parent. “I don’t want to spend money fighting.”

“The court system—it is a pain. Every time you go, they tell you to find a lawyer. They tell you [that] you make too much for a pro bono lawyer, but I no longer have disposable income to afford a lawyer. It is so stressful.”

Beyond the cost of going to court, a few other parents described challenges with the time and complexity of the court process. “By the time you get back in court, that is five or six months,” said one non-custodial parent. “It knocks the fight out of you—the wait is too long.”

Parents said they wish there were an easier, simpler way to update orders for support without going to court. “If income changes or living situation changes, there should be a faster or easier process,” said one non-custodial parent. Even “if it’s agreed upon, you still have to go to court; the state should be able to hold a faster mediation process,” they said.

A few parents also raised specific concerns about the difficulty of updating child support payment amounts:

- Cases are not actively reviewed for potential status changes.
- Requesting a review to lower a payment could result in a payment being increased.

- A parent may be contacted to offer to have a case randomly reviewed, but it is voluntary and if the other parent does not participate the amount would not be changed.
- Child support payments do not automatically stop when children turn 18, and paying parents may need to involve lawyers and file motions to close a case.

Non-custodial parent

Unresponsive to economic or health hardships

While many parents discussed the challenges of updating child support payments, a few non-custodial parents raised specific challenges with the program responding to major economic hardships or health conditions.

“Parenting is a big responsibility. One parent can’t afford it alone. Which is obviously why you have the system in the first place. But there’s no way to call a time out. [I] wish there was a way to communicate when you are going through a job loss or something else.”

For example, one non-custodial parent described going to court to ask for support to be lowered because they had to reduce their work hours while they were undergoing cancer treatment. “When I presented documentation that I was too sick to work 40 hours a week, the judge asked me if I could drop my chemo and pick up more hours at work instead—she said that’s not her problem,” they said. “I lost all hope in the system right then and there. That was the most cruel and inhumane thing a person has said to me.”

Changes requested of the program

Interviewees were asked explicitly about what changes they would make to improve the child support program. In addition, many requested changes were implicit in interviewees’ discussion of what challenges they experienced related to the child support program. For example, an interviewee describing the challenge of a complicated application process was implicitly requesting the application process be simpler. MAD analyzed interview responses and included challenges in the challenges section regardless of how they were framed and similarly included requested changes in this section regardless of whether they were framed as a challenge or a requested change and regardless of where in the interview they were raised.

MAD has grouped responses by the actors within the child support program who might be best positioned to enact the requested change, including DHS, county agencies, the judicial branch, and the legislative branch.

Changes requested of Department of Human Services

Initial communications

Many interviewees wanted improvements to the initial communications they receive about child support. Specifically, parents wanted:

- Early information about how payment amounts are determined and what information is considered
- Proactive communications about how childcare costs, healthcare costs, and other costs are classified and considered

- Connections with resources and supports available to parents

Interviewees expressed substantial uncertainty about how payment amounts were determined, what information was considered, and how other forms of support and purchases were classified. While these decisions are not made by DHS, the department may be well positioned to communicate with parents early in the process about how the program is designed, including its fee structure, and what resources may be available to parents. These communications could consist of fact sheets or similar documents that could automatically be sent by mail or email, posted to the DHS website, and made available to county and court system partners for further distribution.

For more discussion of these concerns, see the earlier sections on [“Lack of understanding of how amounts were determined and what information was considered,”](#) [“Classification of other support and purchases,”](#) [“Awareness of fees,”](#) and [“Lack of connections to other resources.”](#)

Ongoing communications

In addition, many interviewees wanted improvements to ongoing communication they receive from the child support program:

- Holistic summary updates on a parent’s child support status at regular time intervals
- Proactive communications with parents after life events or changes in support status, such as a change in employer, new medical costs, or a child turning 18
- Consideration of the feasibility and desirability of including more enforcement information on Minnesota Child Support Online

Parents expressed the desire for more frequent, proactive communication throughout their participation in the child support program. “A couple times I’ve gotten more information than I asked for,” said one parent. “And I actually liked that.”

