Washington Division of Child Support: University Partnership Grant

Final Report

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I. Description of Grant and Activities Conducted

In 2011, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) awarded a three-year grant to the Washington State Division of Child Support (DCS) to facilitate increased partnerships between the agency and universities. DCS has an extensive history of using OCSE grants to implement and test new and innovative child support enforcement efforts. However, unlike past grants this opportunity was not explicitly intervention focused. The main goal of the grant was to fund demonstrations that would leverage the capacity of local universities with relevant public policy expertise to support child support enforcement analysis and interpretation of program and other data and improved capacity across organizations to ultimately improve the financial well-being of children.[1]

DCS partnered with a professor from the University of Washington's Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs (UW-Evans) and MEF Associates to carry out these grant activities. The collaborative – DCS, UW-Evans, and MEF – worked together to identify research problems and to design policy relevant tests of new interventions. DCS implemented the proposed tests, UW-Evans conducted quantitative data analyses and interpretation of the results, and MEF led the logistic aspects of the partnership and the qualitative research.

In this document we describe the experience of implementing a research partnership that supports DCS goals. We focus on the relationship developed between DCS, UW-Evans, and MEF over the three years of the grant and present a framework for how to make these types of partnerships effective in the context of broader agency improvement efforts. We also discuss how to strategically implement an evaluable pilot and the operational issues that might emerge. Ideally, this document will inform decision-makers in discussing how research might fit into DCS operations and what it means for future research and collaboration.

A. Goals of the Grant

A primary goal of the grant was to support knowledge sharing and increased collaboration between DCS and the research team. In particular, DCS sought to use the grant to fund practical application of research that could directly inform DCS policy and practices through the use of rigorous research methods. In its grant application to OCSE, DCS proposed working with research partners to identify new or existing practices that could be evaluated using experimental research methods. The goal was to test whether systematic approaches to various enforcement efforts would yield better results than current approaches.

To identify potential tests, the research team (UW-Evans and MEF) conducted site visits to DCS field offices. These visits focused on conversations with Support Enforcement Officers (SEOs) and program managers to understand current enforcement practices and identify new or existing practices that appeared especially promising.

In addition, UW-Evans researchers met with DCS data staff to review the structure and content of DCS's administrative records to facilitate the development of a data analysis strategy. DCS provided administrative data to UW-Evans to conduct data analysis to understand the

[1] Office of Child Support Enforcement. *Partnership to Strengthen Families: Child Support Enforcement and University Partnerships*. (HHS-2011-ACF-OCSE-FD-0155). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2011.

characteristics of the most difficult cases. They reviewed data documentation to help UW-Evans understand what data were available for use.

UW-Evans researchers also conducted a literature review to explore lessons from prior research on the effectiveness of various enforcement techniques. This involved examining published academic articles, government reports, and grey literature to understand the child support payment process.

B. Research Projects

The partnership conducted tests that highlight two different models of leveraging the research collaborative.

The first project tested a specialized arrears collections unit called the TANF 16; the proposed unit was not a product of the grant but rather an initiative that DCS had undertaken outside of the grant. The timing of the unit startup serendipitously coincided with the grant timeline and it was possible to experimentally test the outcomes of this new method of casework.

The second project tested a strategy of regularly sending billing statements to new noncustodial parents (NCPs). DCS was interested in developing a more systematic understanding of the impact that billing statements have on NCP payment behavior.

Both projects were appealing to DCS because they were policy relevant while minimizing impact on DCS staff.

Lastly, UW-Evans conducted an analysis of administrative data to model caseload compliance and non-compliance trends among a sample of 49,856 completed cases that had been established in Washington State from January 2002 through November 2012.

1. Specialized Arrears Unit (TANF 16)

In 2012 DCS received an appropriation from the Washington State Legislature to hire 16 full-time staff to increase collection of debt owed to the state. These staff formed a special unit housed in the Olympia field office that primarily targeted collections for arrears-only cases where the debt is owed exclusively to the state. Findings from a 1999 study conducted by DCS suggested that a specialized unit could be effective in increasing collections from this population, from which it has historically been especially difficult to collect.[2]

The approach and composition of the TANF 16 unit differed dramatically from DCS's typical approach to staffing and caseload management.[3] SEOs in the TANF 16 unit carry caseloads exclusively comprised of arrears-only cases with debt owed only to the state, instead of the usual practice of SEOs handling all aspects of cases from paternity and order establishment through collections. The unit also redefined staff roles by increasing the responsibility and involvement of Support Enforcement Technicians (SETs) to help with the upfront work preparing a case for enforcement. In addition, SEOs' sole responsibility on these cases was collections; the cases did

