



Minnesota Child Support Division Grant Evaluation Report

Grantee: Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Support Division

Date of Report: December 11, 2023

Intervention Two: Targeted Digital Marketing

Intervention Duration: February 22 through May 23, 2021
August 3 through October 24, 2021
June 6 through September 4, 2023

Grant Number: 90FD0213-01-11

Key Staff:

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

Background

Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program was a 24-month demonstration sponsored by the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families. In September 2018, OCSS awarded funds to 14 child support agencies to test digital marketing approaches and partnerships to reach parents who could benefit from child support services and create or improve two-way digital communication and engagement with parents. The Minnesota Department of Human Services' (DHS) Child Support Division (CSD) was one of the grant recipients.

Minnesota's child support program is state-supervised and county-administered. Through CSD and 78 county child support offices, program staff provided services to 346,000 parents and 240,000 children and collected nearly \$581 million in child support in Federal Fiscal Year 2017. For every \$1 dollar spent on the program, staff collected \$3.30. Minnesota continued to rank in the top five nationally in the percentage of current support collected (74.53) and the percentage of cases with a payment toward arrears (72.26).

Despite its success, the program has seen a steady decline in its caseload. From 2012 to 2017, Minnesota's caseload dropped from 250,000 cases to 221,000. However, it's likely there are many parents and families who could still benefit from its services. From 2014-2016, the number of births in Minnesota was nearly 70,000 per year (about 47,500 to married parents and 22,500 to unmarried parents). Given the national average of 20% of children participating in the child support system, 14,000 of the 70,000 could benefit from Minnesota's child support program, yet only 8,700 per year participated in that timeframe. In 2018, CSD placed five questions in the Minnesota State Survey, a representative survey of all Minnesota residents administered by the University of Minnesota. Survey results show 65% of Minnesotans are aware their county has a child support agency. Forty-five percent said they would be likely to apply for child support services if separated from the parent of their other child.¹

Program awareness, branding, and customer misperceptions of the program have been ongoing challenges. Several factors contribute to these challenges including information that's hard to find and understand, program history and reputation, confusion about how the program can help, and inconvenient ways to sign up are a few.

According to the Pew Research Center, 88% of U.S. adults between ages 18-29 and 78% of adults between ages 30-49 use at least one social media site.² CSD hoped a targeted digital marketing campaign that builds awareness, addresses program branding, offers information, and takes parents to an online form that makes it easier for them to sign up for services would help the program reach its goals.

¹ Minnesota Child Support Division (2019). *2018 Minnesota state survey – Child support division summary*.

<https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-7585P-ENG>

² Pew Research Center (2018). *Social media use in 2018*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>

Intervention

For this intervention, CSD wanted to explore whether digital marketing could help the program reach the following goals:

1. Increase the number of nonpublic assistance (NPA) applications in the pilot counties by up to 5%.
2. Increase traffic to the division's child support website by up to 10%.
3. Develop an electronic application to make it easier for parents to sign up for services.

Before the start of this intervention, CSD collaborated with Minnesota Information Technology (MNIT) to develop and publish an electronic application for services available statewide. Staff designed the application so parents could complete it on mobile devices and created the infrastructure for counties to receive applications through a secure online portal. Due to staff availability and contractual restrictions, CSD and MNIT staff created the electronic application 'in-house' using funds from their general budgets and did not use money from the digital marketing grant.

To accomplish the above goals, CSD created and executed three digital advertising campaigns. CSD worked with DHS communications staff to develop ads for each campaign. We held several meetings to brainstorm creative assets and messages for the ads and discuss which digital platforms would best reach single parents.

CSD contracted with Clarity Coverdale Fury, a Minneapolis-based digital marketing vendor, for their consultation and expertise and to manage each campaign. The vendor placed ads on digital platforms in twelve pilot counties: Becker, Crow Wing, Koochiching, Pine, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Wright, Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services (comprised of Cottonwood and Jackson), Olmsted, Mower, and Scott. For geographic tracking purposes, CSD and CCF considered Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, and Wright as "Metro" counties and the rest as "Greater MN" counties. CSD met monthly with pilot counties to gather input and feedback on the creative assets. State staff thought the pilot counties were a good representation of the program in terms of demographics, population, caseloads, and urban or rural location.

