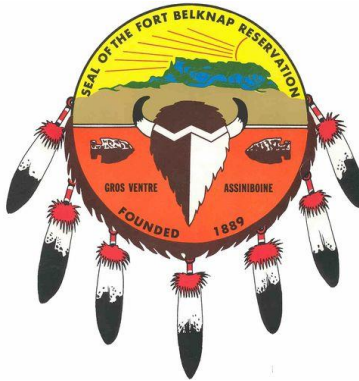


Fort Belknap Indian Community Child Support Intergovernmental Project



Final Evaluation Report September 2023



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Background

Grant Purpose

In 2019, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (now the Office of Child Support Services, OCSS), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, awarded Intergovernmental Case Processing Innovation Demonstration grants to seven state and two tribal child support agencies. These grants funded efforts to test innovations that would increase payments on intergovernmental cases and improve case processing procedures. Recipients could:

- Improve their existing intergovernmental case processing procedures and systems
- Enhance technical capabilities that could improve intergovernmental case processing
- Test improvements to system automation, staffing, data analysis, and system analysis
- Complete the technical steps required to gain access to the nation parent location computer network operated by the OCSS

Recipients had to incorporate procedural justice principles, behavioral economics concepts, and enhanced communication strategies to accomplish the project goals. Ultimately, the goal was to improve intergovernmental case processing and collections from parents who live in different states, tribes, or counties from their child.

Problem

The Ft. Belknap Tribes found it difficult to locate noncustodial parents to begin child support services for their children. Once we located a noncustodial parent, we could make them aware of their parental responsibilities to their child(ren). Another problem was working with our noncustodial parents to identify their barriers to paying child support. We have developed a screening sheet to use when we meet with the noncustodial to help identify barriers and refer them to the appropriate program. We hoped to increase collections to help families become self-sufficient.

Research Questions

The research questions for this project are:

- Will gaining access to the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS), thereby locating noncustodial parents, result in increased collections?
- Will increasing our outreach services to noncustodial parents result in fewer barriers to paying child support?
- How will increasing our outreach services to noncustodial parents enable the case specialist to be more effective in collecting child support and providing services to families?
- How will increasing our staff knowledge of federal requirements lead to improved services to our clients?

Intervention

Goal 1: Access Federal Parent Locator Service

To answer our first research question, we had to gain access to the FPLS. Our locate procedures were limited to postmaster inquiries, family inquiries, and asking the state for locate assistance. These methods were time consuming and often resulted in no helpful data. We wanted access to FPLS as we have seen the success of other tribal programs using FPLS for locate. The security assessment cost was a big hindrance before this grant. With this grant we hired a security assessment firm, developed necessary policies and procedures governing FPLS, obtained necessary training and gained access to FPLS. In a few months of using FPLS, we have seen a big difference in our locate activities, which results in better communication with noncustodial parents. This security assessment took some time as we had to contract with a second firm to complete the assessment.

Once we contracted with the second firm, we identified areas locally that needed work. Working with our IT department and the firm, we developed IT policies and procedures to satisfy the government and we gained access to FPLS and completed training in February 2023. There are only two confirmed locates that the program located and collected on. We expected to see an increase in collections when the program starts using FPLS consistently. We also planned to integrate the FPLS outcomes into a desktop database application so we can pull data from a monitor and hopefully see changes in case dynamics, family stability, and program sustainability.

Goal 2: Increase Outreach Services to Noncustodial Parents

Locating noncustodial parents was the first step in increasing our outcomes. Establishing communication with noncustodial parents was key to improving success in our child support cases. Currently our intergovernmental case specialist has 125 (43%) cases out of 295 caseloads. We developed a form to identify barriers of noncustodial parents, such as lack of a driver's license, work experience, or education.

Our resources include our partners, the Fort Belknap Indian Community Child Support Program Information System (CIS) database, and the tools provided by OCSS. We partnered with other tribal programs to get a full understanding of each case and the families involved. Some of our other partners included Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Head Start, Department of Social Services, Chemical Dependency Center, law enforcement agencies, domestic violence organizations, tribal college, and tribal courts.

We started bi-weekly virtual partners meetings in March 2022. The purpose was to determine how we could help our shared clientele overcome barriers that prevented them from gaining employment. On average, eight people attended these virtual calls. In January 2023, we began holding in-person meetings. Participation increased with the in-person meetings, with an average of 18 participants. We continued to collaborate with tribal programs to better serve our clients and community.