[2] Peters, J. *Overcoming the Barriers to Collection: Final Report of the Research Project Child Support Performance Measurements: A Test for Working Hard-to-Collect Cases*. U.S. Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement, June 1999. Accessed 4-10-15 at https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/ESA/dcs/documents/scpfinalreport.pdf

[3] Plotnick, R., Glosser, A., Moore, K., Obara, E. *Increasing Child Support Collections from the Hard to Collect: Experimental Evidence from Washington State*. Final Report prepared for the Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State Division of Child Support, February 2015.

not require any action regarding paternity or order establishment. The end result was a much narrower set of SEO responsibilities that place a premium on skills related to the location of NCPs and the collections of support from individuals with limited payment history and a lack of steady employment that would allow for wage withholding. Often this meant they took a positive, non-confrontational approach to collections to secure consistent payments, even if these payments were small.

2. Sending Statements to NCPs

The research team proposed a new research option focused on testing the impact of sending regular billing statements to NCPs new to DCS and without an income withholding order in place. Drawing lessons from the private sector, the team theorized that regular billing statements listing the current payment order and arrears would increase payment compliance. When the research team first broached this idea, the DCS Director sent a query to a listserv of other state child support directors, inquiring as to their practices regarding billing statements. Of the responses he received, no directors indicated that they had undertaken any systematic review of the impact billing statements have. The lack of information regarding the effectiveness of sending regular billing statements reinforced the desire of both DCS and the research team to pursue this test. Although sending these statements added a small amount of upfront cost (e.g., mailing, staff time), DCS hoped it would increase the regularity and amount of payment as well as spur NCPs to contact DCS themselves to inquire about the letter and alleviate SEO outreach costs.

C. Implementation

MEF facilitated the communication between DCS and the research team throughout each stage of the projects. This included monthly conference calls with DCS and the research team, annual briefings for DCS leadership, and intermittent memoranda summarizing project status and interim findings from site visits.

These regular interactions created a cycle of feedback that allowed the partners to design policy relevant tests that were operationally feasible and could be supported exclusively by administrative data. The ongoing interactions also allowed DCS to refine implementation throughout the test, which was particularly important for the TANF 16 project.

The research team used information and input from DCS to interpret the findings of the data analyses and produce deliverables that would ultimately be useful to DCS.

D. Collaborative Partnership and Dissemination to Wider Research Community

DCS and the research team maintained a strong, collaborative relationship through each stage of the project. While each partner played a distinct role, they operated with a high degree of communication and in service of the near-term goal of using research to improve DCS operations. While many of the day-to-day tasks the partnership conducted were in support of carrying out the demonstration (e.g., implementation coordination, site visits, data analyses, report writing), in sum, the grant activities supported the longer-term capacity-building objective of the grant.

- ***Division of Child Support***. DCS defined the research agenda by clearly articulating key areas of interest for the project. From the outset, DCS leadership was clear that they wanted the demonstration to focus on testing ways to increase collections from hard-to-

collect populations. With that as the guiding principle, DCS staff at multiple levels (e.g., case workers, supervisors, program managers) offered ongoing input on current operations and the way in which various proposed tests might fit into and improve the existing business model. During implementation, DCS staff oversaw the two interventions, provided the research team with regular feedback, and provided all necessary data for the quantitative analyses. However, they also were willing to make implementation adjustments in response to early feedback from the research team's monitoring work.

- ***University of Washington***. The UW-Evans researchers were responsible for conducting the impact analyses for the two interventions. UW-Evans submitted a final report to DCS in February 2015 covering the impacts and implications of the two experimental projects. It describes the intervention and experimental designs, the characteristics of the treatment and control groups, methodology for the impact analysis, and findings and conclusions. UW-Evans delivered audience-specific presentations and papers to present findings to both the academic community and DCS. The UW-Evans researchers were also responsible for conducting an analysis of the characteristics associated with variation in NCP compliance. This analysis sought to expand understanding of the NCP, CP, and case-level characteristics associated with different levels and spells of compliance.

- ***MEF Associates***. MEF led logistic aspects of the partnership, facilitating monthly project status calls each month following the kickoff meetings and distributing notes summarizing the conversation to all call participants. MEF also helped think through the research design for the two test. In addition, MEF took the lead on qualitative work, collaborating with DCS to plan site visits and with UW-Evans to conduct site visits and conversations with staff at various points throughout the grant. MEF conducted the early fact-finding site visit with UW-Evans and interviewed TANF 16 staff. MEF contributed to UW-Evans's final report, including a description of the findings from the qualitative fieldwork, covering the TANF 16 project implementation, contrasts to business as usual processes, and the lessons learned from the project. It included the topics of staffing and training the team, data integrity and case workflow, and the implications of how the intervention was implemented. In addition, MEF designed deliverables to inform DCS of next steps involved in this grant as well as in future research partnership opportunities. Lastly, MEF also delivered presentations and papers to present findings to the policy community, child support research community, and DCS.

