

# Colorado Interstate Collaboration Grant

## Final Report

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## Executive Summary

The goal of the Colorado Interstate Collaboration (CIC) project was to improve performance for interstate child support cases by building relationships and understandings among Colorado county child support staff and their counterparts in seven border states who handle interstate cases (Arizona, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming). Although the original project plan was to hold in-person summits, the summits were ultimately convened virtually in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We held two in-person summits in June and July 2023, right before the project end on September 30, 2023. Center for Policy Research evaluated the CIC project to assess the reactions of CIC project participants to virtual and in-person summits using online surveys and focus groups at early, midpoint, and final stages of the project. In addition, CPR interviewed experts in interstate case processing to explore next steps for the CIC project to advise other states and regions interested in pursuing interstate collaboration initiatives. The following are key project takeaways:

- Grant plans can change because of external circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, planned in-person meetings may need to shift to be virtual.
- While in-person meetings are ideal, virtual meetings are viewed as effective and valuable by participants, with most favoring a mix of virtual and in-person meeting opportunities.
- Collaboration initiatives should combine organic meeting elements like brief, participant-led updates on new policies or practices with advance planning, coordination, and expert facilitation.
- Staffing shortages, the privatization of child support services, and high rates of staff turnover are barriers to engaging and retaining child support staff in interstate collaboration initiatives.
- The CIC project helped participants to better understand the unique processing and policy features of neighboring jurisdictions and made them feel more confident and supported. They also appreciated CIC project products that included an At-A-Glance document for each participating state and a Best Practices Summary, although both require routine updates and placement on the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) website to become more accessible to a larger number of caseworkers in multiple states.
- CIC project participants would like the initiative to continue.

CPR interviewed five interstate collaboration experts on methods of sustaining the CIC project. Key takeaways from the interviews are:

- The engagement of federal regional representatives seems to be the best strategy for continuing the CIC project. State child support directors and Central Registry directors should explore the feasibility of incorporating the CIC project into other existing interstate collaboration initiatives led and supported by federal regional representatives. Thus, the CIC project might be folded into the existing intergovernmental collaboration for Regions 7 and 8, which encompasses Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, with the potential of adding the states of New Mexico (Region 6), Texas (Region 6), and Arizona (Region 9).
- The leader of the next generation of the CIC project should incorporate key learnings from this grant. The core intervention format should be a quarterly virtual meeting that combines organic features with planned agendas, topics, materials, and activities that are skillfully facilitated.

- Virtual meetings should be augmented with face-to-face meetings, participation in annual state conferences in neighboring states, and engaging in national professional activities dealing with interstate child support.
- Tribal child support programs should be included in future interstate collaboration initiatives.

## Background

### Introduction

In 2019, the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS),<sup>1</sup> within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, awarded Intergovernmental Case Processing Innovation demonstration grants to seven states and two tribal child support agencies. These grants provided funding to test innovations that would increase payments on intergovernmental cases and improve case processing procedures for parents.<sup>2</sup> CDHS Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) received a grant to implement the CIC project. The goal of the project was to improve relationships among Colorado county child support staff and their counterparts in border states and jurisdictions who handle interstate cases to improve worker collaboration and responsiveness. This was expected to increase child support collections, improve case processing procedures, and enhance customer service for interstate cases.<sup>3</sup>

To accomplish this, Colorado proposed to convene interstate child support staff from Colorado and from seven surrounding states with which Colorado shares a border or a high volume of child support cases to participate in five in-person summits (Arizona, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming). Although the original proposal called for live meetings, the summits were ultimately convened virtually in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was hoped that virtual formats would provide a productive forum in which interstate child support workers could become acquainted with one another, discuss differences and similarities in case processing in different state settings, build relationships, and resolve individual problem cases. In June and July 2023, just two months before the CIC project ended on September 30, 2023, Colorado finally convened two in-person summits with states that participated in the CIC project. This allowed Colorado to revisit its original goal of building relationships with neighboring interstate child support caseworkers through face-to-face interaction.

Center for Policy Research (CPR) evaluated the CIC project to assess participants' reactions to virtual and in-person summits using online surveys and focus groups at early, midpoint, and final stages of the project. In addition, CPR interviewed experts in interstate case processing to explore next steps for the CIC grant and to generate advice for other states and regions interested in pursuing interstate collaboration initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> In June 2023, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) was renamed the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS).

<sup>2</sup> Office of Child Support Services. (2023). *Intergovernmental case processing innovation*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.  
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/grants/current-grants/intergovernmental-case-processing>.

<sup>3</sup> Office of Child Support Services. (2023). *Intergovernmental case processing innovation project summaries*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.  
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/css/grant-funding/intergovernmental-case-processing-innovation-project-summaries>.

## The Problem

For its caseload size, Colorado has a high number of intergovernmental cases with about 28,000 family units who depend on caseworkers in Colorado and other jurisdictions to realize financial and medical support. This comprises 28% of the Colorado caseload, of which 10% are initiating cases, 9.9% are responding cases, and 8.2% are one-state cases. Colorado's collection rate (62.8%) for cases initiated in other states is comparable to overall state collection rates (64.7%), but collection rates for interstate cases initiated by Colorado have a much lower rate of collections (53.2%).<sup>4</sup> Colorado depends on other states to enforce initiating intergovernmental cases on Colorado's behalf. Thus, if Colorado can help other states enforce these cases, it can increase its collections percentages and improve the service it provides to families.

Although there are many new technological tools to improve interstate case processing (for example, Interstate Case Reconciliation (ICR), the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act (UIFSA), Query Interstate Cases for Kids (QUICK), the Child Support Enforcement Network (CSENet), Electronic Document Exchange (EDE), and the Communication Center on the OCSS Child Support Portal), the barriers to effective interstate case processing remain formidable.<sup>5</sup> They include:

- Inability to reach caseworkers in other states
- Lack of follow-up by other states after an Income Withholding Order has been issued
- Failure of other states to take enforcement action when the noncustodial parent is not making full payments
- Failure of some offices to assign interstate cases to someone until a specific task is required resulting in the lack of worker contact information
- Lack of authority to redirect that the payment be sent to the Family Support Registry if the order requires that payments must be sent to the issuing state's State Disbursement Unit
- Closings cases for inability to serve the noncustodial parent at the verified address rather than trying to locate the parent
- Losing documents required and recommended for interstate cases
- Lack of knowledge about idiosyncratic requirements for certain documents by some courts and child support agencies
- Inability to issue liens on inmate accounts
- Inconsistency across states on enforcement remedies in different states and the time frames associated with administrative versus court procedures
- Differences in state practice regarding acceptance of direct Unemployment Compensation Benefits
- Repeated requests from other states for more documentation

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<sup>4</sup> Colorado Department of Human Services. (2019). CIC project proposal submitted to OCSS.

<sup>5</sup> Savoy, J., Sorenson, C., & Piper, C. (2014). *Intergovernmental summit: A report of the state and county meeting on process improvement of initiating and one-state Intergovernmental Services*. Colorado Division of Child Support Services.

In addition to these barriers, interstate cases frequently involve unique scenarios that defy obvious solutions or courses of action. This includes:

- Neither party lives in Colorado.
- Custodial parent moves to another state and applies for services there without closing her case in Colorado.
- Other state does not pursue a proactive modification if the noncustodial parent is failing to meet the obligation that the other state is enforcing
- Appropriate frequency of status reports should be requested on a non-paying case in another state.

Finally, caseworkers are often confused about when and how often to use the multiple tools, the resources available to them for case management, and the organizational structures, policies, and procedures in other states. This includes:

- Prioritizing the use of the multiple tools available for case management including their frequency of use to increase support and arrears collection
- Role and function of the Central Registry in various states
- Nature and availability of in-person and web-based training on intergovernmental case processing
- Organizational structures, policies, and procedures used in other states to handle intergovernmental cases

Clear and timely communication and follow-up are often the only way to break down barriers in working on cases that involve other states. For this reason, Colorado chose to focus on interventions in its demonstration project designed to build relationships among caseworkers who handle interstate cases in Colorado and the states with which it shares a geographical border.

Modelled after cross-border interstate projects conducted in Region 5, the CIC project aimed to replicate the effective engagement of caseworkers in multiple midwestern states that have collaborated for many years on addressing roadblocks to interstate case processing.<sup>6</sup> As noted in the Wisconsin and Illinois Border Project:

There are many roadblocks involved when child support cases involve two or more states. Each state has different laws, procedures and requirements that sometimes are difficult for all to understand. If we understand how each state operates, child support caseworkers are better equipped to assist their participants more effectively and efficiently.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> K. Mantilla, Indiana Prosecuting Attorney's Association, email communication, September 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Wisconsin/Illinois Child Support Border Project. (n.d.). *Home page*.  
<https://childsupportborderproject.com/index.htm>.

Like child support caseworkers in Region 5, the architects of the CIC project sought to answer basic questions about practices and policies in other states. As the Wisconsin and Illinois Border Project noted:

We need answers to all types of questions such as: What is it the other state is asking of me? I don't understand it. Why am I getting billing from two states? Who really is my child support worker? Who do I contact and what is their phone number?<sup>8</sup>

The success of this midwestern interstate collaborative is legendary:

A determined group of Wisconsin and Illinois child support professionals came together to improve interstate case work. Our goal was to help children and families. Many problems that seemed so insurmountable a few short years ago have been resolved with a continuation of improvements. Collaboration between bordering child support agencies can and have been accomplished in Wisconsin and Illinois.<sup>9</sup>

### Project Plan and Activities

The original CDHS project plan called for the creation of an advisory board to support the CIC project manager with project implementation. This included:

- Identifying problems in interstate case processing with border states
- Identifying topics to address in the CIC project summits
- Finalizing the evaluation approach
- Finalizing tools to assess the intervention

Comprised of state and local child support personnel committed to interstate case policy and practice, the advisory board met quarterly to provide strategic direction to the project. They reviewed the director's plans for virtual meetings, the evaluation instruments developed by CPR, the results of evaluation surveys and focus groups, and the project products that the evaluators developed.

The next step of the original project plan was to conduct at least five in-person, regional summits over 24 months. Summits were planned to occur for caseworkers in four corners of Colorado (Southeast, Northwest, Northeast, and Southwest) along with their counterparts in border states. A fifth summit was intended to engage caseworkers in large urban jurisdictions in multiple states. The original evaluation plan called for extracting information from the automated child support system and analyzing samples of interstate cases held jointly by Colorado and border states at intervals timed to occur six months before and after each summit.

These plans were upended by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing national shutdown. All in-person gatherings were suspended, in-person work activities in child support offices in Colorado and its border states were terminated, face-to-face meetings between clients and caseworkers were abandoned, various enforcement remedies were dropped, and court hearings came to a standstill.