The grant provided \$225,000 for these digital marketing activities, \$181,000 for the ad placement costs and \$44,000 for CCF's administrative costs. Division staff and the vendor chose a progressive spending strategy for three campaigns, allocating \$55,000 for the first campaign, \$60,000 for the second, and \$66,000 for the third. This strategy allowed us to use additional funds to better-performing platforms during later campaigns.

CSD adjusted the assets, messages, and digital platforms between each campaign that encouraged single parents to click on the ads, visit the website, and sign up for services. The team measured the web traffic to the "Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services" web page, website actions (defined below), and the number of NPA applications in the pilot and non-pilot counties to see how the ads helped us reach our overall goals.

First 90-day Campaign

A legislative approval process and the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the start of the first 90-day campaign until the end of February 2021. For the first campaign, the team used two messages: "Child Support is important. Children do better with support from both parents," labeled a 'Stability' theme for tracking purposes, and "Did life take an unexpected turn? Maybe child support can help" labeled a "U-Turn" theme. CCF managed display

ads on websites and on Facebook and Instagram where single parents visit. Additionally, they placed paid search ads and tracked the key words people used when looking for information about child support.

Dates: February 22 through May 23, 2021

Budget: \$55,000

Creative asset and message examples:

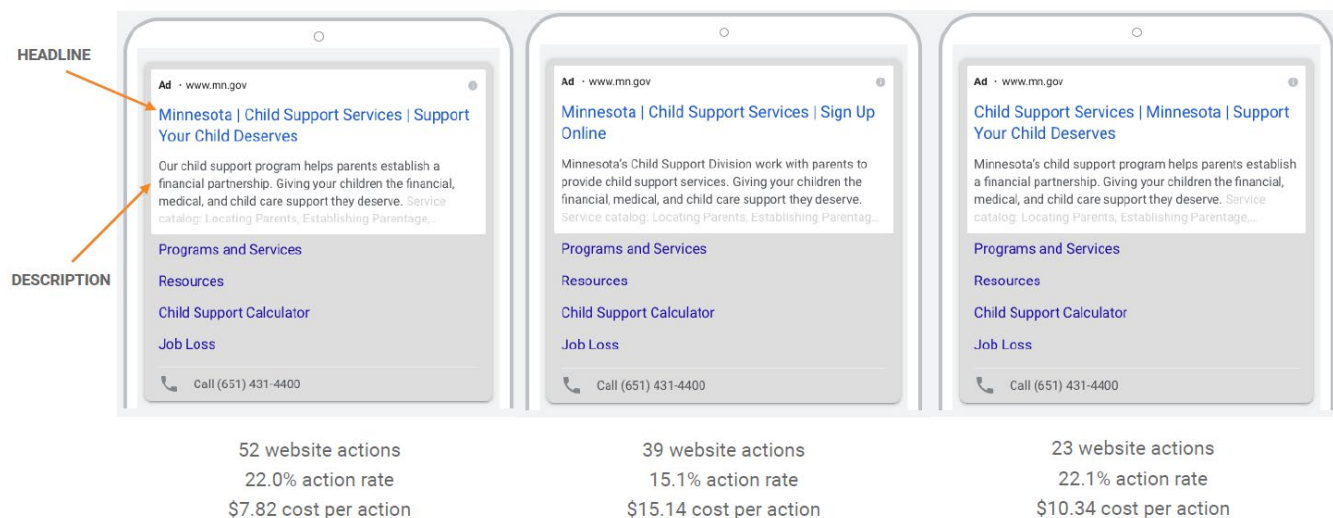
- Display ads



- Social media: Facebook and Instagram



- Paid search



Second 90-day Campaign

For the second campaign, the team:

- Added the message “Need child support? We can help.” to the previous messages to see if a shorter, more direct message would have an impact while maintaining the “traction” the first two messages gained during the first campaign.
- Changed the ad images, including those with no images, to see if people responded differently.
- Added audio ads to see how they perform as a creative asset.

Again, CCF managed display ads on websites and social media. However, based on platform performance, the team discontinued Instagram and placed ads on Twitter and audio ads on Spotify. The team continued using the same paid search ads and track the key words to build on the positive performance from the first campaign.

