



## Minnesota Child Support Division Digital Marketing Grant Final Brief

Grantee: Minnesota Department of Human Services Child Support Division

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## Background

The Digital Marketing grant program, sponsored by the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, was a 24-month demonstration project with the goal of researching how digital marketing may help the child support program more effectively reach and serve families. In September 2018, OCSS awarded funds to 14 child support agencies to test digital marketing approaches and partnerships to reach parents 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.

### Problem description:

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

CSD didn't know whether potential participants knew about the program or available services. CSD also had little data about the perspectives and experiences of participants or how they felt about the program. CSD thought lack of program awareness, branding, and customer misperceptions had been ongoing challenges with several contributing factors 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.

CSD wanted to know if digital marketing efforts could help drive people to its website to learn more about the program or sign up for services to help more families and the declining caseloads. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center (2018). *Social media use in 2018*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/03/01/social-media-use-in-2018/>

In addition, participants often commented about difficulties communicating with caseworkers by phone or in person and asked if caseworkers could text to answer questions or share information.

Department, division, and county staff worked to respond to the feedback they had received over the years. CSD selected the following 12 pilot counties to partner with on the grant interventions: Becker, Crow Wing, Koochiching, Pine, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Wright, Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services (comprised of Cottonwood and Jackson), Olmsted, Mower, Scott.

## Interventions and Evidence-Based Findings

### Project description, target population, and timeline:

**Information gathering.** The goals of this invention were to better understand what Minnesota residents and potential program participants knew about the child support program and the likelihood they would sign up for services. An additional goal was to understand the experiences and perspectives of program participants. CSD used this information to shape the digital marketing efforts and improve the program.

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

Between October 2018 and February 2019, CSD placed 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 were aware their county had a child support agency. Forty-five percent said they would likely apply for child support services if separated from the other parent.<sup>2</sup>

In January and February 2021, MAD staff interviewed 20 program participants to learn whether the child support program benefited their families, the challenges they experienced, and changes they would recommend. In January and February 2022, MAD staff emailed a survey to 9,810 participants from the 12 pilot counties. About 1,200 participants responded to the survey.

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

**Digital marketing.** CSD wanted to see if digital ads with different messages on a variety of platforms would:

- Increase the number of nonpublic assistance (NPA) applications in the pilot counties by up to five percent.
- Increase traffic to CSD’s web page, “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services”, by up to ten percent.
- Drive people to the newly developed electronic application and determine whether it made enrolling for services easier for parents.

Division staff built and published an electronic application using state staff before starting this intervention. A team of DHS and CSD staff then created and executed three 90-day digital marketing campaigns with a contracted vendor to reach single parents in the 12 pilot counties using a variety of ads and platforms.

The 90-day campaigns ran from February to May 2021, August to October 2021. and June to September 2023. The team adjusted the ads and platforms between each campaign to optimize performance and reach their goals.

**Texting.** CSD staff wanted to know if texting could improve communication with participants who signed up to receive texts and reach the following program goals:

- Increase the percentage of current, monthly child support paid and the number of payments made towards past due support by parents who don’t pay or who pay by means other than income withholding.
- Increase the number of parents registered on Minnesota Child Support Online (MCSO), an online portal for parents to get case information 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- Decrease unclaimed money labeled “abandoned funds” for custodial parents.
- Decrease the number of driver’s licenses suspended.

CSD contracted with a vendor to provide 250 individual texting accounts for pilot county staff to send and receive texts from parents on their caseloads and one account for CSD to send one-way texts to participants about the child support issues related to the above goals.

CSD sent texts during three 90-day campaigns that ran from January to March 2021, June to August 2021, and November to January 2022. Staff made adjustments between each campaign, tracked the results toward the intervention’s goals, and sent a final survey to the nearly 5,000 participants who signed up to receive messages to give feedback.

## Research question(s):

**Information gathering.** CSD wanted to ask questions of Minnesota residents as part of the annual Minnesota State Survey to gauge awareness of Minnesota's child support program and interest in signing up for services. Additionally, CSD wanted to ask questions on the survey and during interviews to understand the perspectives of program participants.