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<sup>8</sup> Wisconsin/Illinois Child Support Border Project. (n.d.). *Home page*.  
<https://childsupportborderproject.com/index.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

We reconfigured the CIC project such that instead of planning and conducting in-person meetings, CDHS invited staff from 29 Colorado counties and seven border states to attend virtual summits in 2020 and 2021. The states were Arizona, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming. The peer counties in Colorado where there are higher numbers of interstate relationships included Archuleta, Baca, Cheyenne, Conejos, Costilla, Denver, Dolores, El Paso, Garfield, Jackson, Jefferson, Kiowa, Kit Carson, La Plata, Las Animas, Larimer, Logan, Mesa, Moffat, Montezuma, Montrose, Phillips, Prowers, Rio Blanco, Routt, San Miguel, Sedgwick, Weld, and Yuma. There were five groups for the virtual summits: Northeast (Northeast Colorado, Northwest Kansas, Southwest Nebraska, and Southwest Wyoming), Northwest (Northwest Colorado, Southwest/South Central Wyoming, and Northeast Utah), Southeast (Southeast Colorado, Southwest Kansas, Northeast New Mexico, and Northwest Texas), Southwest (Southwest Colorado, Northeast Arizona, Southeast Utah, and Northwest New Mexico), and Metro (urban centers in each state).

The virtual summits were followed by quarterly virtual meetings in 2021 and 2022 of two larger groups, East and West, where states provided updates and discussed specific cases about which they had questions. The East group was comprised of Eastern Colorado counties, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming. The West group was comprised of Western Colorado counties, Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas.

In a final third phase of the project, CDHS hosted two in-person summits for the East and West groups in June and July 2023. Although there was the option to attend virtually, most participants attended in person. The West Summit was held in Grand Junction, Colorado on June 13–14 and included employees from Archuleta, La Plata, Boulder, Denver, Jefferson, Mesa, Montrose, and Weld counties; Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming state employees. The East Summit took place in Burlington, Colorado on July 11–12 and included employees from Arapahoe, Jefferson, Lancaster (NE), Larimer, Pueblo, Sedgwick, Weld, and Yuma counties; Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, and Texas state employees and child support contractors. Both summits followed the same agenda. Day one consisted of a “speed dating” session for caseworkers to get to know each other, a presentation from OCSS and subsequent discussion on the State Services Portal, and discussions on issues in establishment and enforcement. Day two included discussions on issues in modification, case closure, payment processing, and other issues.

The original evaluation plan, which called for the generation and analysis of time frames and payment outcomes for samples of interstate cases shared by Colorado and its border states before and after the summits was dropped. Instead, the evaluation shifted to assessments of interstate caseworkers in Colorado and border states who participated in the CIC project before and after their participation in the virtual and in-person summits using online surveys and focus groups.

The CIC project culminated in preparing products that were disseminated to caseworkers in Colorado and border states. This included At-A-Glance documents for each of the eight states that participated in the CIC project and a Best Practices Summary that provided both general and micro-level practice guidelines for caseworkers who handle interstate cases. The CIC project manager distributed these materials to all CIC project participants, hoping caseworkers would use the documents to reduce barriers and increase collection on their initiating interstate cases. See Appendix A for the eight At-A-Glance Documents and Appendix B for the Best Practices Summary.

At the end of the CIC project, CPR interviewed five national interstate child support experts (individuals in the child support program at the state and regional level with extensive experience in interstate case processing and communications) about the features of successful interstate collaboration initiatives and



the steps that Colorado and its border states might pursue to sustain the CIC project after completion of the grant.

### Project Challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic created a fundamental barrier to conducting in-person gatherings designed to build relationships and shared understanding and commitment to effective processing of interstate cases. When in-person gatherings were halted and public employees were banned from travel, it was necessary to conduct the summits through an online platform. Although individuals from different jurisdictions could be brought together virtually, it was expected that relationship and commitment building would be compromised.

Another challenge was maintaining a robust level of participation in the virtual summits by the identified jurisdictions that border Colorado. Buy-in and commitment from those jurisdictions were key to the project's success. The lack of a comprehensive roster of caseworkers who handle interstate cases in each border state made explaining the CIC project and its expected benefits difficult. CDHS was forced to rely on Central Registry directors in each state to recruit CIC project participants throughout their state. Central Registry directors were also the only vehicle for communicating information about project learnings, evaluation activities, and its products to line caseworkers.

Participation by non-Colorado child support professionals in the CIC project was low, with several states routinely contributing only one or two participants. Staffing shortages were one reason for this problem. Because of staff resignations during COVID-19, hiring freezes, high levels of staff turnover, and the influx of new employees, many local offices were unwilling to release staff to engage in interstate collaboration activities. For example, the Central Registry Director in Utah was the only person to participate in any aspect of the CIC project. As a further complication, Utah has a customer service unit that prevents callers, including other child support staff from other states, from reaching a case worker of record to obtain a substantive answer to a case issue. In addition, the outsourcing of child support case processing duties to private contractors in some states presented challenges for the CIC project. Private contractors face stiff performance requirements, experience high rates of staff turnover, and operate on slim financial margins. As a result, the only CIC project participation in Kansas and Nebraska came from state personnel.

### Project Evaluation

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting, dramatic changes in case processing and enforcement procedures for interstate child support cases, CDHS dropped its original plan to generate and examine administrative data on samples of interstate cases processed before and after the CIC project. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting shut-down of in-person activities in child support agencies and courts resulted in too many changes in enforcement remedies, time frames for response, court actions, and other critical features of interstate case processing to permit a valid pre- and post-project comparison of case treatment and outcomes for samples of interstate cases.

Instead, CDHS adopted a descriptive evaluation approach for the CIC project that included focus groups, surveys, and interviews with experts. These evaluation activities generated information used to inform the content of cross-border virtual summits, contribute to the development of project documents to help caseworkers adopting effective practices, and recommend future interstate collaboration.

Initial Information gathering activities included focus groups with Colorado DCSS Central Registry staff and the grant advisory board to identify the processes used and challenges faced when initiating and responding to intergovernmental cases. Other goals of the preliminary focus groups were to develop a survey that was administered to child support professionals in Colorado and border states to document baseline worker attitudes toward and experiences with handling interstate cases and to inform the content of summit sessions.

In July and August 2020, a baseline survey was administered to child support professionals in Colorado and border states that addressed processing issues and challenges in intergovernmental cases before the virtual summits and worker attitudes toward and experiences with handling interstate cases. After completing the survey, respondents could provide their email address to be entered into a raffle for a gift card.

To gauge reactions to the virtual summits and their perceived impact on interstate case processing, evaluators drafted and circulated a midpoint survey to participants in October 2021. The survey also asked about the usefulness of the master contact sheet developed by the CIC project manager and the draft Best Practices Summary developed by CPR. Finally, the survey was used to inform the next steps and the generation of project tools moving forward. After completing the survey, respondents could provide their email address to be entered into a raffle for a gift card.

Eight focus groups, one for each state, were conducted in January and February 2022 after the virtual summits to gather state-specific data and guide the development of project tools. The focus groups covered communication tools, order establishment and registration, enforcement remedies, COVID-19-related remedy shut-offs and turn-ons, using contempt or show cause, interest charges on unpaid child support in interstate cases, other COVID-19-related practices, using the Intergovernmental Resource Guide (IRG) by caseworkers, interest in changes in interstate case practices at the state and federal level, feedback for other participating states, and feedback on useful CIC project activities and products including a potential in-person summit. Participants received a gift card for their time.

After the in-person summits, evaluators sent a final survey to all individuals in Colorado and border states targeted for the CIC project in September 2023. This allowed an assessment of reactions to the in-person summits, recommendations for future activities to strengthen interstate case processing, and the utility of the products generated in the CIC project. After completing the survey, respondents could provide their email address to be entered into a raffle for a gift card.

Respondents indicated on the final survey if they were interested in participating in a follow-up focus group. Two focus groups were held toward the end of the grant period to gather more feedback on the CIC project, recommendations for ways to improve interstate case processing, and next steps for interstate collaboration. Participants received a gift card for their time.

Additionally, toward the end of the grant period, CPR interviewed five interstate experts on approaches to sustaining the communications initiative between and among Colorado and its border states after the end of the CIC project. All interviewed personnel have had extensive involvement with state and regional interstate collaboration activities. While these respondents confirmed many of the challenges to conducting in-person meetings that Colorado experienced with the advent of COVID-19, they offered a variety of suggestions on effective virtual and hybrid formats. They also offered ideas on how Colorado might preserve the initiative and engage border states in continuing activities to boost relationship-

building, communication, and learning. Finally, they suggested how interstate collaboration initiatives could be generated and sustained in other parts of the country.

## Summary of Key Findings

### Initial Focus Groups

The initial focus groups provided insight into working interstate cases in Colorado. Challenges were identified:

- Colorado and other states lacked communication and training.
- Some states outsource all (e.g., Kansas) or some (Nebraska and Wyoming) interstate work and consequently have a significant turnover of caseworkers.
- All state Central Registries operate differently, and there is no readily available information on how different Central Registry offices operate.
- Some states are reluctant to provide email addresses or direct phone numbers for caseworkers.
- It is challenging to work with states with a call center that impedes direct communication with a child support professional working a problematic case.
- Colorado has different requirements than other states and they are driven by the courts, but other states provide pushback on these requirements
- CSENet, the electronic communication network across states, is not standardized or streamlined
- Not all states are on, or active on, EDE. The main suggestions for strengthening interstate work centered on having a direct line of communication with the worker in the other state (for example, an email address or phone number).

### Baseline Survey

The baseline survey was completed by 147 caseworkers in the eight states between July and August 2020 (65% of respondents were from Colorado). Since the link to the survey was forwarded to an unknown number of caseworkers by a variety of contacts, there is no way of determining the response rate.

Many caseworkers indicated they would like more training on interstate cases. In Colorado, 40.5% of respondents reported receiving “too little” training on interstate cases; in the other states, it was 56.8%. Similarly, only 14% of the Colorado respondents and 26% of the other respondents felt that caseworkers in other states knew their state’s requirements. Seventy-five percent (exactly 75.3%) of caseworkers in Colorado and 70.6% of caseworkers in the other states agreed that it is harder to work interstate than non-interstate cases.

We identified communication issues as the biggest challenge for processing interstate cases, especially lack of contact information for the caseworker handling the case in another state (identified as a problem by 68.8% of respondents in Colorado and 52.6% of respondents in the other states). Other common communication issues included states having CSENet limitations; states using canned, automated responses; states having high caseworker turnover; and states funneling cases through a call center.

In terms of documentation issues in interstate cases, the most common problem was pushback from other states about their requirements (26.3% of respondents in Colorado and 40% of respondents in the

other states identified this as a “major problem”). In Colorado, the most common process issue was getting cases that lack a recently verified address (36.2% of respondents identified this as a “major problem”). Note, the survey did not define “recently”. In the other states, the most common process issue was that process and requirements in other states are not clear (31% of respondents identified this as a “major problem”). With respect to case work problems, 50.7% of Colorado respondents identified having cases closed by another state without explanation as a “major problem” and 46.5% of respondents from the other states identified getting a canned, automated response from other state as a “major problem.” For interstate establishment, enforcement, and modification cases, the top problems cited by caseworkers (in Colorado and the other states) for all three were not having name, direct phone, or email for caseworker in another state; needing to convey all questions, messages, and requests through a call center; and getting no response from another state.

