

Employment Services Framework for WY Child Support Program

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Executive Summary

The Wyoming Department of Family Services Child Support Program is pleased to propose the development of comprehensive and coordinated services for the parent owing support. These services will promote the sustainable employment of the parent owing support and enable such parents to pay child support, thereby maximizing the attainment of economic stability for the entire family.

Recent decades have seen dramatic increases in child support collections as a multitude of new laws and policies have been enacted to strengthen the child support program.¹ The refinement and expansion of tools available to enforce child support orders have also dramatically improved rates of compliance. However, for a number of years, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement and child support scholars have recognized that low-income families are not sharing in these increased collections to the same extent as middle-income families.²

Future improvement and maximization in the collection of on-going, dependable and reliable support ultimately is contingent upon our ability to address the root causes of non-payment and remove those applicable barriers. Through research, we know that the financial circumstances of many parents owing support resemble those of their custodial parent counterparts who receive TANF; therefore, it only makes sense to apply the same principles of empowerment through service provision to both sets of parents.³

As one of the few human services programs that serve the parent owing support, the child support program is uniquely positioned to become the impetus for great social change that positively impacts the economic stability of the entire family. Given knowledge gained from decades of research and demonstrated successes with this type of service delivery concept, we stand to significantly improve the well-being of children and families in Wyoming.⁴

Background

Parents owing support with little or no income present a unique set of problems for child support agencies. Even when child support guidelines include lower income thresholds, child support obligations for poor, unemployed fathers are often still set at levels above their ability to pay. Arrears accrue rapidly, adding to the balance of uncollected support carried by the state. Traditional enforcement remedies tend to be ineffective when applied to these parents. For most of these obligors, non-payment of child support is a result of their lack of job skills or employment, rather than a refusal to meet their child support obligations.⁵ Ultimately this leaves child support agencies to identify additional strategies such as employment programs as an avenue to improve performance in the collection of child support.

Data from a large national demonstration of child support-led employment programs for parents owing support shows that parents who enroll in these programs tend to face significant barriers to work.⁶ Three employment barriers were mentioned by a majority of parents owing support participating in this demonstration:

- having a criminal record,
- problems getting to work, and
- not having the skills that employers are looking for.

In fact, nearly 70% of the parents owing support who enrolled in these employment programs had a criminal record, about one quarter had not finished high school and one quarter reported experiencing moderate or severe depression at program enrollment.⁷

Our proposal would provide employment services to all parents owing support in the child support program who need them. There are a number of reasons to focus on all child support cases, not just the TANF caseload. First, the TANF national caseload has dropped from 3.7 million in 1999 to 1.4 million cases in 2016, a 62% drop. In Wyoming, the drop in the TANF caseload was significant but not as drastic, declining 35% between 1999 and 2016.⁸ In the years ahead, the child support program will presumably serve more and more families who have either left TANF or who never entered the system.

Second, a cornerstone of the welfare reform movement has been the assumption that child support will play an increasingly important role in helping those who leave TANF to attain economic stability. Indeed, in signing the welfare reform legislation, the President said, “If every parent paid the child support that he or she owes legally today, we could move 800,000 women and children off welfare immediately.”⁹

To provide the best services, the child support program must understand who its clients are, what their needs are, and what their experiences have been in the past. Regardless of the status of a family receiving assistance, approximately half of the families served by the child support program have incomes below 150% of the poverty threshold. Families in the child support program’s caseload generally have lower incomes than families that are not, with only 23% of families in the child support program’s caseload having incomes over \$50,000 in 2015.¹⁰ In Wyoming, 63,398 people lived below the poverty line in 2017.¹¹

All of these patterns point out the similarities between TANF recipients and their non-welfare counterparts, their fragile financial status, and the importance of continuing to provide and improve child support services to both TANF and non-TANF clients. Although it is probably overly optimistic to expect that child support can be the sole safety net for poor families and replace government transfers for single-mother families receiving public assistance, it can make an important difference to family well-being and prevent many low-income families from slipping into poverty.