Another goal was to locate noncustodial parents to increase the amount of child support collected as well as reduce the amount of time searching for noncustodial parents. With access to FPLS, we were able to decrease the amount of time with locate and begin working with noncustodial parents. Approximately 44% of our cases are intergovernmental.

Prior to FPLS, child support staff reviewed each case where we were unable to locate the noncustodial parent. In cases where we were unable to locate, we noted in case notes methods of locate (family contact, postal verification, state locate) and results. For reference, we developed a survey for noncustodial parents about our program and services. We mailed 100 surveys and received 25. Most were returned “undeliverable” or “not at this address.” This reinforced our need for more accurate locate services. Our next step was to conduct intensive personal locate through phone calls to family members, employers, housing organizations, and local post offices.

We also started outreach activities to connect with our noncustodial parents. We held resource fairs in May and October 2022. About 50 community members attended. Thirty tribal programs presented on services they provide. We also developed and distributed a resource manual that listed tribal programs and their services.

Working with our tribal partners, we coordinated several community activities. For Halloween, we worked with three local schools to host a “Trunk or Treat”, where tribal programs distributed program information and treats from their cars. In December, we hosted activities such as cookie decorating, gift wrapping, bingo, and pictures with Santa. We also held family strengthening classes for noncustodial parents. At each activity there were approximately 120 participants. Lastly, we provided budget training to approximately 10 noncustodial parents and food safety training to about 20 community members, including children grades 4-6.

By presenting these community activities, we hoped to reach noncustodial parents to let them know about our services. Once noncustodial parents connected with our program, we worked with them to identify barriers and refer them to the appropriate programs. In the past year, we helped five noncustodial parents find employment, three regain custody of their children, and three enrolled in the local tribal college. Seven noncustodial parents closed their cases because their children aged out and they paid arrears in full. This has increased collections and reduced arrears.

We believe that personal connection is important in helping our noncustodial parents succeed. Phone calls and personal visits are noted in our database. We chart each client’s cooperation by number of visits, referrals to other programs, and removal of barriers. Our goal is to have the noncustodial parent become employed and able to pay child support. We learned that we must maintain contact with our customers to update addresses and phone numbers so we can keep the lines of communication open. Communication and collaboration with our tribal partners is also key to helping our customers succeed.

Gaining access to the FPLS is a very important tool in locating noncustodial parents. Our total locate cases was 46 from January 1, 2022, to September 29, 2023. From January 1, 2022, to February 2023, our successful locates was four. From March 2023 to September 2023, we

successfully located 22 noncustodial parents using FPLS, started income withholding for support. We have received several payments to date.

Goal 3: Strengthen CSP Case Management Capacity

In our plans to provide quality case management to our clients, we needed to identify where our staff weaknesses were. We hired Dr. Phillip Shortman to conduct the evaluation. A questionnaire was developed to gauge the child support staff's knowledge of the organization's staffing, finance, planning and evaluation, feedback, communication, and leadership roles and responsibility. The analysis suggested differences in perceptions of these topics by staff. We held a one-day workshop for staff to identify the weaknesses and receive training on policies and procedures so all staff understood their role and responsibilities. We held bi-weekly staff meetings to review difficult cases and gauge progress with noncustodial parents. We found that reviewing cases together revealed valuable information about the noncustodial parent, such as place residence or place of employment.

Client confidentiality is our main focus at child support. As preparation for access to FPLS, we reviewed the security measures required by IRS to protect our data and ensured our files were locked in fireproof file cabinets in a locked file room. We also randomly selected files to make sure each custodial parent submitted required documents necessary to open a case. For example, for each child, we checked for the birth certificate, social security card, certificate of degree of Indian blood, and financial documentation. When we were missing documents, we contacted the custodial parent to get copies. All managerial components except the policies and procedures for the security assessment were in place. The security assessment was completed later.

Lessons Learned

Locating noncustodial parents has always been an issue for our program. We found that utilizing FPLS helped us with client's employment, wages, and address. Once we were able to locate parents, we could help them with their child support obligations.

We also found that going out into the communities and talking face to face was the most effective way to reach our customers. They were more willing to cooperate when we sat and visited with them to show we were there to help.

Next steps

We have hired a case specialist outreach worker to continue our outreach activities. A big accomplishment was collaborating with our tribal partners. This was best way to provide our customers with needed services to help them overcome barriers. We have also established a case management meeting with our partners who share customers. We are a small reservation and by collaborating with others, we can be more successful in providing services to families. This grant has been a great help to our program. We were able to make improvements to our program, locate more parents, and increase collections.