For all states, the most frequently used tool to communicate with other states and exchange information was CSENet. The State Services Portal was also frequently used. Sixty-four percent of caseworkers in Colorado and 57.2% of caseworkers in the other states said that they never or rarely contacted the Central Registry in their state for help with a case. Caseworkers from all states in the CIC project agreed that they had experienced challenges working with Arizona and Texas on interstate cases, including interstate turnaround times and the ability to reach caseworkers assigned to interstate cases.

See Appendix C for the September 1, 2020, report summarizing all findings from the baseline survey.

### Midpoint Survey

Evaluators circulated the link to the midpoint survey to 120 virtual summit participants in October 2021. Forty-five child support professionals responded to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 37.5%. Once again, most respondents (57.8%) were from Colorado, but all eight states were represented in the sample.

Feedback on the ongoing virtual summits was positive, with 44.4% of respondents indicating that they provided an “excellent” opportunity to meet counterparts in another state and 37.8% indicating that they provided a “good” opportunity. The virtual summits also provided information that caseworkers didn’t know (37.8% rated them as “excellent” and 42.2% rated them as “good” in this respect) and answered some of their questions about interstate work (44.4% rated them as “excellent” and 32.2% rated them as “good” in this respect). Overall, respondents felt the virtual summits helped them be more efficient in working interstate cases: 53.3% felt that participating in the virtual summits “definitely” supported having someone to work with in the other states, 57.8% felt that participating “definitely” resulted in them having a better idea of what states need, and 73.3% felt that participating “definitely” gave them a better understanding of how states vary in interstate processing.

Of those who had seen or used the draft Best Practices Summary, 15.4% felt it was “very useful”, and 46.2% felt it was “somewhat useful”. When asked about what additional information should be included in the Best Practices Summary, 50% of respondents selected enforcement thresholds for remedies. Of those who had seen or used the Master Contact Sheet circulated at the beginning of the project, 45.7% felt it was “very useful” (45.7%), 20% felt it was “somewhat useful”, and 51.1% of respondents indicated they would like a direct phone number for a worker or call center. In terms of the IRG, 51.1% of respondents indicated that they use it “1–2 times per week” and 25.6% use it “everyday”.

In terms of what participants would like from the CIC project, the most popular response was recommendations to OCSS on how to improve interstate case processing (62.2% of respondents), followed by an IRG cheat sheet with key IRG item numbers to help direct you to state-specific information (53.3% of respondents). Regarding future meetings, 51.1% of respondents indicated that they would like a virtual meeting held every quarter rather than an in-person meeting (40%), a virtual meeting once per year (22.2%), a virtual meeting once every six months (26.7%), or a virtual meeting once per month (28.9%).

See Appendix D for the November 2021 report summarizing all findings from the midpoint survey.

### Second Round of Focus Groups

In January and February 2022, CPR conducted eight virtual focus groups with child support professionals from each state. Most focus groups had about five to seven participants.

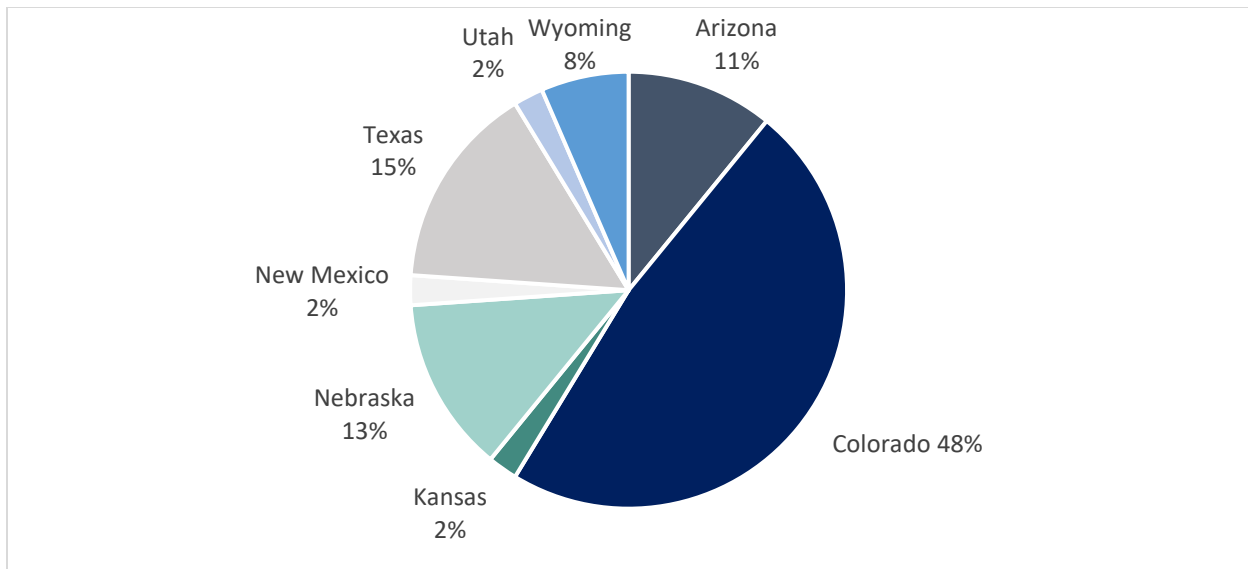
Drawing on the midpoint survey results, the focus groups, and follow-up with contacts in each state, CPR developed:

- At-A-Glance document for each state with state-specific information on communication tools, order establishment and registration, enforcement remedies, interest rates, the impact of COVID-19, and a “What’s Your Lingo?” section to clarify state-specific acronyms for their child support agency, Central Registry, state computer system, etc.
- Updated overall Best Practices Summary document including an IRG Quick Reference Guide
- Document with recommendations for OCSS action; see Appendix E for this document

### Final Survey

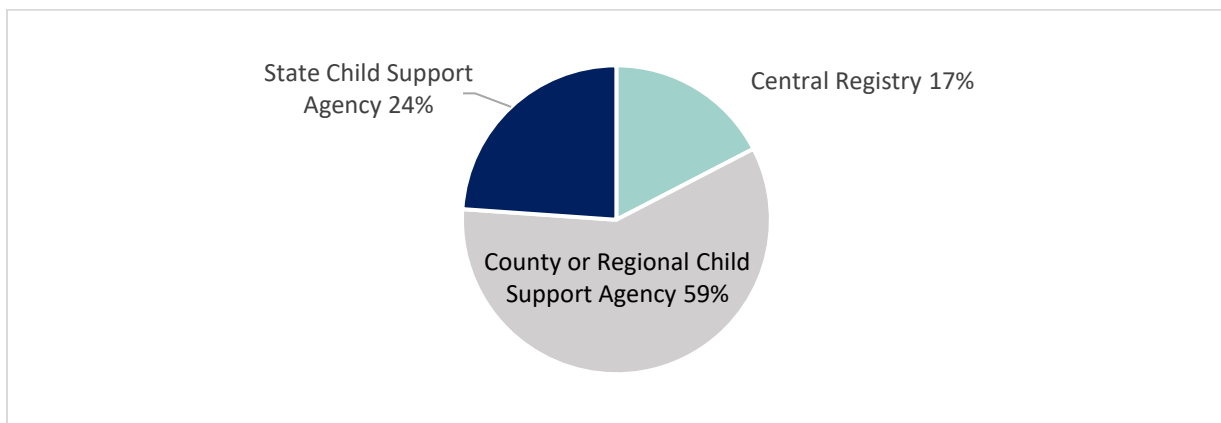
In September 2023, the evaluators sent the link to the final survey to the 107 individuals on the invitation list for the in-person summits. This list included the grant advisory board, caseworkers, Central Registry managers, and other child support staff across the eight states involved in the CIC project. Forty-six respondents completed the final survey, resulting in a response rate of 43%.

Around half (47.8%) of respondents were from Colorado, but every state in the project was represented (Figure 1).



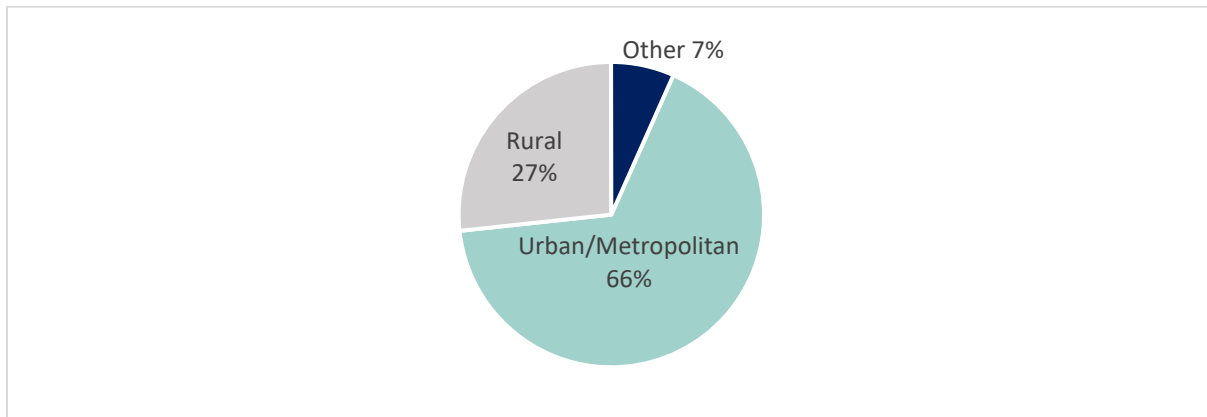
**Figure 1. Participating States**

The majority (58.7%) of respondents indicated that they work in a county or regional child support agency (Figure 2).



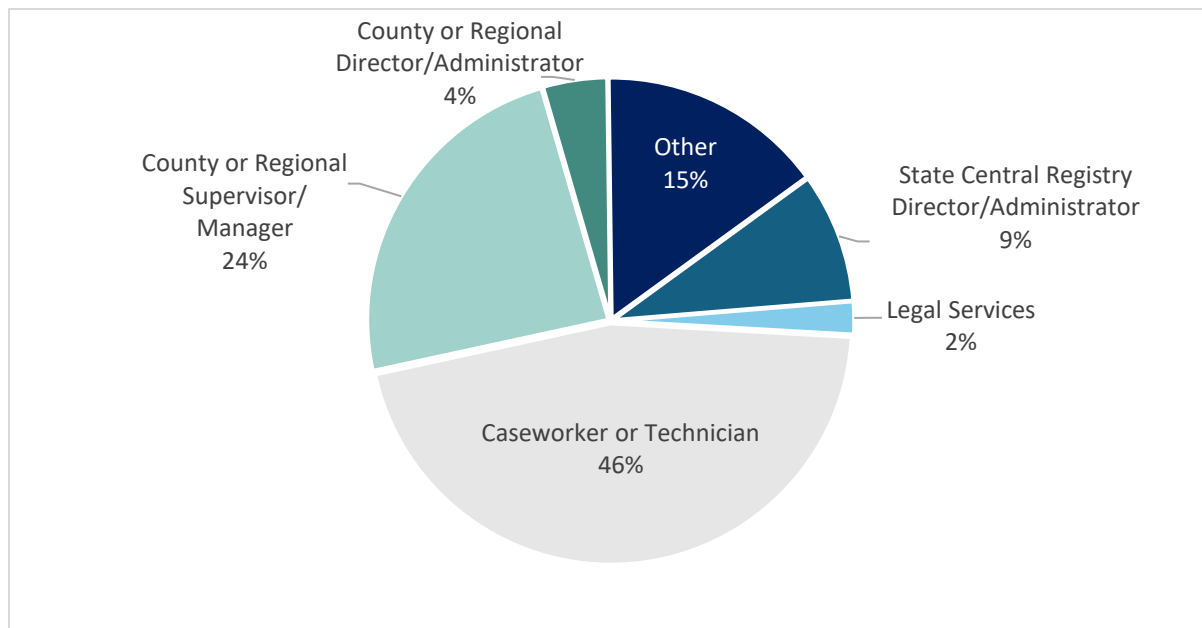
**Figure 2. Work Setting**

Most respondents (66.7%) indicated that they work in an urban or metropolitan area. “Other” areas included teleworking and a mix of urban and rural (Figure 3).