Scope of Services

Objectives

The Wyoming Department of Family Services Child Support Program proposes establishing an extensive network of collaborative partnerships to remove the aforementioned barriers and address related needs in order to maximize the emotional and financial involvement of both parents in their children’s lives. Our plan is to utilize the successful models implemented elsewhere while tailoring services to fit the needs of Wyoming residents. By targeting parents owing support for services, we can help them overcome barriers and assist them in finding and sustaining employment. This proposed program will provide parents owing support with the foundation to become consistent child support payers and involved parents. Many parents owing support want to be involved in their children’s lives, but they struggle emotionally and financially. As illustrated previously, studies show the financial circumstances of the parent owing support often closely resemble that of the custodial parent. Many of these individuals are overwhelmed by the system and need help navigating their way through the maze of services and agencies. Customers can be offered a range of supportive services to help them find and retain meaningful employment and increase rates of compliance with child support obligations.

Many of these services can be secured through effective collaboration in the community free of charge as they are funded through other mechanisms, while others would best be secured through contractual agreements similar to those currently in effect through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Block Grant.

Partnerships

The Wyoming TANF Program will be a primary partner as the TANF Block Grant (specifically Reserve TANF dollars) has been identified as the main funding source to initially cover costs associated with providing employment related services. Additional funding sources, such as a child support 1115 waiver or exemption related to using federal incentive dollars, will also be considered and explored.

The Wyoming Department of Family Services Child Support Program proposes entering into a contract or an agreement for services in order to effectuate the sustainable employment of parents owing support. The Department of Workforce Services will be targeted as the main provider of employment related services. The Department of Workforce Services’ CLIMB and DADS programs may also be utilized in relevant locations and may serve as a model for targeted supportive services provision. Potential expansion of these specialty workforce programs will

also be explored through this new partnership between the Child Support Program and the Department of Workforce Services.

The Child Support Program will also form collaborative partnerships that will increase both clients' willingness and ability to pay child support. All partnerships will closely resemble services existing in other similar programs proven to be effective. The partnerships will include but not be limited to:

- Wyoming Judicial Department – The courts will refer appropriate parents involved in child support related legal actions to the employment program, conduct related review hearings, and potentially order obligors to enroll in the employment program.
- Department of Corrections (DOC) – Oversees parents owing support who are incarcerated, on Parole, or on Probation. DOC will coordinate with the Child Support Program to maximize successful re-entry and employment of appropriate clients and provide updates on location and employment status of parents owing support.

Outreach and Engagement

The Child Support Program will engage a diverse set of stakeholders to maximize enrollment in the program and the success of participants. Engagement efforts will target agency leadership, child support staff, other Department of Family Services program staff such as TANF, Child Welfare, SNAP, and Child Care, court personnel, workforce and criminal justice agency representatives, and other community based organizations.

Child Support Program staff will be the main source of referrals for the program. Therefore, the child support program will allow enrollment at all stages of case processing including intake, establishment, review and adjustment, and enforcement. It is anticipated that most referrals will occur during the enforcement stage of case processing. Initially, to be eligible, participants must have an open child support case in Wyoming. The program will continue to consider and refine eligibility criteria, such as having paternity or an order already established.

The courts will also become a main source of referrals for the program and may assist with enrollment and monitoring program participation as an alternative to contempt sanctions. Program participation might be offered during related child support hearings and especially during enforcement related hearings. Participation through child support related hearings may be voluntary or it could be court ordered as a part of contempt or show cause related hearings, and could include more frequent review hearings than normal.

Service Delivery

General Overview

The Wyoming Child Support Program plans to operate its employment program for obligors statewide. However, we intend to pilot the employment program for approximately 12 months in Cheyenne, Gillet, and Lander. The pilot phase will allow for the development and refinement of related processes, policies, and forms. These specific sites will also enable the program to be piloted in both privately and publicly administered offices and in both rural and urban areas.

Case Management and Staffing

Case management will be an integral part of the program's success. Intensive case management services will be provided by both child support and workforce staff, to assist parents with overcoming significant barriers to employment and payment of child support. Staff providing case management services will be trained to successfully use Motivational Interviewing strategies to guide all interactions with program participants.