Dates: August 3 through October 24, 2021

Budget: \$60,000

Creative asset and message examples:

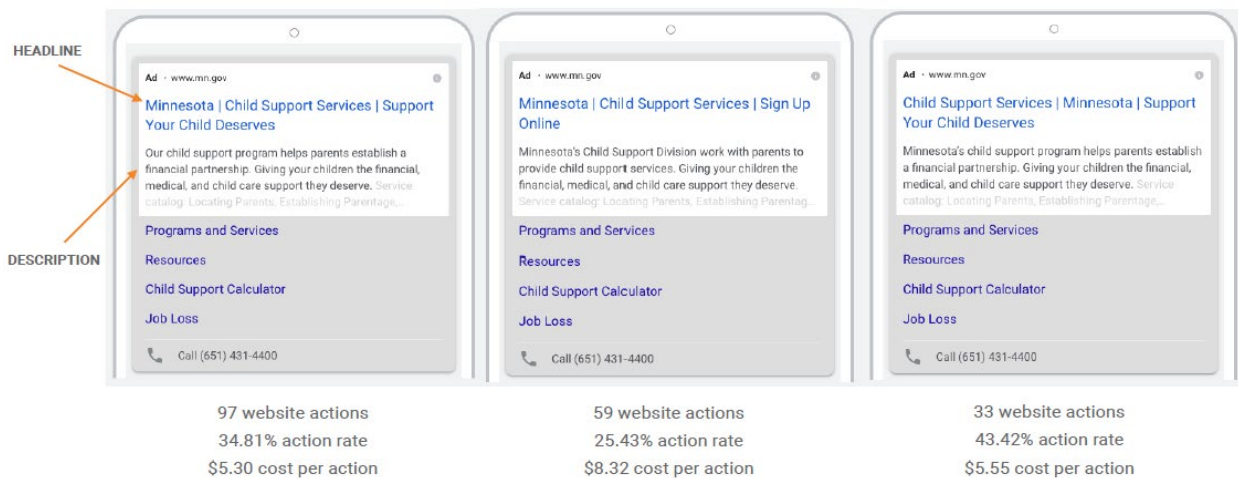
- Display ads



- Social media: Facebook, Twitter, and Spotify



- Paid search



Third 90-day Campaign

For the third campaign, the team produced and placed five animated videos (instead of the static ads used in the first two campaigns) to see how they help reach the intervention goals. The video topics included:

- “Why should I sign up for child support services?” One displayed a female signing up for services and the other displayed a male to address the perception that only women sign up for services.
- “What services does Minnesota’s child support program offer?”
- “How do courts determine child support amounts in Minnesota?”
- “How do I sign up for services?”

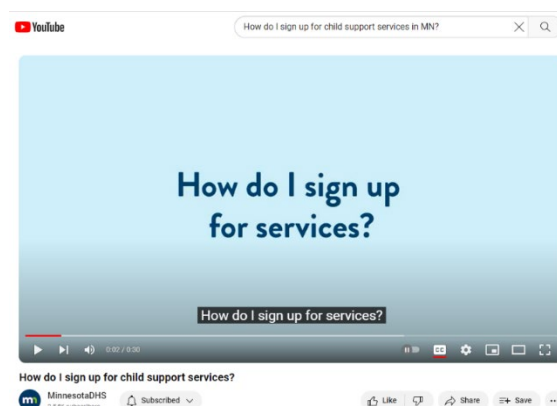
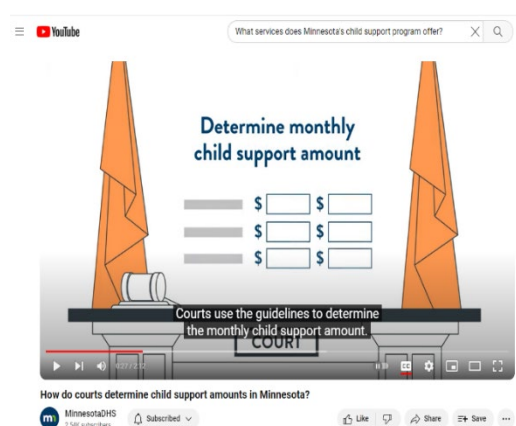
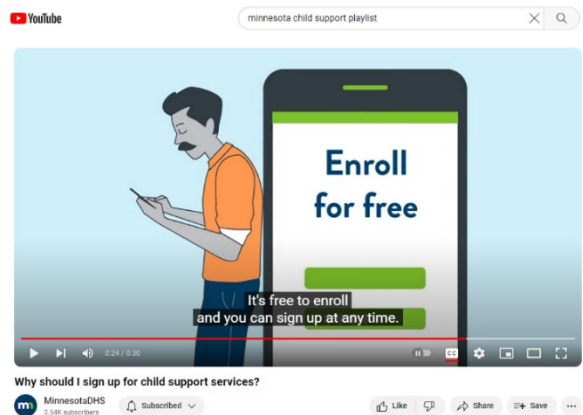
CCF managed the video ads on sites and Facebook. Additionally, they placed Google search ads and tracked the key words people used when looking for information about child support.