One specific suggestion from these parents was to provide holistic summary updates on an annual basis as well as when there was an important life event or status change. While county child support workers may be best equipped to have holistic check-in meetings with parents, DHS may be well positioned to provide automated summary updates that provide a different view of a case than is provided in billing statements and that could be sent out at different time intervals.

“They could send me a letter update about payments, or what’s happening, or what would happen in the future. Just like a summary at the end of the year. I know I can check that online on my account, but it’d be nice if they sent something at the end of the year, some kind of report.”

Life events and changes in support status were common sources of confusion and frustration for parents, who expressed uncertainty about the implications of these events on their case and a lack of clarity about actions they could or should take. DHS could use data it already has to determine when there has been a life event or change in support status such as a change in employer, a parent remarriage, or a child turning 18. In these cases, DHS could send both the holistic update information included in annual summaries as well as a fact sheet or FAQ document related to the life event or status change, including information about how to request changes to

support. For more discussion of these concerns, see the earlier section [“Lack of clear status overview and status updates.”](#)

A few parents expressed interest in having more information available about enforcement actions related to their case, and DHS could consider both the feasibility and desirability of including more enforcement information on Minnesota Child Support Online, weighing factors such as data availability, data privacy, and parents’ interest in transparency.

Tone of communications

Almost all non-custodial parents said they have the perception the program is biased toward custodial parents, and two-thirds expressed frustration with the tone of communications. These parents described the tone of current communications as too often being threatening (related to enforcement) and too often embedding implicit negative assumptions about non-custodial parents. These parents wanted changes to the tone of communications non-custodial parents receive to make them less threatening, less presumptive, and more welcoming. For more discussion of these concerns, see the earlier sections on challenges in [“Perception that the program is biased toward custodial parents”](#) and [“Tone of communications.”](#)

Payment logistics

One-quarter of parents discussed specific tactical changes they wanted made to payment logistics and the online system overall:

- Autopay options for parents who are self-employed¹³
- Choices for parents on when a child support payment is made in a month
- Reduction in the lag time between when a wage is deducted by an employer and when it shows up online
- Refunds issued electronically when requested, rather than just by paper check
- Improvements to the process for medical reimbursement, which was described as “archaic and difficult” to navigate
- Removal of cases that were closed because they were ineligible from the active list on the portal

For more discussion of these concerns, see the earlier section on challenges related to [“Payment logistics.”](#)

In addition, a few parents suggested more fundamental changes to payments:

- Development of a child support spending account modeled after Flexible Spending Accounts (FSA) or Healthcare Spending Accounts (HSA) where both parents could have visibility into spending and be confident that spending is on expenses related to a child
- Development of a “stopgap” fund to allow non-custodial parents to voluntarily put aside additional funds each pay period and then draw on funds to pay child support if they run into economic hardship

¹³ While the child support program does offer autopay options, parents were not necessarily aware of these tools, indicating that CSD and counties need to do more work to raise awareness of these options.

Changes requested of counties

Equipping county workers to improve communication

Many parents wanted more and better information about their cases. In addition to the automated work DHS can do to proactively communicate during both the initial and ongoing states of a child support case, counties have a critical role to play in communication with parents. Specifically, parents wanted:

- County workers equipped to communicate with parents about how payment amounts are determined and what information is considered
- County workers equipped to communicate with parents about how childcare, healthcare, and other costs are classified and considered
- More frequent updates about enforcement actions
- Occasional holistic status update conversations between county workers and parents
- Enhanced training to county staff on positively communicating with parents
- More information about other resources and supports available to parents; targeted additional information to parents going through hardships

These requested changes are focused on improving communications with parents by providing county workers with the training, resources, and information they need to address common parent questions, organize holistic check-in meetings with parents, and connect parents with information and resources relevant to them.