The employment program will provide child support and employment services in a one-stop approach by co-locating staff, whenever feasible. Co-location of staff may differ in each jurisdiction. Based upon existing arrangements,

Cheyenne is already conducive to co-location, and other co-location arrangements will be explored with Workforce Services during the MOU negotiation and implementation phases.

Enhanced Child Support Services

While employment related services will be the main focus of this program, enhanced child support services will be necessary and will significantly contribute to the long-term success of program participants. Child support obligations of some participants may have been set based on previous earnings and those amounts may be unrealistic in relation to the earning capacity achieved through the program. Additionally, some child support enforcement remedies previously used may be identified as current barriers to employment. Enhanced child support services may include, but not be limited to:

- Expedited review and adjustment of child support orders;
- Reinstatement of driver's licenses that have been suspended for non-payment of support;
- Suspension, suppression, or staying of certain remedies while a participant is actively engaged in the program;
- Compromising state owed arrears in exchange for participation or payment; or
- Facilitating negotiation with the other parent on arrears forgiveness.

Employment Services

All targeted service areas have a local Workforce Services agency offering employment services that are administered statewide by the Department of Workforce Services. As previously mentioned, Workforce Services will be the main provider of all employment related services. Employment related services may include, but not be limited to:

- Job-readiness services, such as resume writing and interviewing skill development;
- Job-search assistance;
- Short-term job skills training;
- Job placement, potentially including subsidized or transitional employment opportunities or paid work experiences; and
- Job-retention.

Other Supportive Services

Other services and work supports are often necessary to successfully overcome barriers to employment and payment of child support. Participants may need to receive additional work supports such as GED instruction and testing, interview clothes, and tools or uniforms for work. These needs will be addressed on an individual basis. Often times child support agencies that operate employment programs identify transportation assistance as a key need of participants. The Wyoming Child Support Program will consider multiple options for providing transportation assistance and will contact other rural employment sites to review successful models of transportation assistance provision in rural settings. The program will initially consider providing gas vouchers and payment of driver's license reinstatement fees while continuing to evaluate additional transportation assistance possibilities.

Providing employment services is the main focus of this approach to improve obligors' ability to pay child support.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the need for these services is well documented and the proposed approach has proven successful. If we form these partnerships and fund the necessary services, we will have taken a significant step toward breaking the cycle of children growing up without the support they need and deserve!

¹ Sorensen, Elaine. 2016 The Child Support Program is Focused on Performance. Washington, DC: Office of Child Support Enforcement, Story Behind the Numbers Series.

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² Sorensen, Elaine. 2016. The Child Support Program is a Good Investment. Office of Child Support Enforcement, Story Behind the Numbers Series.

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³ Maria Cancian, Daniel R. Meyer and Eunhee Han. 2011. Child Support: Responsible Fatherhood and the Quid Pro Quo. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 635: 140-162.

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⁴ Office of Child Support Enforcement. 2019. Highlights from the CSPED Impact and Benefit-Cost Reports.

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⁵ Turetsky, Vicki. 2019. Reforming Child Support to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families. *The Abell Report* 32(5).

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⁶ Cancian, Maria, Angela Guarin, Leslie Hodges, and Daniel R. Meyer. 2018. Characteristics of Participants in the Child Support Noncustodial Parent Employment Demonstration (CSPED) Evaluation. Wisconsin: Institute for Research on Poverty. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/resource/csped-participant-characteristics>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Graham, Tracy and Melody Morales. 2017. "Child Support Caseload Trends: 1999-2016." Washington DC: federal Office of Child Support Enforcement.

⁹ President Clinton quoted in Children Today. 1997.

¹⁰ Sorensen, Elaine, Arthur Pashi, and Melody Morales. 2018. "Characteristics of Families Served by the Child Support (IV-D) Program: 2016 U.S. Census Survey Results." Washington DC: federal Office of Child Support Enforcement.

¹¹ American FactFinder. Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months. 2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. Washington, DC: Census Bureau.
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