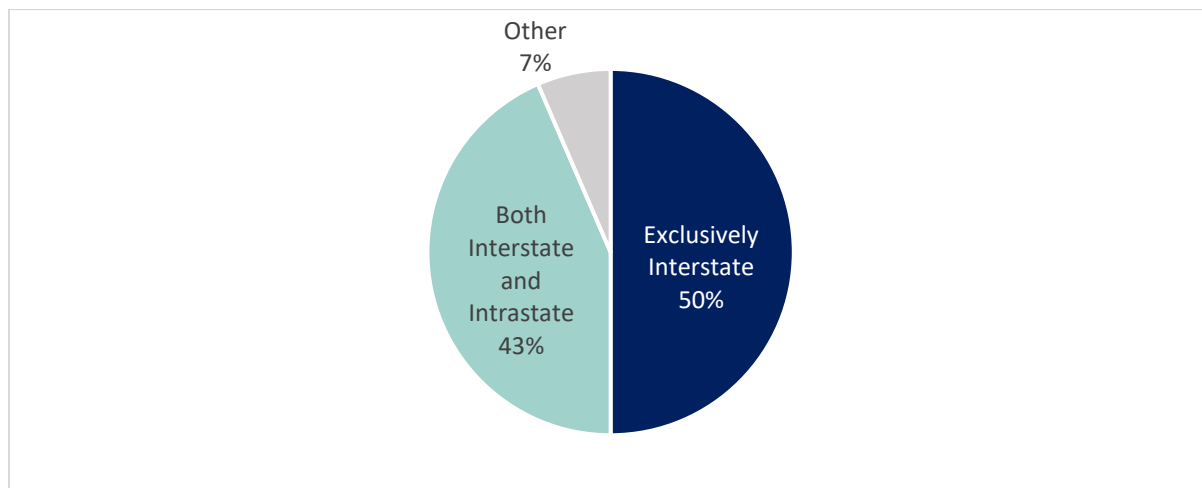
**Figure 3. Work Area**

Almost half (45.7%) of respondents work as a caseworker or technician and almost a quarter (23.9%) as a country or regional supervisor/manager. “Other” positions included Financial Services Manager, IRG/Adoption Manager and Ombudsman, and Lead Child Support Technician (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. Position**

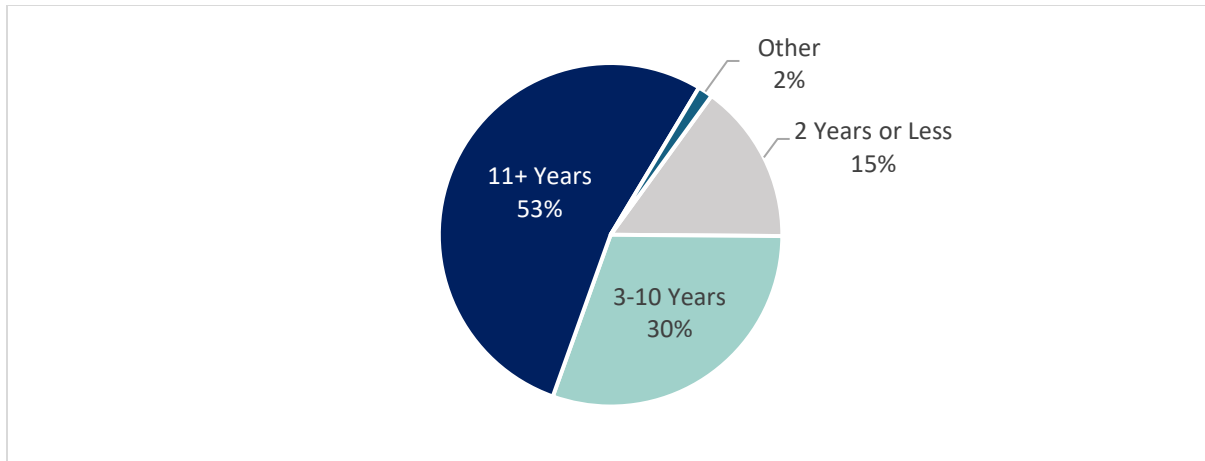
Half (50%) of respondents indicated that they work exclusively on interstate cases. “Other” types of cases both enforcement and interstate cases (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Types of Cases Worked On**

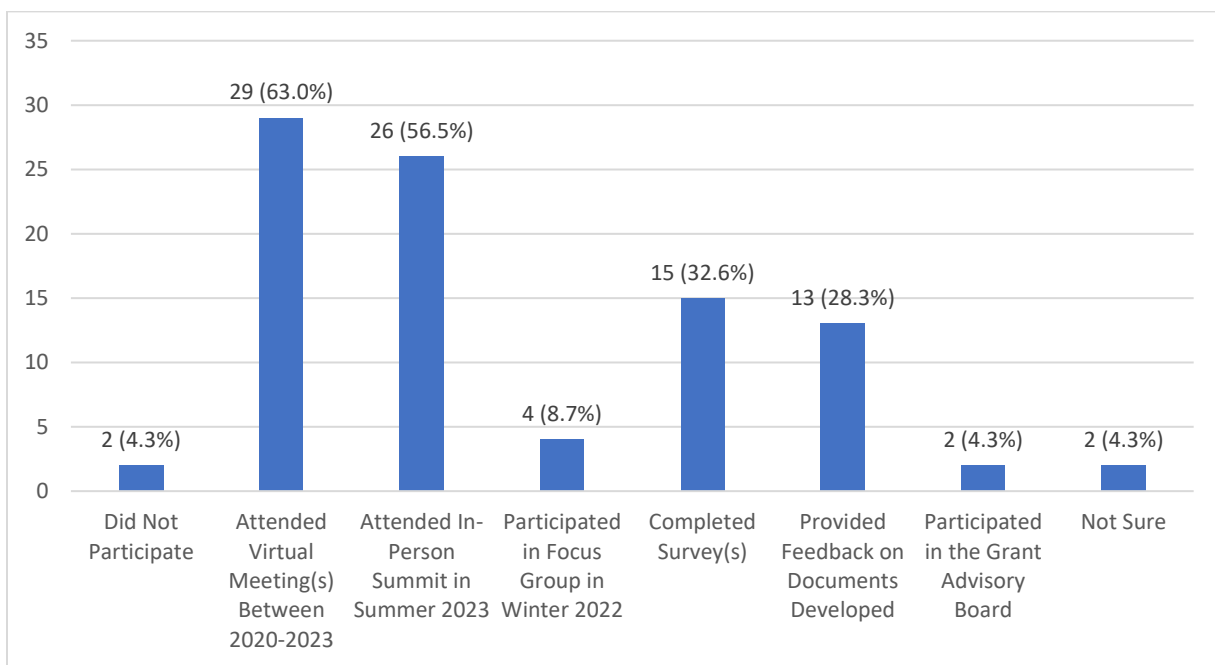
Almost half (45.7%) of respondents indicated that they have worked 11+ years in child support, although this number is higher since some of the “other” years in child support included 17, 30, and 31 years (Figure 6).





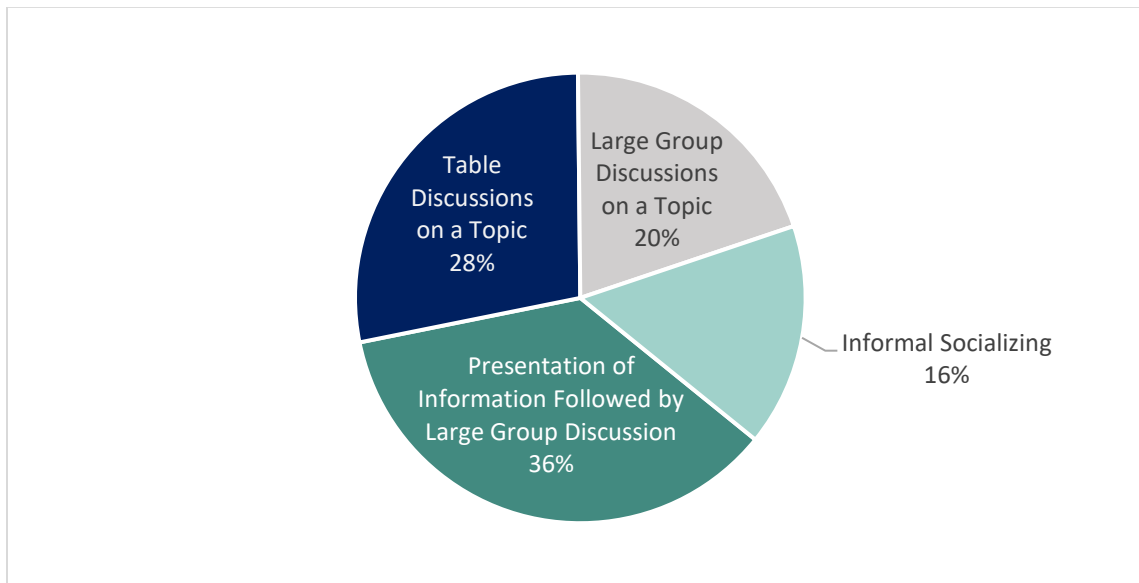
**Figure 6. Years in Child Support**

When asked about their participation in the CIC project, more than half of the respondents attended virtual meetings between 2020-2023 (63%;  $n=29$ ) and the in-person summit in Summer 2023 (56.5%;  $n=26$ ) (Figure 7).



