

#supportVAkids: Digital Marketing for the Virginia Child Support Program

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I. Background

I.A. Grant Purpose

The Digital Marketing grant program, sponsored by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, is 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, OCSE awarded funds to 14 child support agencies to test digital marketing approaches and partnerships to reach parents that could benefit from child support services and create or improve two-way digital communication and engagement with parents.

I.B. Problems

The Virginia Division of Child Support Enforcement (DCSE) used its grant funds to respond to three problems:

- The decline in the number of child support cases in Virginia, despite evidence that many families that could benefit from DCSE services are not receiving them
- The COVID-19 pandemic, which had sudden and far-reaching effects on the operational activities of DCSE and on the apparent needs of the people served by the program
- Uncertainty within DCSE and across the child support community about the digital engagement methods that could be sustained absent the additional funds provided by the grant

I.B.1. The Declining Caseload

Between federal fiscal years 2013 and 2018 the number of total child support cases in Virginia with either current or past child support due declined by 10.8 percent, or over 35,000 cases. Nearly 20,000 of those cases (or 55 percent of the total decline) came from Former Assistance. Cases classified as Never Assistance fell by less than 5 percent (approximately 6,000 cases) over the same time, suggesting there remains a relatively robust and ongoing need for IV-D services among this portion of the caseload. Meanwhile, the gap between families eligible for services and those participating in the IV-D program may be widening. According to American Community Survey (ACS) estimates, there were between 540,416 and 561,162 children under the age of 18 in single-parent households in Virginia in 2017.¹ DCSE caseload data identified 301,284 children under 21 in the DCSE caseload in federal fiscal year 2017. That leaves at least roughly 240,000 children in Virginia who could presumably be eligible for IV-D services.²

DCSE leadership—particularly Craig M. Burshem, Deputy Commissioner of State Programs for the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS)³—was largely responsible for defining and prioritizing the project team's focus on increasing program participation.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

² Given the mismatch in the age ranges between the two measures (under 18 for ACS data, under 21 for DCSE data), there are presumably even fewer children under 18 on the DCSE caseload and thus an even wider gap.

³ At the time of the original grant application, Deputy Commissioner Burshem was the Director of DCSE.

I.B.2. The COVID-19 Pandemic

On March 23, 2020, at roughly the midpoint between our second and third intervention cycles, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam issued an initial statewide closure of non-essential businesses and K–12 schools in response to the COVID-19 virus. Around the same time, DCSE closed its public offices and Virginia’s Juvenile and Domestic Relations Courts, which hear child support cases, stopped hearing cases in person.

In response the project team amplified the messaging that seemed most relevant to these changed conditions: applications, the review and adjustment of existing child support orders, the employment support services available through DCSE’s Family Engagement program, and Virginia’s debt compromise process for child support arrears that accumulated while the custodial party or the noncustodial party’s children were receiving benefits through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.⁴ Details of phrasing and focus and some of the imagery we used were also revised or developed to suit this new environment.

I.B.3. The Sustainability of Digital Interventions

The announcement for this grant noted that funding for learning opportunities was made in part “to develop the capacity of the agency to continue digital outreach after the *Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program* grant has ended.”⁵

The training that the project team received through this grant has strengthened DCSE’s collective grasp of the breadth of digital outreach strategies. Results from the first and second intervention cycles had convinced the project team that DCSE could benefit from continuing its program of organic social media⁶ and paid advertising. DCSE staffing decisions allowed it to continue organic social media, but no similar set of budgetary provisions paved the way for paid media. The uncertainties brought by COVID-19 only sharpened the project team’s sense that any budget we proposed to continue advertising needed to be as modest as possible while still focusing public interest in child support on DCSE, as opposed to the competing sites, such as family law attorneys.