Dates: June 6 through September 4, 2023

Budget: \$66,000

Creative asset and video examples for display, social media, and paid search ads:

- Video-screen caps



Results

State staff and CSD analyzed and discussed the results from each campaign and made adjustments in between to reach the intervention goals. State staff defined **‘Web traffic’** as the number of pageviews for the “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services” web page. Pageviews include reloads and instances when a visitor navigates to a different page and returns to the original page. This is a good measurement to determine if people are visiting the page with more information about signing up for services and track whether the ads helped reach the related goal.

CCF staff defined and tracked **‘Website actions’** when:

- A person clicked the “Sign up online” button on CSD’s “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services” web page
- A person clicked on one of the four links to download PDF versions of the applications in English, Hmong, Somali, or Spanish
- A person completed and submitted an electronic application.

CCF thought this was a good measurement to gauge visitors’ activities once they got to the “Sign up” page and hopefully took the next steps. Staff also tracked the **number of NPA applications**, electronic and paper, towards the goal of increasing the number by 5%.

First 90-day Campaign: February 22 through May 23, 2021

Web traffic to “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services” page: 25,214 page views or 8,405 per month

Website actions: creative asset, message, and platform performance

- Display ads with the “Unexpected Turn” or ‘U-Turn’ theme produced more website actions (220) than ads with the “Child support is important” message or ‘Stability’ theme (183). (Consider including the top three display sites-Musi, Yahoo and Yahoo mail.)
- Facebook produced more website actions (463) than Instagram (66) and the ‘Stability’ theme was more effective producing results than the ‘U-Turn’ theme (371 vs. 158). (Social media)
- Paid search ads with the headline “Minnesota | Child Support | Services | Support Your Child Deserves” produced the most website actions with 52. The top three keyword search phrases that generated the most website actions were:
 1. “Child Support Services”
 2. “Minnesota Child Support Services”
 3. “Child Support Payment Online”

Number of NPA Applications

Month	Non-Pilot Counties			Pilot Counties		
	Paper	EApp	Total	Paper	EApp	Total
November 2020	180	N/A	180	145	N/A	145
December 2020	158	N/A	158	126	N/A	126
January 2021	203	N/A	203	143	N/A	143
February 2021	159	96	255	108	149	257
March 2021	145	133	278	80	178	258
April 2021	110	92	202	77	147	224
May 2021	116	126	242	64	129	193
June 2021	119	129	248	63	163	226
July 2021	157	131	288	60	149	209
Total	1,347	707	2,054	866	915	1,781

Second 90-day Campaign: August 3 through October 24, 2021

Web traffic to “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services” page: 19,763 page views or 6,588 per month

Website actions: creative asset, message, and platform performance

- Display ads with the messages “Child support is important” or ‘Stability’ theme and “Unexpected Turn” or ‘U-Turn’ theme produced similar website actions, 462 and 445 respectively. The “Need child support?” message did not perform as well, with 82 actions. (Consider including the top three display sites-Musi, Yahoo and Yahoo mail again.)
- Website actions for Facebook were 41% lower than the first campaign overall. Ads with the “Need child support?” generated the most actions (299) while ads with the other two messages tied at 36 website actions each.

Ads on Twitter generated only three website actions from August-September so staff switched the remaining budget to display ads for the rest of the campaign. Since Spotify was a new platform, staff kept the ads running for the duration of the campaign. Unfortunately, the ads produced no website actions.