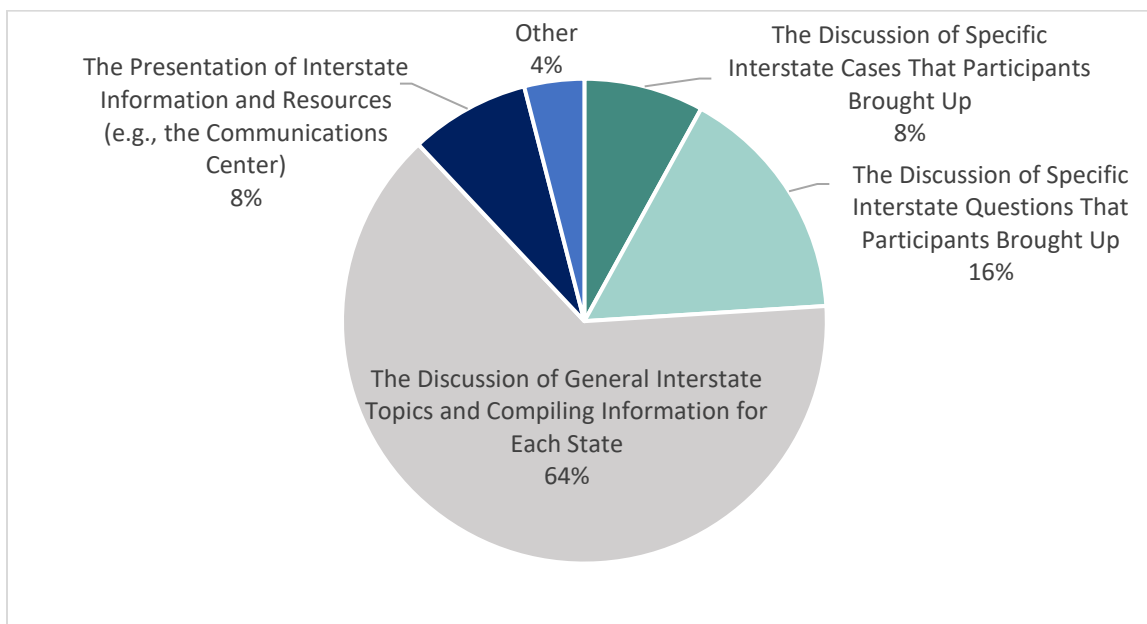
**Figure 7: CIC Project Participation**

Of those who attended the in-person summit, there was a mix of the type of activity they found most beneficial. The presentation of information followed by large group discussion was the most beneficial for 36%; table discussions was the most beneficial for 28%; large group discussions were the most beneficial for 20%; and informal socializing was most beneficial for 16% (Figure 8).



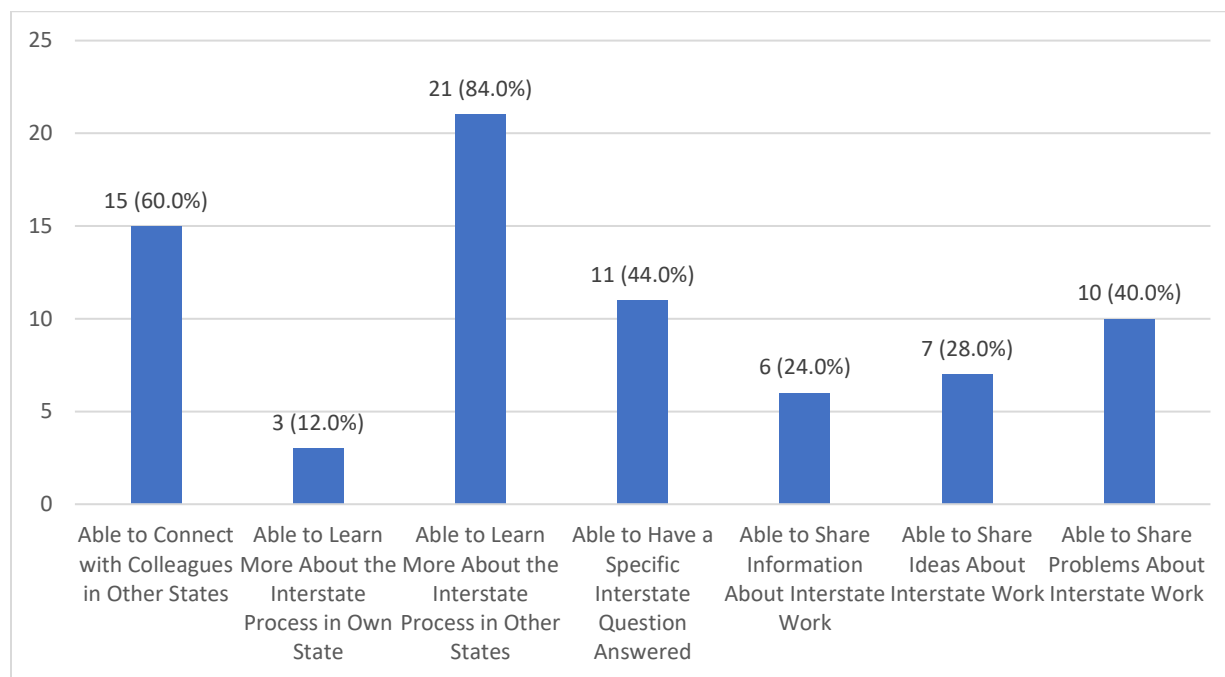
**Figure 8: Most Beneficial Type of Activity at the In-Person Summit**

Of the respondents that attended the in-person summit, the majority (64%,  $n=16$ ) found the discussion of general interstate topics and compiling information for each state to be the most beneficial (Figure 9).



**Figure 9: Most Beneficial Type of Session at the In-Person Summit**

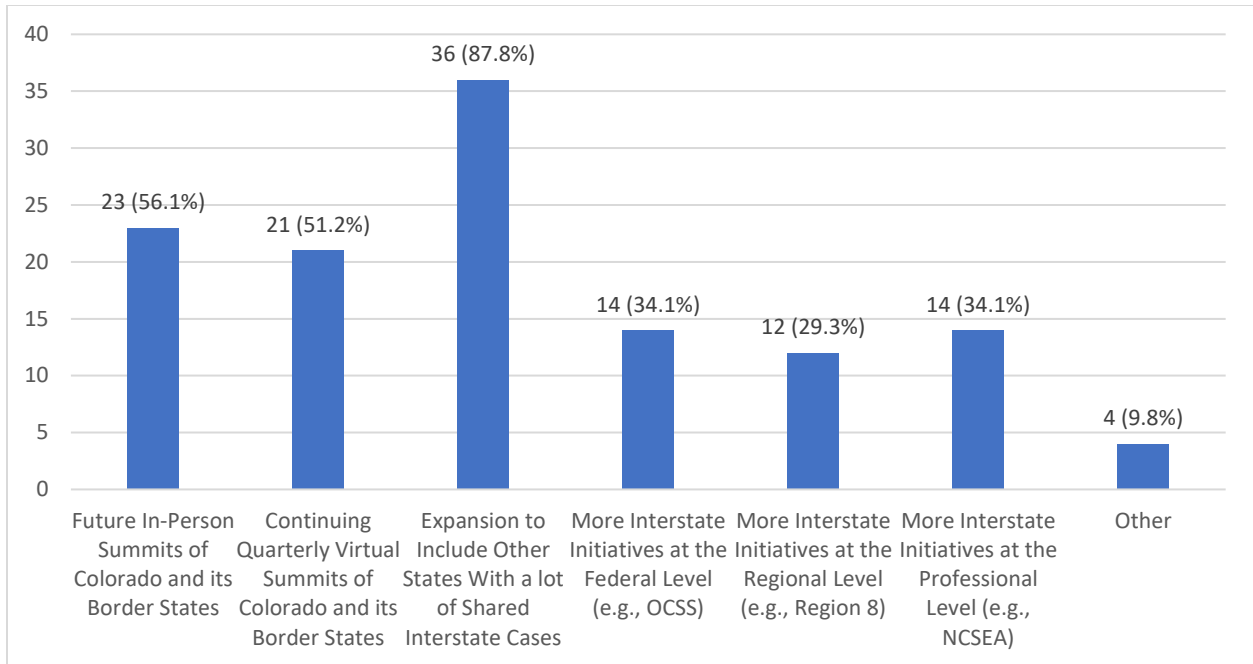
Respondents who attended the in-person summit were asked what they gained from attending. Eighty-four percent ( $n=21$ ) indicated they learned more about the interstate process in other states, and 60% ( $n=15$ ) indicated they were able to connect with colleagues in other states (Figure 10).



**Figure 10: Gained from Attending the Summer 2023 In-Person Summit**

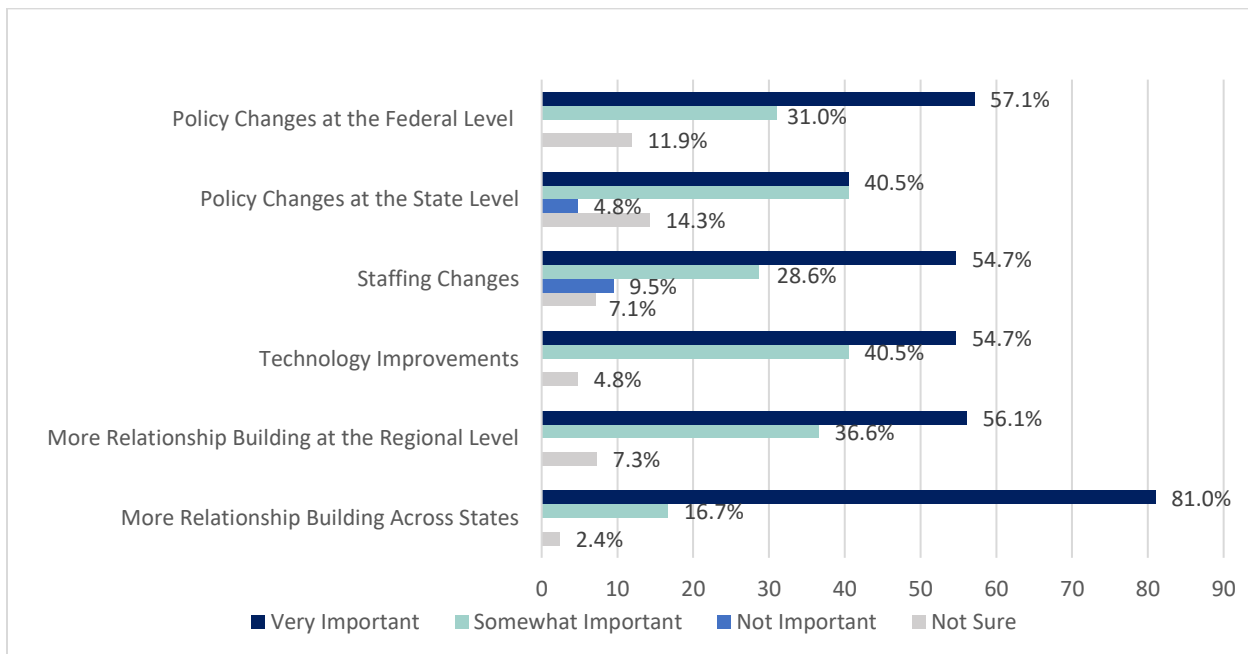
Open-ended feedback on the in-person summit was generally positive, with one respondent sharing, “I really enjoyed getting to meet everyone that I was able to and that there were multiple states that were in attendance,” and another saying, “it was a lot more educational than I thought it would be. Would go every year if I could.” A few respondents suggested that there be just one in-person summit, rather than separate East and West summits, and that the location of the in-person summit could be improved. As previously noted, the East summit was held in Burlington, Colorado, a 2.5-hour drive from Denver International Airport, while the West summit was held in Grand Junction, Colorado, which has a small regional airport. Another respondent suggested “it would be beneficial to have some classes or divide into groups to discuss certain topics...if it were set up more like the annual child support conference that would be really neat.”