Our analysis of results from Cycles 1 and 2 led us to create a best practices campaign for Cycle 3 that placed Google Search ads at the forefront, allowing us to guide interested users to the project website (supportVAkids.com). Any visitors who failed to complete the contact form on the site during their initial visit would then receive remarketing ads from the Google Display Network, Facebook, Instagram, or

⁴ Elsewhere in this report we call this the TANF debt compromise program. A description of it is available in Aspen Institute and the Good+ Foundation (2020). “Reducing Arrears: Child Support Policy Fact Sheet.” https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/2020/09/ChildSupport_Arrears.pdf.

⁵ See, among other places, page 6 of *Using Digital Marketing to Increase Participation in the Child Support Program* (2018). Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement Program. Grant HHS-2018-ACF-OCSE-FD-1368. https://ami.grantsolutions.gov/files/HHS-2018-ACF-OCSE-FD-1368_0.pdf.

⁶ We follow the common contemporary marketing practice of using the word “organic” to distinguish marketing approaches that platforms are not paid to promote. In practice, organic content may sometimes also be promoted through advertising funds. These parts of our organic campaigns thus became part of our paid campaigns.

Twitter. The remarketing ads would be set to make conversions their objective⁷ and would also be delivered to any users who visited any other DCSE webpages we updated with the tracking tag.

II. Interventions and Evidence-Based Findings

II.A. Project Description, Timeline, and Target Population

II.A.1. Project Description and Timeline

Our project was broken into three 90-day intervention cycles across a little over 13 months. This three-part approach reflected a somewhat simplified version of the Transtheoretical Model of Change, originally described by James O. Prochaska and Carlo DiClemente.⁸ While that model described five overall stages (Precontemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, Maintenance, and Relapse), we focused primarily on the three middle sections (Contemplation, Preparation, and Action), recasting them into three intervention cycles, which we named Find (Cycle 1), Engage (Cycle 2), and Educate (Cycle 3). In keeping with the Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI²) paradigm of drawing on past results to directly shape our future plans,⁹ we used the time between cycles to analyze the outcomes of the interventions and, as much as possible, align our approach in the next cycle to this new data. The timeline given below in Figure 1: Project Timeline illustrates our project’s pattern of interventions and evaluations.



Figure 1: Project Timeline

Table 1: Project Activities by **Cycle** lists the most important project activities by cycle. Activities carried over from earlier cycles with some modifications are included in the table, while those that were used but not changed (such as the campaign’s name and logo) are not.

⁷ In this context “conversions” refers to actions taken by users at the direction of our campaign. Most digital marketing platforms allow advertisers to select objectives for ads (such as clicks or conversions) that are distinct from the user action that determines the cost of the ad (typically in our project, a click).

⁸ J. O. Prochaska and C. DiClemente (1983). Stages and Processes of Self-Change of Smoking: Toward an Integrative Model of Change. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 51(3): 390–395. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/16334721_Stages_and_Processes_of_Self-Change_of_Smoking_-_Toward_An_Integrative_Model_of_Change.

⁹ The Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation (OPRE) describes the LI² paradigm in *Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI2): Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives*. OPRE Report #2017-108. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/li2_brief_final_b508.pdf.

Our messaging varied across the cycles and, to some degree, across the platforms, though all three cycles and most platforms included a paid or organic campaign about applying for child support. Table 2: Content Area by Cycle breaks out the most important messaging strands in each cycle, while Table 3: Content Area by Paid and Organic Campaign Platform connects all project messages to the platforms we used to promote them.

II.A.2. Target Population

Our interventions targeted parents and guardians in Virginia eligible for various DCSE services but are not receiving them, with an emphasis on those who have also never participated in public benefit programs. We never intentionally limited any of interventions by gender or age, aside from targeting users aged 18 and older, though ad placement errors in Cycle 2 led to some unintentional targeting by family status (such as divorced or separated).