For more discussion of the concerns underlying these requested changes, see the earlier sections on [“Lack of understanding of how amounts were determined and what information was considered,”](#) [“Classification of in-kind support and purchases,”](#) and [“Lack of connections to other resources.”](#)

These requested changes would likely be most feasible in combination with changes at DHS to create informational materials and proactively send them to parents. For example, county workers could share fact sheets developed by DHS about how payments are determined or about how healthcare costs are considered. Similarly, if DHS automatically generates holistic summary updates on a parent’s child support status at regular time intervals and proactively communicates with parents after life events or changes in support status, these communications could also be sent to county workers and serve as the impetus for a proactive conversation between a parent and county worker.

Changes requested of judicial branch

Simplify application and update processes¹⁴

Many parents expressed frustration with the application process, describing gathering the necessary documentation as complicated, confusing, and time-consuming. Specifically, parents wanted:

¹⁴ Portions of this section may apply to forms and processes administered by DHS CSD as well as those requested by the judicial branch.

- Simpler application process, with fewer documents requested—separating essential information from optional information
- Easier process to update support amounts to reflect changed income or life event

These parents wanted clarity on which documents were required and which were optional, and a simplification of the application process wherever possible. A few parents described experiences where they spent significant time gathering documents, only to feel that these documents were never considered. For more discussion of these concerns, see the earlier sections on [“Burdensome application process”](#) and [“Difficulty of updating support amounts to reflect changed income or life event.”](#)

Clearly communicate decisions

Many interviewees expressed frustration with a lack of clarity around how courts determined payment amounts, and about what information courts used in making the determination. These parents wanted clear communication about decisions, including the factors considered in the decision.

For more discussion of these concerns, see the earlier section on [“Lack of understanding of how amounts were determined and what information was considered.”](#)

Changes requested of legislative branch

Reduce complexity

While some frustration with the application and payment determination processes could be addressed with improved communication from DHS, counties, and courts, parents wanted changes to reduce the complexity of the application and modification processes that may require action from policymakers and the legislature. For example, a few parents specifically suggested creating alternative application or modification processes that would use the court system only if parents disagreed.

For more discussion of these concerns, see the earlier sections on [“Burdensome application process”](#) and [“Difficulty of updating support amounts to reflect changed income or life event.”](#)

Consider fairness concerns

Many parents expressed concerns about the fairness of the child support program’s structure from a range of perspectives and viewpoints. Both parents with a low absolute income and parents with a higher relative income raised concerns about the fairness of the current model, including the incentives (or disincentives) it creates for parents, the burdens it places on parents with a low income, the ways enforcement policies can make it harder for non-custodial parents to maintain employment, and the ways in which a lack of enforcement can burden custodial parents. For more discussion of these concerns, see the earlier sections on [“Fairness for parents with higher incomes,”](#) [“Fairness for parents with low incomes,”](#) and [“Financial burden of child support.”](#)

In addition, a few interviewees raised concerns about the ability of other parents to conceal income from the child support program and wanted the state to consider ways to reduce the amount of concealed income.

Views of the program

Recommending participation

Interviewees were asked if they would recommend participating in the program to others.

Many custodial parents said they would recommend participating in the child support program.

“Yes, and I have. Just because without this program... there are people that just wouldn’t pay. So to not have to deal with that stress to request funds is a huge relief.”

A few custodial parents were less likely to recommend the program, for example recommending that people use a private lawyer instead because doing so allowed more flexibility in negotiation.

Non-custodial parents had more mixed responses: a few said they would recommend the program, a few said they would recommend the program only in certain situations such as a disagreement between parents, and a few others said they would not recommend the child support program to others.

What people wish they had known before becoming involved

Interviewees were asked what they wish they had known about the program before they got involved.

Just over half of custodial parents said there was nothing else they wished they had known beforehand. Among those who did have something they wish they knew, responses included wishing they had known:

- It would be difficult to find information at the start.
- Cost of living adjustments are not always automatic.
- There would be inconsistent payments.
- There would be inconsistent enforcement.
- There would be fees.