- Paid search ads with the headline “Minnesota | Child Support | Services | Support Your Child Deserves” produced the most website actions (97). The top three keyword search phrases that generated the most website actions during this campaign were:
 1. “Child Support Services”
 2. “Child Support Payment”
 3. “Child Support Help”

Number of NPA applications

Month	Non-Pilot Counties			Pilot Counties		
	Paper	EApp	Total	Paper	EApp	Total
August 2021	132	134	266	67	168	235
September 2021	143	140	283	53	159	212
October 2021	131	120	251	69	146	215
November 2021	110	107	217	47	134	181
December 2021	111	106	217	42	162	204
January 2022	137	143	280	53	169	222
February 2022	117	131	248	57	161	218
March 2022	144	153	297	47	169	216
April 2022	124	117	241	62	172	234
Total	1,149	1,151	2,300	497	1,440	1,937

Third 90-day Campaign: June 6 through September 4, 2023

As described in the ‘Intervention’ section above, For the third campaign, state and CCF staff produced five videos and post them on digital platforms like the first two campaigns to see how the video format compares to static ads.

Web traffic to “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services” page: 9,809 page views or 3,270 per month

Website actions: creative asset, message, and platform performance

- Display ads with the videos generated 316 website actions. Regarding performance, the rank of the videos were:
 - “Why should I sign up for child support services?” featuring the female
 - “How do I sign up for services?”
 - “Why should I sign up for child support services?” featuring the male
 - “How do courts determine child support amounts in Minnesota?”
 - “What services does Minnesota’s child support program offer?”
- Website actions for the videos on Facebook totaled 183 which was lower than the second campaign. Regarding performance, the rank of the videos were:
 - “What services does Minnesota’s child support program offer?”
 - “Why should I sign up for child support services?” featuring the female
 - “Why should I sign up for child support services?” featuring the male
 - “How do I sign up for services?”
 - “How do courts determine child support amounts in Minnesota?”

- Paid search ads featuring the videos generated 230 website actions. The top three keyword search phrases that generated the most website actions during this campaign were:
 1. “Child Support Help”
 2. “Child Support MN”
 3. “Minnesota Child Support”

Number of NPA applications

Month	Non-Pilot Counties			Pilot Counties		
	Paper	EApp	Total	Paper	EApp	Total
February 2023	112	142	254	52	155	207
March 2023	143	126	269	68	204	272
April 2023	111	149	260	62	170	232
May 2023	120	145	265	68	201	269
June 2023	133	165	298	79	187	266
July 2023	119	151	270	57	171	228
August 2023	133	185	318	85	217	302
September 2023	111	168	279	76	197	273
October 2023	130	149	279	79	174	253
Total	1,112	1,380	2,492	626	1,676	2,302

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Overall, this intervention succeeded in meeting the goals mentioned above:

- CSD worked with a digital marketing vendor to launch a successful digital marketing campaign in the 12 pilot counties that increased traffic to program’s website and led visitors to the actions they need to take to sign up for services.
- CSD and MNIT created and launched a new electronic application that proved successful with a high adoption rate with parents compared to use of paper applications.

Web traffic

The nearly 300% increase in pageviews to this page surpassed the goal to increase web traffic by 10%. The number of pageviews for the “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services” web page was the highest during the first campaign. The number dropped during the months without ads and in later campaigns. Staff didn’t know the reasons for the decrease, but one reason could be ‘ad fatigue’ when the newness and novelty of the ads fade. The table below breaks down the web traffic data during the intervention:

Time periods (with no ads)	Number of Months	Pageviews	Pageviews per Month

June-July 2021	2	3,055	1,528
November 2021-May 2023	19	29,772	1,567
Average pageviews per month	-	-	1,547
Time periods (with ads)	Number of Months	Pageviews	Pageviews per Month
March-May 2021 (first 90-day campaign)	3	25,214	8,405
August-October 2021 (second 90-day campaign)	3	19,763	6,588
June-August 2023	3	9,809	3,270
Average pageviews per month			6,087
Percent increase in average pageviews per month	-	-	293.4%

Website actions

Results for website actions were mixed. Some messages resonated better than the others and some platforms performed better than others. For example:

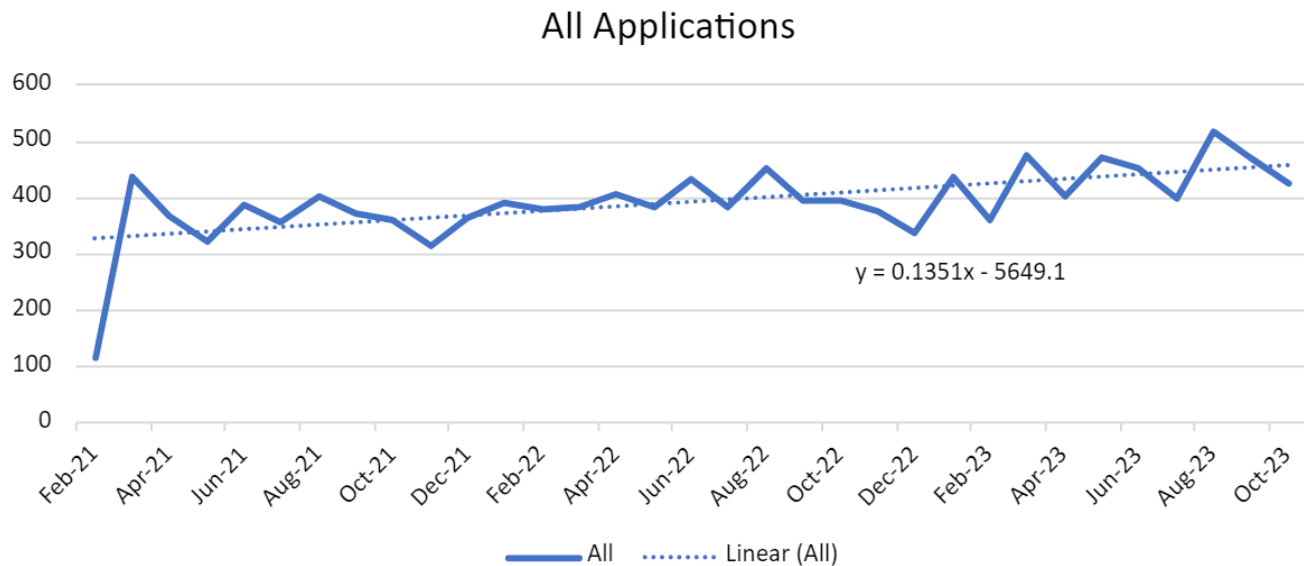
- During the first campaign, the ‘U-Turn’ themed message performed better on the display ads while the ‘Stability’ themed message performed better on Facebook.
- During the second campaign, the ‘U-Turn’ and ‘Stability’ themed messages performed well compared to the ‘Need child support’ theme on display ads while the opposite was true on Facebook.
- During the third campaign, the effectiveness of the video assets differed between platforms.
- The top three keyword searches changed for each campaign.

This suggests additional and more refined testing with fewer variables might be necessary to determine message and platform effectiveness. Another issue to consider is advertising budgets and how they can affect reaching program goals. Generally, paid search with static ads can generate website actions at a lower cost but they may not be as engaging as video ads.

Number of NPA applications

Figure X below is a compilation of the application data broken down for each campaign in the Results section. It displays the number of NPA applications from February 2021 to October 2023. Since launching the electronic version in February 2021, the program has seen a 13.5% increase in the average number of monthly applications.

When describing the impact of the ads on applications, pilot counties have seen a 7.5% increase in applications since February 2021 while the non-pilot counties saw a 6% increase. It’s reasonable to conclude that a likely reason for the difference is the ads displayed only in the pilot counties.



Another reason for the overall increase in the average number of monthly applications is the electronic application. Unlike the previous PDF version, the new application allowed parents to apply online any time using their phones or other mobile device. Before the new application, parents had to fill out a hard copy by hand or complete the PDF using a computer, print it, and either mail it or deliver it to a county child support office. The convenience of the electronic application is a major factor in the better numbers.

Additionally, collaboration with the pilot counties, federal and state staff, and CCF was critical to the success of the intervention. The teamwork, patience, and flexibility given other work priorities, staff turnover, and a pandemic contributed to the positive results.