We did, however, target the majority of our ads to a set of 40 localities in Virginia (19 cities and 21 counties) that contain about 3.5 million people (about 41% of Virginia's 8.5 million residents). A complete description of the data and decision-making that led us to choose that set of locations appears as Appendix C of our Communication Plan, but the essential goal was to uncover which locations seemed to contain the largest gaps between DCSE caseloads and the number of families that could benefit from DCSE services. Table 4: Location Targets and Extended Focus Areas for Most Paid Campaigns gives a complete list of our location targets.

II.B. Research Questions

We posed the following research questions across the interventions:

1. Can promoting child support applications through digital channels increase the number of new applications for those services among Virginians, particularly those who have not received public benefits (Never Assistance cases)?
2. Can targeted paid and organic digital marketing strategies in Virginia drive positive public engagement with child support services?
3. Can targeted paid and organic digital marketing strategies address the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic by increasing the number of individuals seeking DCSE's services to review and adjust child support orders, reduce child support debt on TANF cases, and refer noncustodial parents to employment services?
4. Can a marketing campaign that emphasizes search advertising, supported by display and social media platforms, form the basis for a sustainable, cost-effective approach to paid digital outreach?

II.C. Outcome Measures

A list of outcomes measures is shown in Table 5: Outcome.

II.D. Results

A full reporting of all outcome measures across all cycles would require more than the allotted space. We have therefore focused on only those we consider most salient for other programs.

We assume that the COVID-19 pandemic has colored the results from Cycle 3. Although DCSE offices remained open but suspended in-office customer service for all of Cycle 3, we assume outcomes related to the DCSE caseload were more strongly affected by the pandemic than purely digital measures such as click-through rates, conversions, etc.

II.D.1. Results of Project Activities on Applications

Data on openings of new cases—the closest available proxy for applications—is shown in Table 6: DCSE New Case Openings. To bridge the gap that typically exists between an individual user’s initial interest in applying and the actions necessary for that interest to be reflected in the data, we extended the period under analysis from the typical three months covered by the other cycles to a full four months.

II.D.2. Results of Organic Social Media Campaigns

Shortly before the start of Cycle 2, we created organic social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. At that point DCSE already had a YouTube account, though it was essentially dormant. An organic account in LinkedIn was created ahead of Cycle 3. From November 2019 onward, DCSE staff posted organic content to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter at our expected rate of roughly two times per week. Our weekly organic posts to LinkedIn fell similarly in line with our plans for Cycle 3. We made only one organic post to YouTube during Cycle 3 but several between Cycles 2 and 3. Between November 1, 2019 and July 30, 2019 our Facebook account gained 460 followers; our Instagram account, 885; our Twitter account, 124; our LinkedIn account, 50. We gained approximately 110 YouTube subscribers during Cycle 3.

Out of the 120 organic posts we made between November 1, 2019 and July 30, 2020 on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, we received only 10 comments on organic Instagram posts and roughly the same number on organic Twitter posts. We received 168 comments on organic Facebook posts—almost all negative—but reached thousands of people.

This contrast between the small number of negative comments and the many people reached is even more striking on paid social media. On Facebook we received 169 comments, most from a small group of users, on paid posts that reached 358,399 people. On Instagram 11 comments came from the 210,816 people reached. Combined, this means we reached 3,162 people for every comment received—at an average cost of \$36.92 for every thousand people reached.

II.D.3. Digital Marketing Results Related to the Economic Crisis Created by the Pandemic

The number of paternities established between May and August 2020 (our extended period of analysis for Cycle 3) declined 63 percent from the same period in 2019—a result tied directly to the suspension of in-office customer service at DCSE offices and other facilities during COVID-19 crisis. Requests for review and adjustment fell by 24 percent during the same period, while enrollments in DCSE’s Family Engagement program increased by 126 percent. Data on enrollments in DCSE’s TANF debt compromise program were not available for analysis.