Half of non-custodial parents said they wished they had known more about how payments were calculated. A few non-custodial parents said there was nothing else they wished they had known. Other responses included wishing they had known that getting a lawyer is helpful, and that it is useful to think about the long-term details of the order, all the way through to emancipation.

Trust in the child support program

Trust in the child support program varied significantly between custodial and non-custodial parents.

Interviewees were asked if they trusted the child support program to do what is in the best financial interest of children and whether the child support program is fair and objective.

Custodial parents had largely positive responses to these questions. Two-thirds of custodial parents said they trusted the child support program to do what is in the best financial interest of children or that the child support

program is fair and objective. A few said they somewhat trusted the program or that the program was somewhat fair and objective, and one said they did not trust the program because of a lack of enforcement.

Non-custodial parents had largely negative responses to these questions. Half of non-custodial parents said they did not trust the program to do what is in the best financial interest of children or that the child support program is not fair and objective.

"It's not fair... the actual money I pay to their mother gets used for her to do things not related to our children and we still have them 50/50. So that money could be better invested in things for them, not for her to go on vacation or buy a new car. It's not going to good use."

One-third of non-custodial parents said they somewhat trusted the program or that the program was somewhat fair and objective. A few non-custodial parents said unequivocally that they trusted the program or that the program is fair and objective.

Communicating with parents

Interviewees were asked about the best way for them to provide feedback about the program, how the child support program could improve communication with parents more broadly, and the best methods to communicate with parents.

Future program feedback from interviewees

Among interviewees, phone calls or interviews and surveys were commonly mentioned as the best way for them to provide feedback about the program, with a slight preference for phone calls or interviews. Interviewees who said phone calls or interviews would work best noted the following benefits:

- Unlike surveys, participants can be sure what they are trying to convey is clear.
- It feels like someone is actually listening, that participants are being heard, and it adds a personal touch.
- Phone calls or interviews may be more challenging to set up, but they are more likely to produce better information and obtain more specific answers than surveys.

One interviewee noted that it could be difficult to conduct phone calls or phone interviews in large counties where many parents participate in the program. Another interviewee said phone calls are not always a good experience because program staff are not always kind and they do not always make you feel heard. In terms of timing, one interviewee suggested conducting phone calls or interviews every six months to one year to check in on participants and allow them the opportunity to give feedback.

Some interviewees wondered about the benefits of surveys, noting that people may ignore an invitation and that they are often too generic. A few interviewees questioned whether survey results are actually reviewed and utilized. A benefit of surveys noted by one interviewee was the flexibility in completing them on one's own time, such as over a lunch break. Another interviewee suggested that surveys be sent out as children near their 18th birthdays.

Emails and face-to-face meetings were each mentioned as preferred ways to provide feedback by a few interviewees. A few other interviewees said they were not particularly interested in providing feedback in the future because they questioned whether the information would be used.

Improving communication with parents

A few interviewees were unsure how communication with parents could be improved, with one interviewee noting that some people will want more communication and others will want less. A few interviewees said determining how to improve communications is likely challenging because everyone wants something different.

Among interviewees who had improvement ideas, more proactive communication was discussed most commonly. Ideas included providing information on the child support program with divorce filings, actively reviewing cases for potential need for modifications, and checking in on participants to see what they need, what their concerns are, and what questions they have. One interviewee recommended that the program be more proactive about telling participants when their case worker has changed, rather than having participants find out when their messages are not returned.

Other ideas for improvement included:

- Improving the child support website
- Sending letters or documents by mail more often
- Lightening the case load of county workers so they can be more available to participants
- Developing a team that could answer specific or general (e.g., frequently asked) questions sent in by email to a central inbox
- Increasing the use of texting

Methods for communicating with parents

A few interviewees were unsure of the best methods for communicating with parents more broadly or noted that it likely depends on individual preferences, so providing a wide variety of communication methods is helpful. Most commonly, interviewees suggested communicating with parents via email, with one interviewee noting it is a direct and fast method of communication. Phone calls, text messages, and physical documents were also mentioned. One interviewee noted the importance of having options for communication methods that parents can opt in to or out of to suit their preferences.