When asked about next steps for interstate collaboration, 87.8% ( $n=36$ ) of respondents identified expansion to include other states with a lot of shared interstate cases, 56.1% ( $n=23$ ) of respondents identified future in-person summits of Colorado and its border states, and 51.2% ( $n=21$ ) identified continuing virtual summits of Colorado and its border states. “Other” next steps included virtual Case Specialist discussions and having topics and case scenarios established before meetings (Figure 11).



**Figure 11: Next Steps for Interstate Collaboration**

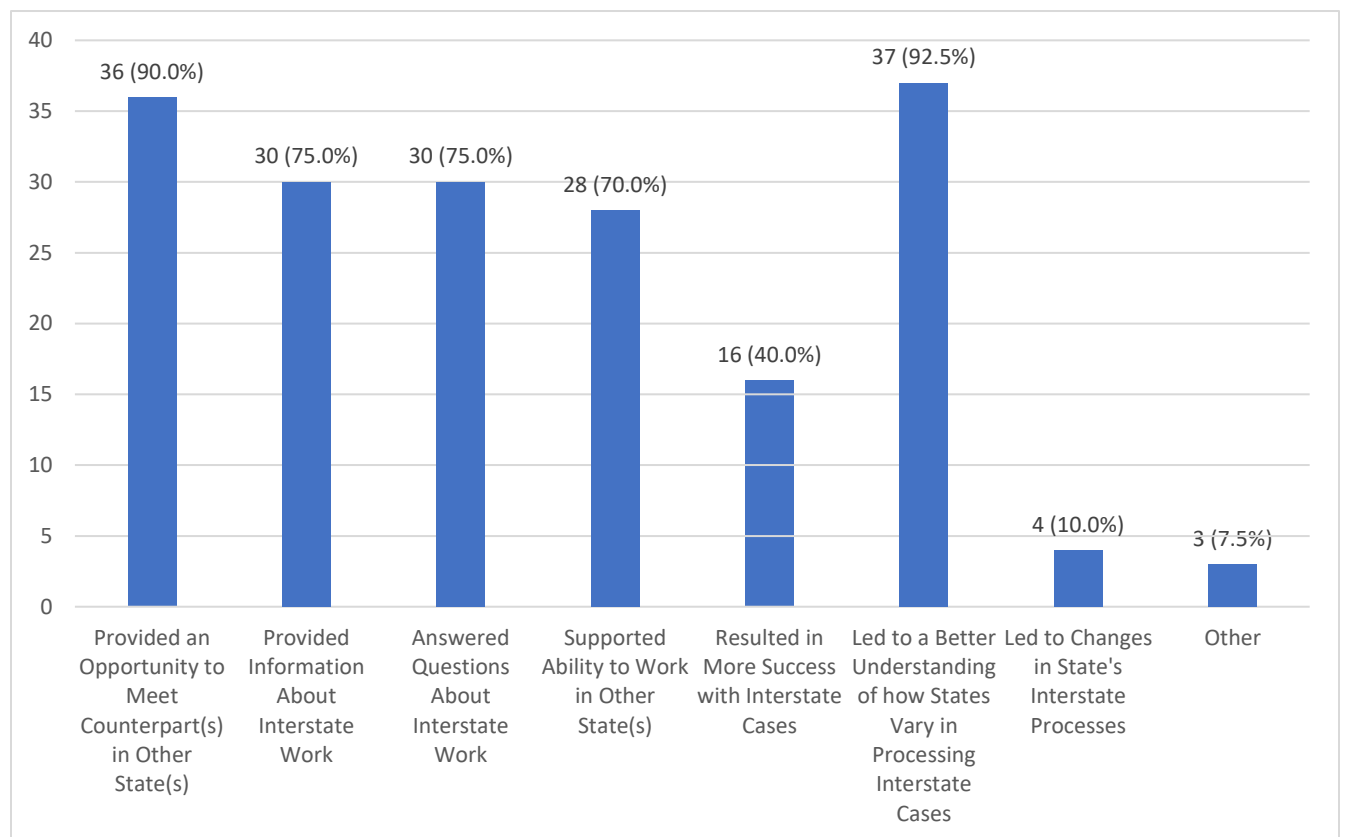
Respondents were most likely to identify more relationship building across states as very important to improve case processing and least likely to identify policy changes at the state level as very important (Figure 12).



**Figure 12: Importance to Improve Interstate Case Processing**

Open-ended recommendations for improving interstate case processing focused on communication and training. One respondent suggested “an intergovernmental type certification process to ensure appropriate knowledge levels.” Another respondent noted that they “would appreciate a listserv or similar (vehicle) to ask questions or pose scenarios between meetings, (because) getting feedback from other agencies or states is super helpful.”

When asked about what the CIC project facilitated regarding interstate work, 92.5% ( $n=37$ ) felt it led to better understanding of how states vary in processing interstate cases, 90% ( $n=36$ ) of respondents felt it provided an opportunity to meet counterpart(s) in other state(s), 75% ( $n=30$ ) felt it provided information about interstate work, 75% ( $n=30$ ) felt it answered questions about interstate work, 70% ( $n=28$ ) felt it supported their ability to work with other state(s), 40% ( $n=16$ ) felt it resulted in more success with interstate cases, and 10% ( $n=4$ ) felt it led to changes in state’s interstate process. “Other” outcomes included the opportunity for feedback and gaining resources and more patience with other interstate technicians (Figure 13).



**Figure 13: CIC Project Facilitated Regarding Interstate Work**

Open-ended feedback on the CIC project was positive. As one respondent noted, “[T]hese meetings have been helpful and of great benefit, they are constructive in understanding other state’s processes and experiences. Sharing this information connects us more to keep working together in moving our cases forward in less time to be able to help the families and especially the children.” People emphasized the benefit of having more information, improved communication, and increased understanding since “interstate is a beast...very busy work.”

### Final Focus Groups

Toward the end of the grant period, CPR held two virtual focus groups with respondents who indicated on the final survey they were interested in participating in a follow-up focus group. Fourteen child support professionals representing seven of the eight CIC project states participated in the focus groups. All focus group participants had engaged in the CIC project at various levels, but all were familiar with the project and nearly all had participated in both its virtual and in-person summits. The following themes emerged in the 90-minute focus group sessions.

**Both virtual and in-person meetings are helpful.** Face-to-face meetings are valued for “being able to put a face to a name” and enhancing relationships. Virtual meetings are helpful outlets to bring specific issues to the table and hear how caseworkers in other states do business. Although most agreed that “nothing beats face-to-face,” participants found it valuable to discover that casework in another state is a “very different process.” They also acknowledge that virtual meetings make it possible to connect with other caseworkers because people can see one another. The chief value of seeing caseworkers in other states is getting them to answer the phone and help. As one worker explained, “People dread interstate cases because they can’t get people to answer the phone. Once you get to see someone in another state, you can reach out and say, ‘Hey, can you look at something for me?’”

**There are barriers to engaging caseworkers in virtual and in-person meetings.** Respondents in most states blamed COVID-19 and its aftermath as challenges to engaging staff in the CIC project. For example, one Colorado county blamed the refusal of county commissioners to authorize virtual work during COVID-19 to a massive wave of worker resignations from which it has never recovered. Others blamed budget cuts due to COVID-19 and its aftermath for staff reductions and hiring freezes. Participants agreed that the workforce had changed in fundamental ways that made it harder for agencies to retain employees. And two states pointed to recent changes in the vendors hired by their states to deliver child support services and the vendors’ subsequent inability to fill vacant staff positions. As this worker put it, “Everyone is new and struggling with basics. They can’t take on an initiative like interstate collaboration.” Other challenges to CIC project recruitment and engagement were lack of support from the state child support director and the use of certain types of call centers.

**Focus group participants favor the engagement of caseworkers and are skeptical about including higher-level personnel.** Focus group participants see value in including ordinary caseworkers or “boots on the ground.” Still, while local workers are viewed as the parties best able to “fix” interstate problems, there is consensus that “brand new caseworkers would be lost” in an initiative like the CIC project. Central Registry personnel are favored participants, too. On the other hand, respondents fear that the participation of “higher-ups” would have a chilling effect on conversation and candor between and among staff in the trenches.

**The importance of effective activities, approaches, and topics.** Focus group participants cautioned against getting into highly specific discussions of individual problem cases. They also suggested using breakout rooms to engage people in discussing topics of interest to only a subset of meeting attendees. Among the topics of key interest are updates on new processes and tools, complex case questions dealing with establishment and enforcement issues, interstate processes, and policies in surrounding states. One respondent who is familiar with other regional communication initiatives suggested that the coordinator send an agenda before each meeting so each state could decide the appropriate person to send. Very open-ended meetings were viewed as less successful than those with advance planning and an agenda. It was generally agreed that failing to include tribal child support programs was an omission and that future communication initiatives should be more inclusive.

**The perceived impact of the CIC project.** Participants credited the CIC project with helping them understand where border states were. This included knowing the types of delays and reasons for delay they might expect in other states, the impact of COVID-19 on agency capacity, staffing issues, remote work policies, system changes, the judicial versus administrative profile of the state, typical time frames for case processing, and court procedures. Knowing this information was credited with reducing worker anger about delays and making staff feel more confident in their interactions with other states and less intimidated. As one put it: “New workers don’t want to ask a dumb question.” And in the words of another worker: “It is a comfort to know more about other states. You have the fear of not knowing something, of saying the wrong things. It helps to know a little about their policies, procedures, and statutes before you reach out.”

Another benefit of the CIC project is the validation it provides for interstate caseworkers. Participants agreed that intergovernmental cases are not addressed by upper management within their states. The CIC project offers caseworkers support from people who do similar work and understand their frustrations.

The key challenge to achieving more beneficial effects from an initiative like the CIC project are use of call centers and voice response units (VRU) that shield caseworkers from callers—including caseworkers in other states. As a result, they rarely lead to more customized treatment or actual access to a worker. And because worker turnover at call centers is typically high, reaching a human being doesn’t translate into useful information.

Call center staff turnover is very high, so you usually have very new workers who don’t know anything. Reaching them doesn’t solve your problem. Essentially, you are constantly at ground zero.

**Reactions to CIC project products.** Focus group participants were aware of the At-A-Glance document for each participating state and the Best Practices Summary. They agreed that they were “nice resources” but noted that they will need to be updated. They also suggested that the documents be placed on the CDHS website and made a living document.