II.D.4. Results of Best Practices Model

Selected results are shown in

May-Aug. 2020 (Cycle 3 Extended)		May-Aug. 2019		May-Aug. 2018
Count	% Change over May-August 2019	Count	% Change over May-August 2018	Count
644	-21%	819	-15%	962
Nov. 2019-Feb. 2020 (Cycle 2 Extended)		Nov. 2018-Feb. 2019		Nov. 2017-Feb. 2018
Count	% Change over Nov. 2018-Feb. 2019	Count	% Change over Nov. 2017-Feb. 2018	Count
799	12%	712	-7%	763
June-Sept. 2019 (Cycle 1 Extended)		June-Sept. 2018		June-Sept. 2017
Count	% Change over June-Sept 2018	Count	% Change over June-Sept 2018	Count
789	-12%	895	-64%	2,472

Table 7: Results of Best Practices Model (Cycle 3). We have focused on these results because we think they most clearly reflect the kinds of outcomes we would expect if DCSE implemented a similar model in the future.

II.E. Analysis, Lessons Learned, and Next Steps

The results of Cycle 3 suggest that the digital marketing approaches we took during this cycle (search and display advertising, paid and organic social media, a webinar for family law attorneys, and a podcast series) can drive positive engagement with the child support program to varying degrees. Since Cycle 3 essentially recapitulated more refined and focused versions of the activities of Cycles 1 and 2, those results can be applied to our project activities.

The 12 percent increase in applications related to Never Assistance cases during the extended analysis period for Cycle 2 seems to suggest, at the least, that the potential impact of this type of marketing can only be realized with digital end points, such as DCSE’s online child support application. Yet even simple digital solutions, such as the contact form we added to the main project webpage, can yield strong results. We received 1,432 requests through that contact form, both during and between the cycles, for an average conversion cost of \$17.97, if we treat those requests as an outcome of paid ads.

Among the most critical lessons the project team learned because of this grant were:

- Behaviorally informed messaging makes a difference
- Partnerships are critical to every part of the process, from planning to evaluation
- Search advertising appears to be an effective method of digital advertising, but supporting it with ads on other platforms can improve overall outcomes
- For users to act on digital marketing messaging, they need clear digital endpoints and those endpoints have to be designed primarily for mobile users

- Organic social media is best thought of as a long-term investment in outreach and brand awareness—with video as an important ingredient in developing that awareness—and while negative comments need to be managed, they are manageable

DCSE plans to continue all parts of its organic social media program, to broaden its webinar program for family law attorneys, and to add to its podcast series. The program is also investigating procurement options that would allow it to continue paid advertising.

Table 1: Project Activities by Cycle

Cycle 1 (6/10/19 – 9/9/19)	Cycle 2 (11/1/19 – 1/29/20)	Cycle 3 (5/1/20 – 7/30/20)
Find	Engage	Educate
<i>New Intervention Elements</i>	<i>New Intervention Elements</i>	<i>New Intervention Elements</i>
Search engine optimization (SEO)	Accounts for organic social media	Snapchat ads
Target market analysis	Instagram posts and ads	YouTube ads
Campaign name	Twitter posts and ads	LinkedIn posts and ads
Campaign logo	Facebook posts and ads	Podcasts
Integration of behavioral economics into messaging	Support launch of online child support application	Webinar for family law attorneys and mediators
Campaign webpage	Additional campaign webpage	Paternity-related partnership
Contact form	Hashtag campaign	
Google Search ads		<i>Updated Elements from Cycles 1 and 2</i>
Google Display ads	<i>Updated Elements from Cycle 1</i>	Google Search ads
Conversion tracking	Behavioral messaging	Google Display ads
	Campaign webpage	Facebook posts and ads
	Contact form	Instagram posts and ads
	Conversion tracking	Twitter posts and ads
		Behavioral messaging
		Campaign webpage
		Contact form
		Conversion tracking

Table 2: Content Area by Cycle

Cycle 1 (6/10/19 – 9/9/19)	Cycle 2 (11/1/19 – 1/29/20)	Cycle 3 (5/1/20 – 7/30/20)
Applications	Applications	Applications