Recommendations

MAD developed recommendations for the child support program based on input from interview participants; these recommendations may be improved with additional perspectives from program staff and other stakeholders. MAD's recommendations largely focus on cross-cutting input received from both custodial and non-custodial participants. The child support program should explore these recommendations in the broader context of programmatic goals, priorities, feasibility, and available resources.

- **The child support program should proactively communicate with parents throughout their time in the program.** Communications at various points may differ based on parent need, providing more detailed information about the program upon entry (e.g., intent and goals of the program, how support is calculated) and timely status updates or next steps at key family or program milestones (e.g., change in county worker, changes in support status, child turning 18). When contacting parents, the child support program should consider the tone and framing of communications, identifying any that may be perceived as overly punitive, particularly when communicating with non-custodial parents.
- **The child support program should consider opportunities to connect parents with other programs and resources.** The child support program could partner with other state programs and nonprofit organizations to refer families to resources and programs for which they may be eligible. For example, CSD could send parents partially pre-filled applications for Medical Assistance, Child Care Assistance, or other programs based on administrative data in the child support program. The program could also consider providing direct support or training on topics such as financial planning.
- **DHS CSD should consult with county child support offices to identify opportunities to improve parent interactions with county workers, such as through improved resources and training.** To address participant concerns, county worker resources and training elements could include sections on how to serve families holistically, how to shift towards a customer service mindset, and how to identify community resources that may be available to support parents. County workers could also be supported with automated notifications and resources sent to both participants and county workers about a status change, life event, or potential eligibility for another program.
- **The child support program should explore simplifying application and modification processes.** This would likely involve working with counties, judicial partners, and legislative partners to streamline forms and the documentation that is requested. For example, the program could evaluate which pieces of requested information are vital and which pieces could be optional by reviewing how often different pieces of information lead to changes in child support determinations.
- **The child support program should review the existing payment system to determine if participant suggestions about payment logistics can be incorporated.** For example, auto pay for self-employed non-custodial parents, electronic refunds, and selecting on which day of the month payments are made.
- **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.** While parents with higher incomes expressed a preference for payments to be flatter (i.e., to change less if they earn more) parents with low incomes expressed a preference for more graduated payments (i.e., for payments to change more based on income earned at a given time). Additionally, DHS should consider unintended consequences of existing and future payment structures, such as negatively affecting career and educational trajectories of parents.

- **The child support program should continue to work to understand the findings of this study and implement recommendations.** Counties, courts, and other partners in the child support program should be consulted in reviewing the parent perspectives reflected in this report and planning potential changes that could be made in response, for example by planning ways to implement changes to both initial and ongoing participant communications. It may also be beneficial to validate the findings of this study with a broader group of participants, for example using findings from this research to develop the structure of a survey. Some findings from this report may be directly applicable to future phases of the child support program’s digital marketing efforts, while other findings could inform improvements to the child support program overall.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. How did you become involved with the child support program?
 - a. Why did you apply for the program?
 - b. Why did you not apply for the program? What would have made you interested in applying, if anything?
2. What has been your overall experience with the child support program?
 - a. Were you able to easily find information about the program? Why or why not?
 - b. Have you been able to easily interact with the program? Why or why not?
3. How has participating in the child support program benefited you or your family?
 - a. In your experience, has the program met your needs? Why or why not?
 - b. What aspects of the program have been the most helpful?
4. What challenges have you experienced related to the child support program?
 - a. What challenges have you experienced in receiving or paying child support?
5. Would you recommend participating in the program to others? Why or why not?
6. What do you wish you had known about the program before you got involved with the child support program, if anything?
7. Do you trust the child support program to do what is in the best financial interest of children? Why or why not?
 - a. Is the child support program fair and objective? Why or why not?
8. What changes would you make to improve the child support program?
 - a. What would be the best way for you to give feedback about the program?
9. How could the child support program improve communication with parents?
 - a. What methods should the program use to communicate with parents?
10. Is there anything else I haven't asked you that you would like to share, related to the child support program?