**Reactions to participation by federal regional representatives.** Kansas focus group personnel also participate in the Region 7 interstate initiative, which is led by a federal regional representative. Colorado and Wyoming personnel participate in the interstate collaboration groups for Region 8 and Region 9. Focus group respondents familiar with federal regional office involvement are supportive of the idea. They feel it increases participation. Another respondent felt it might “lend more weight to the

discussion.” Some respondents were unsure of which region they were a part of considering recent reorganizations. Others favored collaboration initiatives that involved states that shared a border because they were more “intimate” groupings. Still others felt that any type of grouping—border, regional, high case volume—would be beneficial.

**Participation in national conferences that address interstate issues.** Relatively few focus group participants attend national conferences that address interstate matters such as the Western Intergovernmental Child Support Engagement Council (WICSEC) or Eastern Regional Interstate Child Support Association (ERICSA) annual conferences. A few said they attended when the conferences were offered virtually, but since the cost of registering and traveling is typically borne by the county, few to none can attend, and those that do are from upper management.

**Dissemination of CIC project learnings to other staff.** Focus group participants agree that the CIC project representative in each state should handle “flipping information out to other people in the state,” but that the distribution of meeting notes after each virtual and in-person session would’ve been helpful. One respondent felt she was “using the CIC project to train herself so that she could train others [in her state].” Another CIC project participant described her dissemination process in the following way:

I took it back to the office and presented it. I talked to my boss first and then I would present it to the district managers. We have an annual conference so I could add a session on interstate collaboration to that, too.

**Continuation of the CIC project.** Most focus group participants hope Colorado will continue to organize a collaboration initiative for its border states so the CIC project will remain operational. One participant noted, “[The CIC project] is a keeper.” Attendees assume that the staff member hired to replace the recently separated director of the Colorado Central Registry, who convened the CIC project, will assume similar duties in the future. Optimally, the future CIC project would have a chair and co-chair to divide the work. No other state offered to pick up the mantle. One participant suggested that Central Registry directors among the participating states jointly manage the initiative. Ideally, the CIC project would meet virtually on a bimonthly or quarterly basis and convene in person annually.

### [Interviews with Interstate Collaboration Experts](#)

The following themes emerged in interviews with five experts who have experience with interstate collaboration initiatives.

**Interstate caseworkers share a strong interest in expanding their contacts in other states.** Regardless of state setting or region, child support caseworkers who handle interstate cases are keenly interested in finding and cultivating contacts in other states. They are also interested in how cases are processed in other settings. As one expert put it, “[T]he tools are great, but you are always looking for a contact.” There are many logical and effective ways to group states for communication initiatives. They include states that share borders, states that share many cases, a state and the tribal child support programs within its boundaries, and states that comprise a single federal region. Among the challenges interstate initiatives face is the privatization of child support services, which is associated with high worker turnover and limited caseworker involvement in meetings and other professional development activities. Another barrier is call centers, which make it difficult for caseworkers to reach knowledgeable human beings in another state.



**In-person meetings are optimal but virtual meetings are highly effective, too.** In-person meetings are viewed as optimal ways to establish contacts in other states and build relationships. As one respondent put it, “Personal connection is key and real connections are in-person.” And in the words of another founder of interstate collaboration initiatives:

We have a simplistic model. If we put people at tables and force them to be together and learn together, they will be able to put a face to a name and help each other. They will understand one another and not be angry with each other.

Travel restrictions during COVID-19 upended these opportunities, and the expansion of the virtual world introduced new meeting formats. Experts now say the most effective format is a combination of virtual and in-person meeting opportunities. The optimal initiative would consist of a quarterly virtual 90-minute meeting with a yearly 1.5-day in-person meeting. Regions 5 and 7 conduct three virtual and one face-to-face meetings per year. Virtual meetings garner good attendance, permit the communication of useful information, and enable child support staff to get to know their counterparts in other jurisdictions. They also make it possible for representatives of large, high-case-volume states to attend meetings as visitors. As one expert stated, “[T]he virtual word gives us the opportunity to bring individuals and groups together who wouldn’t otherwise connect.” One expert pegged the optimal size of a virtual meeting at 25-30 people to allow breakout rooms for smaller-sized discussions. For time management purposes, each state should designate a single speaker to handle any state-specific update or presentation with others on the team chiming in with additional information.

**Organic initiatives and convenings are vital.** Several established interstate collaboration initiatives began and grew naturally. As one regional convener put it, “We got data showing that performance on cases we shared was lower than performance on regular cases, so it was perceived as a need, and it grew organically.” Other states pair off with a single partner to do “nitty-gritty” case resolution. Still other states tie the strength of their interstate initiative to a regional culture that stresses multi-state collaboration. A respondent in Region 5 noted that states in that region began holding large urban jurisdiction meetings in 2003, and this experience built a “foundation for exchange of best practices and meeting activity.” Once established, they are sustained by individuals who see value in them. Incorporating participants and content in an organic manner during meetings is also important. Respondents noted the value of attendees in each participating state providing a 5-minute overview of new developments in interstate practice and policy at every quarterly and annual meeting. As one facilitator explained, “[E]very meeting starts with me doing role call and asking each jurisdiction to tell me something new.” These contributions are viewed as valuable ways to keep states informed about their neighbors and introduce colleagues across state lines. To save time, experts urge participating states to designate a single speaker, if multiple individuals attend the meeting, with others chiming in only to provide missed material.

**Preparation is necessary.** Round-robin exchanges are necessary in interstate virtual meetings but are not enough. An effective interstate collaboration initiative needs someone who convenes the meeting, plans the content of sessions, communicates with participants, and updates their contact information. Effective and durable communications initiatives also have convenors who provide skilled facilitation. They select interesting topics for meeting sessions, invite informative guests from other states and agencies, generate case and practice scenarios that spark discussion, and organize training activities.

**Skillful coordination and facilitation are vital.** The coordinator and facilitator of an interstate collaboration initiative plays a vital role in its success and sustenance. On a practical level, this person needs to make sure that points of contact in the participating states are maintained. Staff change and communications with participants and their replacements must be updated on an ongoing basis. Another critical role that the facilitator plays is to schedule virtual meetings, develop an agenda, and remind attendees of its conduct. In virtual meetings, facilitators need strong online skills so they can create breakout rooms, conduct mini-polls, engage participants in making virtual word clouds and sticky-notes, and pursue other techniques to enhance connectivity and engagement. Facilitators need to do vital preparatory work or delegate it to others before virtual meetings. This might include selecting a topical focus, engaging guest visitors from other states and tribes, arranging mini-training sessions, creating case scenarios that will spark interest and discussion, and taking and disseminating meeting notes.

**Treatment of problem cases.** Child support caseworkers struggle with problem cases, and one benefit of an interstate collaboration forum is to try to obtain a resolution. Still, experts caution against overwhelming partner states with questions about problem cases or using meetings to engage in lengthy case-specific discussions and explanations. To avoid getting “in the weeds” on specific cases during the meeting, each participating state might be asked to identify 5-10 problematic cases and exchange them with the appropriate state representative for review and further follow-up action. If specific problem cases are used to generate meeting material, the issues they present should be elevated to a more general level that has broad policy and practice implications to make the discussion applicable to multiple states. As one respondent put it, “We elevate case situations to policy and procedures and solve the problems off-line.”

**Other useful content for virtual and in-person meetings.** Experts suggested the facilitator of an interstate collaboration initiative use a variety of approaches to offer useful and varied content to attendees in virtual and in-person meetings. Since a few large states generate many interstate cases that affect every region, a representative of high-volume states like Florida, California, Texas, Illinois, and New York might be invited to participate virtually as a guest in an interstate meeting to provide information on how they operate, handle interstate cases, and respond to participant questions. In a similar manner, tribal child support programs that exist in border states in an interstate collaboration network might be invited to attend and discuss the process and challenges of handling interstate cases in tribal settings. Another effective facilitation strategy is to conduct scenario-based training and engage each state in describing how they would handle a case that involves a similar situation. Relevant topics include handling a change of child custody or payee, order modifications, income withholding procedures, and the use of certain enforcement tools. Finally, interstate experts might be engaged to conduct brief presentations or offer a short training session on a new electronic tool, or a complex procedure followed by a discussion. Resources for these activities include staff in the Division of Federal Systems at OCSS as well as state-level trainers. More extensive training sessions are reserved for longer, in-person meetings.

**Documents and products.** Interstate initiatives frequently generate products that help their state participants navigate the cases they share with other states. The most common document is a “Need to Know” handout that describes relevant interstate laws in border or regional states and clarifies what caseworkers are allowed and not allowed to do. Another common document is a Best Practices Summary. As previously noted, the CIC project produced variants of these documents.

**The support of child support directors is critical.** While child support directors are not the target audience for interstate collaboration initiatives, their support is vital. Ultimately, IV-D directors need to welcome state engagement in such initiatives, approve the participation of staff in communication initiatives, sanction their attendance at quarterly and annual meetings, potentially weigh in on who should represent the state or participate, and respond to requests for state changes that might be made by other participating states.

**The targeted audience for interstate collaboration initiatives are “leaders at the state and county level.”** Interviewed experts agree that the audience for interstate collaboration initiatives does not consist of child support directors or frontline caseworkers. Rather, states should seek to engage “leaders at the state and county level” who can recommend changes in policy and practice should they arise. Optimally, this would include state staff involved with interstate policy, Central Registry personnel, supervisors or experienced staff at the state and county level who might be opinion leaders in the child support community, and large city representatives who generate the biggest volume of interstate cases. In states that are highly judicial, a legal representative may be important. Experts feel that child support directors have other forums in which to meet (for example, the National Council of Child Support Directors and the National Child Support Engagement Association (NCSEA) Policy Forum) while frontline workers can go to state and national child support conferences where there are many opportunities to get basic interstate training.

**Engaging federal regional officers can be beneficial but can also bring “federal expectations.”** Federal regional representatives are actively engaged in several other interstate collaboration initiatives. This includes initiatives in Regions 1, 2/3, 5, 7/8, and 9/10. One advantage of participation by federal regional personnel is they typically provide funding for in-person meetings. For example, in Regions 2/3, the federal representative pays the transportation and hotel costs when participants attend an in-person meeting. In some regions, they also play a key role in preparing for quarterly convenings and facilitating them. For example, the Region 5 facilitator is a regional representative who regularly generates case scenarios for quarterly meetings that highlight relevant case practices and policies. Another role a federal regional coordinator can play is to make sure interstate points of contact in each state are maintained and updated. Some experts say federal involvement “helps” and each of the regional representatives should host an interstate collaboration meeting. One interviewee suggested it be made “a duty of the federal regional representative.” On the other hand, federal regional participation can lead to a “loss of control.” In the words of one expert, “[F]ederal funding makes it a federal show. If you put federal money behind these gatherings, you get federal expectations.” Maybe one expert put it best when he observed, “The benefits and costs of federal involvement depends on the federal representative.”