Paternity Establishment (DNA Testing)		Review and Adjustment
Family Engagement (All Services)		Engagement Services
		Debt Compromise
		Paternity Establishment (In-Hospital)

Table 3: Content Area by Paid and Organic Campaign Platform

Content Area	Facebook and Instagram (Paid and Organic)	Twitter (Paid and Organic)	Google Search (Paid)	Google Display (Paid)	YouTube (Paid)*	Snapchat (Paid)	LinkedIn (Paid and Organic)	Web†
Applications	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
Review and Adjustment	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
TANF Debt Compromise	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
Family Engagement (All Services)			Yes	Yes				
Employment Services	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Paternity Establishment (DNA Testing)			Yes	Yes				
Paternity Establishment (In-Hospital)						Yes		Yes
How-to Video					Yes		Yes	
Webinar							Yes	
Podcast							Yes	Yes
DCSE Operational Updates (Organic Only)	Yes	Yes						Yes

* On YouTube, the how-to video was also part of an organic campaign.

† The web category includes DCSE’s main website (dss.virginia.gov/family/dcse/), the project website (supportVAkids.com), the supportVAkids-branded page on the podcast platform Anchor.fm (anchor.fm/childsupportva), and Virginia’s paternity information webpage (VApaternity.com).

Table 4: Location Targets and Extended Focus Areas for Most Paid Campaigns

Initial Target Area	Surrounding Areas Included in Ad Target Markets
Bristol (city)	Washington County
Brunswick County	
Caroline County	
Clarke County	
Colonial Heights (city)	Chesterfield County, Prince George County

Initial Target Area	Surrounding Areas Included in Ad Target Markets
Danville (city)	Pittsylvania County
Dinwiddie County	
Essex County	
Hampton (city)	Northampton County, Poquoson (city), York County
Henrico County	
Martinsville (city)	Henry County
Nelson County	
Newport News (city)	Isle of Wight County, James City County, Surry County, York County
Norfolk (city)	Virginia Beach (city)
Petersburg (city)	Chesterfield County, Prince George County
Portsmouth (city)	Chesapeake (city)
Richmond (city)	Chesterfield County
Roanoke (city)	Roanoke County
Salem (city)	Roanoke County
Staunton (city)	Augusta County
Suffolk (city)	Chesapeake (city), Southampton County
Waynesboro (city)	Augusta County
Winchester (city)	Frederick County

Table 5: Outcome Measures

Data Element	Frequency	Source	Cycles
Impressions (Paid)	Platform total across cycle	Platform reporting tools	1–3
Ad Clicks (Paid)	Platform total across cycle	Platform reporting tools	1–3
Views (for Video) (Paid)	Platform total across cycle	Platform reporting tools	2–3
Click-through Rates (Paid)	Platform average across cycle	Platform reporting tools	1–3
Cost per Click (Paid Content)	Platform average across cycle	Platform reporting tools	1–3
Cost per (Video) View or per 1,000 (Video) Views (Paid)	Platform average across cycle	Platform reporting tools	2–3
Cost per 1,000 Impressions (Paid)	Platform average across cycle	Platform reporting tools	1–3
Conversions (Paid)	Platform total across cycle	Platform reporting tools	1–3
Conversion Rate (Paid)	Platform average across cycle	Platform reporting tools	1–3
Cost per Conversion (Paid)	Platform average across cycle	Platform reporting tools	1–3
Organic Social Media Following	Growth over cycle	Platform reporting tools	2–3
Webinar Attendees	Count per webinar	Attendee records	3
Views of Webinar Recording	Platform total from posting to 3 months after cycle	YouTube	3
Listens to Podcasts	Platform total from posting to 3 months after cycle	Anchor.fm	3
Case Openings ¹⁰ for Never Assistance Cases	Cycle total (+ 1 month) over previous year	DCSE caseload data	1–3
Paternities Established	Cycle total (+ 1 month) over previous year	DCSE caseload data	1, 3
Requests for the Review and Adjustment of Child Support Orders	Cycle total (+ 1 month) over previous year	DCSE caseload data	3

¹⁰ We treat case openings as equivalent to the successful submission of an application.