**Digital marketing.** CSD wanted to know how placing ads with different messages on a variety of digital platforms in the 12 pilot counties would affect the web traffic to the "Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services" webpage and the number of NPA applications.

**Texting.** CSD wanted to see how text messages would affect child support payments, MCSO registrations, unclaimed funds, and the number of driver's license suspensions among participants in the 12 pilot counties who signed up to receive messages.

## Outcome measures:

**Information gathering.** CSD and MAD staff examined:

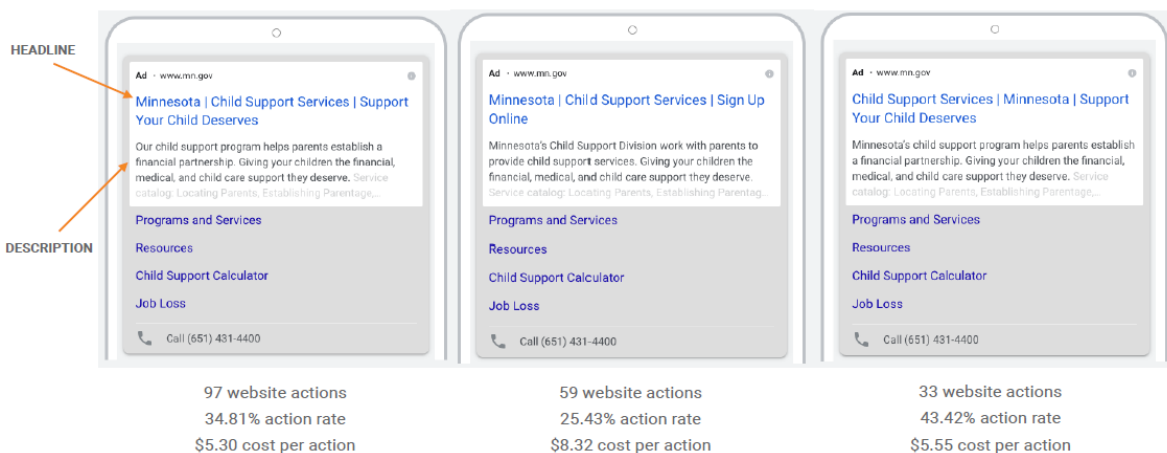
- Responses to 11 child support-related questions on the Minnesota State Survey after interviewers read the following script "The next questions are about child support, which is money one parent pays to their child's other parent to support that child, when the parents are no longer together. A few examples:
  - "Are you aware that each Minnesota county has a government child support agency?"
  - "If you were separated from the other parent of your child, how likely is it that you would apply for the county government child support services that I just asked you about?"
- Answers to the questions MAD asked during participant interviews and in participant survey. Examples include:
  - "Thinking about your overall experience with the child support program, please rate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements. [Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree]
    - Overall, my experience with the child support program has been positive.
    - The child support program has benefited my family.
    - The child support program is fair and unbiased.
    - Child support is an important program for ensuring that financial needs of children are met.
    - I would recommend participating in the child support program to other parents.

- I trust the child support program to do what is in the best financial interest of my children.

**Digital marketing.** CSD and its digital marketing contractor tracked the performance of ads like those below on a variety of platforms to measure:

- Pageview data for the “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services” web page
- Website actions tracked when:
  - A person clicked on the “Sign up online” button on CSD “Sign up for Minnesota Child Support Services” web page
  - A person clicked on one of the four links to download PDF versions of the application in English, Hmong, Somali or Spanish
  - A person completed and submitted an electronic application
- Number of NPA applications submitted

A sample of display, social media, and paid search ads:



**Texting.** CSD analyzed the outcomes from text messages staff sent to see if they:

- Increased the percentage of current, monthly child support paid and the number of payments made towards past due support by parents who don't pay or who pay by means other than income withholding
- Increased the number of parents registered on Minnesota Child Support Online (MCSO)
- Decreased unclaimed money labeled "abandoned funds"
- Decreased the number of driver's license suspended

## **Results:**

**Information gathering.** The results from the Minnesota State Survey are a benchmark about what Minnesota residents know about the child support program and their interest in signing up for services. CSD hopes to ask the same questions in future surveys to see if the results change. A few results that stood out include:

- 65% percent were aware that Minnesota county has a government child support agency.
- 59% were aware these agencies collect and record child support paid by one parent and send it to the other parent.
- 54% said they'd likely apply for child support services if they were separated from the other parent of their child.