**There are a variety of ways to promote cross-state engagement and relationship building.** Rotating the location of an annual in-person meeting might deepen commitment to an interstate initiative, although Colorado is the obvious hub for the eight states targeted for the CIC project. Another team building and learning experience is for states to invite border states to send one or two representatives to their state conference, waive registration fees, and engage the visiting representatives on a panel or roundtable to discuss interstate practices. For example, Pennsylvania and New Jersey involve three people from the opposite state to attend their state conference and do not charge a registration fee. Finally, each state must come up with a way to disseminate learnings from the interstate collaboration initiative. The representative from the state might circulate notes from virtual and annual meetings to regional and

local child support offices, organize a panel or roundtable on the interstate collaboration initiative at the child support community's annual state conference, or communicate meeting learnings to state trainers who work with interstate caseworkers. Finally, child support caseworkers can participate in the professional associations that focus on interstate case processing. These are ERICSA, which sponsors an Intergovernmental Improvement Committee, and WICSEC, which sponsors an Intergovernmental Fair. NCSEA Connects, a bimonthly meeting of professionals who handle intergovernmental cases, is another vehicle for interstate collaboration. One challenge to sustaining the interstate collaboration initiatives is retirement of intergovernmental specialists. Viewed as "icons" in the field, many pioneers of case processing in this area are retiring, and there is a perceived lack of replacements with similar zeal and passion.

**Including tribes is challenging but important.** There are 574 federally recognized tribes, of which 60 have a certified child support program. Nevertheless, interstate collaboration initiatives have typically failed to engage tribal child support programs, as was the case with the CIC project. One reason is they lack critical interstate tools, such as CSENet. However, this pattern is changing. Region 7 recently incorporated tribal child support programs in its interstate initiative, despite the challenges. Experts suggested that any future iteration of the CIC project include tribal cases and programs that operate within the border states that Colorado engages.

## Lessons Learned

The CIC project provides several takeaways for Colorado and other states interested in improving collaboration between and among states that are close to one another and share interstate child support cases.

**Grant plans can change because of external and environmental circumstances.** Colorado's proposal to OCSS aimed to improve cooperation and relationships between and among its seven border states by convening five collaborative, in-person meetings among Colorado and its seven border states and testing the ability of such meetings to increase child support collections, improve case processing procedures, and enhance customer service. About six months after the award of the CIC grant on September 30, 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic began. In the wake of ensuing agency closures, travel restrictions, and suspensions of normal agency practice and procedures, Colorado's grant plans were upended. Instead of conducting five in-person summits, project architects adopted a plan to conduct a series of quarterly virtual summits, hoping to revert to in-person meetings as soon as national health circumstances permitted. Instead of conducting a quantitative evaluation of pre- and post-project performance patterns extracted from samples of interstate cases drawn from the Colorado automated child support system, Colorado pivoted to conducting surveys and focus groups with caseworkers who participated in virtual summits. When Colorado conducted in-person summits during the last quarter of the project (June and July 2023), the state conducted a final round of surveys and focus groups with participants. Finally, to explore sustainability and generate lessons for other jurisdictions that may be interested in interstate collaboration initiatives, CIC project evaluators interviewed national interstate collaboration experts.

**While in-person summits are optimal, virtual meetings are viewed as effective and valuable by participants and experts, with most favoring a mix of meeting opportunities.** There is no perfect substitute for the connections made in face-to-face meetings, but CIC project participants and experts

alike give virtual interstate meetings very high marks with most favoring quarterly sessions. Virtual formats:

- Are cost-effective
- Garner good attendance
- Allow participants to connect a name with a face
- Help reduce the isolation that some interstate caseworkers feel
- Enable caseworkers to learn about new policies and practices in neighboring states
- Facilitate the resolution of problem cases
- Afford exposure to national experts and new jurisdictions through guest invitations
- Build case expertise and cross-state understandings through participation in scenario-based training activities

**Collaboration initiatives should combine organic meeting elements with advance planning, coordination, and expert facilitation.** A key feature of every virtual and in-person communication initiative is brief, unscripted input by each participating state on new practices, policies, initiatives, and developments that might affect the pace, timing, and outcome of interstate case processing. Another spontaneous feature of interstate collaboration initiatives is the opportunity for caseworkers to submit problem cases and potential resolutions to the group or representative of another state for advice. However, these organic elements should not overshadow the importance of more structured meeting activities. This includes:

- Planning in advance
- Drafting agendas
- Maintaining participant contact information
- Preparing meeting activities
- Using engagement techniques such as polling and break-out rooms
- Inviting guests and speakers
- Taking notes
- Organizing brief training sessions
- Developing and using of case scenarios that stimulate discussion and learning

Both CIC project participants and experts caution against allowing participants to engage in spontaneous, lengthy, case-specific discussions and explanations that are not generalizable to the full group. Rather, participants with specific case questions should submit them to the facilitator in advance to determine whether the item can be elevated to policy and procedure that would interest multiple states or solved offline. Another way to avoid getting “in the weeds” on specific cases during the meeting is to allow participating states to submit an agreed-upon number of problem cases to one another for subsequent review and follow-up action.

**There are barriers to engaging and retaining child support professionals in interstate collaboration initiatives.** COVID-19-related resignations, staff reductions, and hiring freezes all have contributed to severe worker shortages in child support agencies. Caseworkers and line staff are less expansive when overwhelmed and are less likely to participate in a communications initiative. Due to high levels of worker turnover and state use of private vendors to deliver child support services who struggle with worker retention, agencies have many new employees. This presents a challenge for worker

engagement in communication initiatives. New child support caseworkers struggle with job basics and lack the background to participate effectively and benefit from communication initiatives. Still another challenge is the unwillingness of some child support directors and managers to adequately support the initiative and permit caseworkers to engage. Several experts also note that the recent retirement of child support professionals who pioneered the interstate case processing field also presents challenges for creating and sustaining interstate collaboration initiatives at a national level.

**The perceived benefits of interstate collaboration initiatives are wide ranging.** The CIC project was credited with helping participants better understand neighboring jurisdictions, their unique processing and policy features, the types of delays and other case hiccups they might encounter, and the reasons for those circumstances. As a result, staff felt more informed and tolerant. Another benefit is increasing staff confidence. Caseworkers are more likely to engage with their opposite state counterparts to try to resolve case problems if they feel knowledgeable and confident and less afraid of “asking dumb questions.” CIC project participants also appreciate products and documents that highlight key features of state process and policy and recommended practices. This includes the CIC project’s At-A-Glance document for each participating state and its Best Practices Summary, although both require routine update and placement on the CDHS website to become “living” and accessible to a larger number of child support caseworkers in each participating state.

Continuation of the CIC project or another interstate collaboration initiative will require staff commitment. Colorado’s Central Registry Director, and manager of the CIC project, left employment at the end of the grant. As of this writing, no replacement has been hired and it is unclear whether sustenance of the CIC project will be part of the future duties of the new Central Registry Director. Although CIC project participants expressed support for its retention, no other state offered to pick up the mantle. As previously noted, staff support is critical to initiating, conducting, and sustaining an effective interstate collaboration initiative. Participants suggested several ways forward ranging from joint management by Central Registry Directors for the eight participating states to management by federal regional representatives.

## Next Steps

Evaluators of the CIC project interviewed five interstate collaboration experts on approaches to sustaining the communications initiative among Colorado and its border states and for other groups of states interested in promoting relationship building, communication, and learning in the interstate area.

**Explore the feasibility of engaging federal regional representatives in continuing the CIC project and its potential incorporation into other existing interstate collaboration initiatives.** Child support directors and central registry directors in states that participated in the CIC project should explore the feasibility of engaging regional representatives in helping to sustain, and potentially augment, the CIC project. One purpose of federal regional representatives is to maintain close contact with state, local, and tribal partners and address the needs of communities and individuals served through federal programs and policies. Several existing, long-standing intergovernmental communications initiatives are led or supported by federal regional representatives. This includes initiatives that exist in Regions 2/3, 5, 7/ 8, and 9/10. The states that comprise the CIC project involve four federal regions: Region 6 (New Mexico and Texas), Region 7 (Kansas and Nebraska), Region 8 (Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah), and Region 9 (Arizona). The next step for continuation of the CIC project would be to convene Central

Registry directors in the states that participated in the initiative, determine their interest in continuation, and engage the relevant federal regional directors in a conversation about the composition of an effective interstate initiative.

One option might be to explore folding the CIC project into the existing intergovernmental collaboration for Regions 7/8, which would encompass the states of Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah, with the potential of adding the states of New Mexico (Region 6), Texas (Region 6), and Arizona (Region 9). Federal regional representatives help to maintain and update points of contact for interstate meetings; plan and host virtual and in-person meetings; construct agendas; create instructive case scenarios; invite guests from other states, tribal child support programs, and regions; and otherwise support the collaboration and learnings objectives of the initiative. They may also provide financial support to underwrite in-person meetings and identify other relevant training, meeting, and learning opportunities at a national level. As previously noted, there is concern that the involvement of federal regional representatives will lead to a “loss of control” and the introduction of “federal expectations.” Still, given the separation of the architect of the CIC project and the absence of a replacement with the mandate and passion to sustain the CIC project, the engagement of federal regional representatives seems to be the best strategy for its survival.

**Conduct quarterly virtual meetings that combine organic features with planned agendas, topics, materials, and activities that are skillfully facilitated.** The leader of the next generation of the CIC project should incorporate key learnings from this grant. The core intervention format should be a quarterly virtual meeting that incorporates both organic and planned components. Each meeting should begin with a representative of each state providing a five-minute overview of new developments in policy and practice. Round-robin exchanges should be combined with carefully planned agendas that include interesting topics, informative guests from other states and tribal programs, case scenarios that spark discussion, and appropriate training activities. Skilled facilitation is another core feature of effective communication initiatives. This includes maintaining points of contact within each state, scheduling meetings, preparing agendas, managing meeting time, and using techniques to enhance connectivity and engagement including breakout rooms, mini-polls, and the use of virtual word clouds and sticky-notes.

**Augment quarterly virtual meetings with face-to-face meetings, participation in annual state conferences in neighboring states, and engaging in national professional activities dealing with interstate child support.** In-person meetings are optimal ways to establish contacts in other states and build relationships. Communications initiatives should aim to conduct in-person meetings annually in a location that is relatively central to the group of participating states and offers easy travel access. Another team building and learning experience is for states to invite border states to send one or two representatives to their state conferences, waive registration fees, and engage them in a panel or roundtable to discuss interstate practices. States can broaden their interstate expertise and exposure to caseworkers in other states by participating in professional associations and conferences that focus on interstate case processing. Finally, the CIC project coordinator must generate notes from each virtual and in-person meeting that are shared with a point person in each participating state committed to disseminating learnings, announcements, and opportunities to regional and local child support offices and state trainers who work with interstate caseworkers.

**Include tribal child support programs in interstate collaboration initiatives.** There are 574 federally recognized tribes, of which 60 have a certified tribal child support program. The CIC project did not engage tribal child support programs. Working with tribal child support programs is challenging since many lack critical interstate tools. Despite the challenges, some regional communication initiatives (e.g., Region 7) have included tribes. A future iteration of the CIC project should include tribal cases and child support programs that operate within the border states that participate.