Data Element	Frequency	Source	Cycles
Enrollments in DCSE’s Family Engagement Program	Cycle total (+ 1 month) over previous year	DCSE caseload data	1, 3
Contact Form Submissions	Count during cycle	DCSE form data	1–3

Table 6: DCSE New Case Openings

May-Aug. 2020 (Cycle 3 Extended)		May-Aug. 2019		May-Aug. 2018
Count	% Change over May-August 2019	Count	% Change over May-August 2018	Count
644	-21%	819	-15%	962
Nov. 2019-Feb. 2020 (Cycle 2 Extended)		Nov. 2018-Feb. 2019		Nov. 2017-Feb. 2018
Count	% Change over Nov. 2018-Feb. 2019	Count	% Change over Nov. 2017-Feb. 2018	Count
799	12%	712	-7%	763
June-Sept. 2019 (Cycle 1 Extended)		June-Sept. 2018		June-Sept. 2017
Count	% Change over June-Sept 2018	Count	% Change over June-Sept 2018	Count
789	-12%	895	-64%	2,472

Table 7: Results of Best Practices Model (Cycle 3)

	Facebook	Google Display	Google Search	Instagram	Twitter
Impressions	143,599	1,284,949	73,482	13,211	87,705
Clicks	675	11,598	5,545	28	68
Views¹¹	39,192	NA ¹²	NA	6,387	14,670
Click-through Rate	0.47%	0.90%	7.55%	0.21%	0.08%
Cost per Click	\$1.93	\$0.13	\$1.36	\$5.66	\$2.75
Cost per View	\$0.03	NA ¹³	NA	\$0.02	\$0.01
Cost per 1,000 Impressions	\$9.09	\$1.20	\$102.43	\$12.00	\$2.14
Conversions¹⁴	69	11	365	6	0
Conversion Rate	10.22%	0.09%	6.58%	21.43%	0%
Cost per Conversion	\$18.92	\$140.14	\$20.62	\$26.43	NA
Benchmark¹⁵ for Click-through Rate	1.20%	0.64%	2.88%	0.88%	1.55%
Benchmark¹⁶ for Cost per Conversion	\$18.68	\$75.51	\$48.96	Not available	Not available

¹¹ Each platform defines a video “view” differently. To simplify reporting, we have attempted to align the various meanings as much as practicable on each table rather than across the evaluation as a whole.

¹² Throughout, we use “NA” to mean “not applicable.” When data is not available, we have used that phrase.

¹³ Though Google Display uses videos in some ad combinations, it does not report video views for those ads.

¹⁴ Conversions for these ads were achieved when users completed a contact form on the main project webpage.

¹⁵ Click-through rate benchmarks are taken from AdStage (2019?). “Paid Media Q2 2019 Benchmark Report.” <https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/4350015/Benchmark%20Report/Q2%202019%20Paid%20Media%20Benchmark%20Report.pdf>. We chose second quarter 2019 results as the most clearly analogous for Cycle 3. All AdStage values represent medians, not means. For reasons described in the interim evaluation of Cycle 2, we have come to doubt that clicks from the Twitter Audience Platform in that cycle clearly reflect the interest of real users in our target locations. We have thus excluded results from the Twitter Audience Platform from these figures.

¹⁶ Facebook cost per conversion benchmarks are taken from Mark Irvine (August 2020). “Facebook Ad Benchmarks for YOUR Industry [Data].” Wordstream. <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2017/02/28/facebook-advertising-benchmarks>. Google cost per conversion benchmarks are taken from Mark Irvine (October 2020). “Google Ads Benchmarks for YOUR Industry [Updated!].” Wordstream. <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2016/02/29/google-adwords-industry-benchmarks>.