The roles of the participant interviewees were evenly split between custodial and noncustodial parents. Custodial parents reported a positive overall experience more often and nearly all said participating in the program benefited them or their children by enforcing child support payments they otherwise wouldn't receive. Noncustodial parent interviewees more often said there wasn't a benefit in participating in the program.

Nearly two-thirds of the survey respondents were custodial parents while one-third were noncustodial parents. Custodial parents consistently rated their overall experience more positively than noncustodial parents. Nearly three-quarters of respondents agreed that child support is an important program for ensuring the financial needs of children are met. However, fewer said they trust the child support program to do what is in the best financial interest of their children or that the program is fair and unbiased.

**Digital marketing.** For the first 90-day campaign, web traffic averaged 8,405 page views per month. Display ads with "Did life take an unexpected turn? Maybe child support can help." produced the most website actions. For social media, Facebook performed the best and "Child support is important. Children do better with support from both parents." generated the most website actions. The most popular paid search terms for ads were "Child support services", "Minnesota child support services", and "Child support payment online." The number of NPA applications totaled 1,397.

For the second 90-day campaign, web traffic averaged 6,588 page views per month. Display ads with the messages “Child support is important.” and “Did life take an unexpected turn?” produced similar numbers of website actions. For social media, a new ad on Facebook with the message “Need child support? We can help.” generated the most website actions. The top paid search terms for ads were “Child support services”, “Child support payment”, and “Child support help”. The number of NPA applications totaled 1,462.

For the third 90-day campaign, CSD used five animated videos the team produced for the ads. Web traffic averaged 3,270 page views per month. Display ads with the video “Why should I sign up for child support services?” featuring a female applicant performed the best while the video “What services does Minnesota’s child support program offer?” generated the most website actions on social media. The top paid search terms for ads were “Child support help”, “Child support MN”, and “Minnesota child support.” The number of NPA applications totaled 1,682.

**Texting.** CSD sent payment reminder text messages during the first week of each month to 100-300 parents. The percentage of current support paid was higher for parents who received the text messages compared to those who didn’t, as high as 57.8% compared to 9.5% in June 2021.

Division staff sent MCSO registration texts during the second week of each month to 235-670 participants. Those who received texts registered at a higher rate than those who didn’t get the messages, as high as .79% compared to .14% in January 2021.

CSD staff sent text messages during the third week of each month to 29-57 custodial parents reminding them about child support on their stored value card. In general, parents who received these messages were more likely to make a transaction on these funds than those who didn’t, as high as 30.3% compared to 6.46% in November 2021.

Pilot county staff sent text messages during the last week of each month to 51 noncustodial parents about their suspended licenses. Parents who received these messages had a higher reinstatement rate compared to those who didn’t get them, 49.2% and 39.3% respectively.

According to results from a survey CSD sent to participants who signed up to receive text messages at the end of the pilot, 56% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” to the statement “Overall my texting experience with child support has been positive.” And 81% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” to the statement “I would like the child support program to communicate with me by text in future.”

## **Analysis:**

**Information gathering.** By gathering and analyzing the answers to the questions from the State Survey, participant interviews, and participant survey, CSD met the goals of this intervention. CSD expected some of the results but not others. For example, CSD staff expected custodial parents to consistently rate their experience more positively than noncustodial parents. At the same time, staff didn’t expect

only 59% of Minnesotans would know the program collects and records payments from one parent and sends them to the other parent, especially since it is one of the program's core services.

**Digital marketing.** Despite the mixed outcomes from the different messages and platforms, the overall results suggest CSD met the goals for this intervention. Monthly website traffic to the relevant web page was nearly 300% higher during months ads ran than the months they didn't. Additionally, the average number of monthly NPA applications was up 13.5%, 7.5% in pilot counties where the ads ran and 6% in nonpilot counties. However, some of the success is due to the new electronic application CSD launched statewide on February 1, 2021. This new application made it significantly easier for parents to sign up for services and is likely the main reason the difference between pilot and nonpilot counties was 1.5%.

**Texting.** The results also suggest CSD met its goals. Generally, CSD saw better outcomes from participants who received program-related texts compared to those who didn't. However, the requirement from CSD's general counsel's office to get participant permission to text limited the sample size so it's harder to predict if the program would have had the same results sending messages to more people. It's also encouraging that over 80% of participants who signed up would like the program to communicate with them by text.

## Impact of COVID

The COVID-19 pandemic forced county and state staff to telework at least part time for over two years and many continue to telework. It significantly shifted work priorities and affected staff turnover at all levels. During the grant, CSD could not refill two of the three staff positions who spent significant time on this effort. Additionally, most of the staff from the digital marketing vendor left and weren't replaced.

Participants couldn't access county staff in person during the pandemic. This eliminated the option to sign up for services or the texting pilot in person. However, with the launch of the electronic application in February 2021 and texting permissions web page, this became less of an issue.

The program stopped using some enforcement remedies, including suspending driver's licenses, so CSD had to change its plans for texting about that remedy until Minnesota's governor ended the peacetime emergency in July 2021.

CSD doesn't know how the pandemic affected demand for child support services, but staff changed their digital marketing strategies because of the pandemic to include relevant images and messages. It may be safe to assume demand remained the same or increased during the pandemic based on the increased in applications for services.

## **Translating findings from tests run before the COVID-19 pandemic to the new social and economic context**

The COVID-19 pandemic and a requirement that state agencies receive approval from a legislative commission before starting to work on grant-funded projects delayed CSD from implementing its digital marketing grant interventions, so all the findings came during or after the outbreak. However, CSD is considering findings around the number of NPA applications before, during, and after the pandemic. The need for services combined with the new electronic application and digital ads likely affected the increase in average number of monthly applications. CSD continues to track these numbers considering only the electronic application remains.

## **Interpreting the results of tests run after the COVID outbreak**

CSD is taking a longer-term view when interpreting results after COVID. It's difficult to determine how much the effects of the pandemic had on relationships, employment, access to services, court hearings, and other factors that impact the program. The average number of monthly NPA applications seems to level off but the program has yet to get back to pre-pandemic levels in other areas like collections, paternity and court order establishments as well as staffing.

## **Key Lessons Learned and Other General Conclusions**

- CSD would like to manage internal staff turnover and shortages and adapt to similar issues with its partners more effectively. However, staffing issues were a major problem in every employment sector during COVID.
- CSD would like to gather information or conduct “market research” more often to find out why more single parents aren't using their services and make program adjustments based on the results so more parents will enroll. For example, CSD knew many parents thought it was difficult to sign up for services using the paper-based application, which was one reason staff created the electronic application.
- The program should continue to do what it can to make it easier for participants to engage with its agencies and staff. Whether it's forms like the electronic application they can fill out online, or tools like texting and email that make communication easier, the program needs to “meet people where they are” and leverage these changes to help parents and families more effectively.
- Even a little marketing, like paid search ads, can help raise awareness and lead more parents to sign up for services. If budgets are tight, ads that appear when someone is actively searching for services are a less expensive way to reach audiences looking for help than paying for display or social media ads.

## What we learned that isn't captured in the data

- Adequate staffing is critical. Two of the three CSD staff who spent significant time working on this project left during the grant period and were not replaced. This situation reminded remaining staff that preparing for staff turnover is critical. Additionally, it would have been helpful to talk about contingency plans for staff turnover with contracted vendors. All four staff from the digital marketing vendor left the project during the three campaigns so the team lost continuity and progress during the turnover.
- Patience and flexibility are necessary traits for projects like this when unexpected changes and issues come up. For example, the legal interpretation from CSD's general counsel requiring participants to give permission before we could start texting delayed the start of this intervention and significantly decreased the number of pilot participants.