In addition to the core activities of the project, the research team worked hard to inform other practitioners and researchers about the grant activities.

Collaboration with other sites. OCSE had awarded 1115 grants to two other states as well: Michigan and Iowa. In October 2012, partners from all three states met at the University of Washington to discuss their projects. During the meeting, DSHS provided a presentation on situating child support interventions and research in the broader social service context and facilitated small, mixed group conversations on developing new research ideas. MEF assisted in developing the agenda, coordinating speakers, and facilitating group discussions.

Conference Panels. The research team presented the projects to the academic and practitioner communities at several points throughout the grant. These include the Welfare Research and Evaluation Conference, and the annual meetings of the National Council of Child Support

Directors, the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, the National Association of Welfare Research and Statistics, the Eastern Regional Interstate Child Support Association, and the Population Association of America. Some of the presentation sessions also featured results from the Michigan and Iowa interventions.

II. Framework for Using Research to Inform Service Delivery Approaches

The University Partnership Grant presented an opportunity to facilitate collaboration between researchers and practitioners. The projects conducted as part of the grant serve as examples of how to leverage existing university research capacity to superimpose a model of rigorous research to test innovations. The two projects provided DCS with valuable information to better implement policy and procedure changes. *Furthermore, the research grant provided a framework for using research to inform service delivery approaches that can be applied to future opportunities for testing innovations and changes*.

In this section we cover the four components that are involved in using research to test innovations in service delivery:

1. identifying a testable service delivery approach,
2. designing and delivering the identified new strategy,
3. testing it, and
4. using the findings to refine broader agency approaches.

We use the experience of the University Partnership and the TANF 16 project as an example of each of the steps we describe.

A. Identifying new or improved service delivery strategies

As child support agencies seek to increase the use of research to support program operations, the initial step is to identify testable service delivery approaches. Partnerships such as the one between DCS and the research team should prioritize tests that produce actionable information to improve agency operations, which may also be relevant to other program managers and policymakers. Critical to this process are conversations with individuals within the agency at multiple staffing levels. These varying perspectives can be instrumental in identifying gaps in the existing service delivery model, identifying potential innovations, and thinking through the implications of proposed shifts in program operations.

These discussions can also be a time to introduce the value of this type of research to staff who may be unfamiliar with external evaluators and researchers. Below are the steps that the University Partnership took at this stage.

University Partnership. The research team held conversations with DCS leadership and staff as a starting point to identify what tests would be most useful to DCS. These conversations represented an important step in cementing the relationship between the research team and DCS, and this experience allowed the research team to be more sensitive to the dynamics of the organization and how staff might respond to research. Moreover, initial conversations with DCS staff were instrumental in providing the research team with an in-depth understanding of the operational context and DCS policies and procedures.

The research team discussed the project with two sets of DCS staff in service of narrowing down potential areas and tests of interest:

- ***DCS leadership.*** The research team began with conversations with DCS leadership, focusing on topics such as the research areas of interest at the agency, state, and federal level, as well as the future directions the agency hoped to pursue. In addition, the research team used this conversation to identify the types of management and line staff to interview next. DCS leadership was enthusiastic about the opportunity to have rigorous evaluations of proposed interventions, understood the value of conducting field experiments, and provided essential technical support staff that provided the research team with the needed administrative data.
- ***DCS staff and managers.*** With these staff, the topics of discussion focused on learning about specific approaches staff take, how they make decisions about deploying enforcement techniques, and how case characteristics influence their decision-making – all within the broad topic that leadership identified: improving collections among the hard-to-collect, particularly for cases without income withholding.

Through the conversations with leadership and staff, the research team aimed to assess the current state of the areas of interest that DCS believed needed improvement. There were two methods of identifying potential interventions:

- ***Examining existing interventions and practices***. The conversations helped identify current strategies that appeared to be working well, as well as key areas where challenges persisted. In some cases, DCS already had some potential ideas for program improvements, which the research team discussed with them whether they would be appropriate and feasible for evaluation within the grant.
- ***New ideas based on site work***. The research team proposed potential ideas for new practices based on the site work that they conducted. In addition, the research team suggested that the partnership be attentive to planned upcoming policy changes that could provide targets for an intervention, or needed to be considered when planning an intervention.

Lastly, the research team emphasized the various benefits of the research process in their conversations and how research can help support the implementation and evaluation of new strategies.

- ***Implementation research***. The partnership also stressed how research can support program management by providing useful feedback from an outside perspective, particularly from qualitative work. While DCS can use their administrative data to conduct quantitative analyses on performance, they may not have the capacity to do field work or elicit honest feedback from line staff due to their relative organizational positions.
- ***Impact evaluation***. Impact evaluations can provide useful information on what works, why, and for whom. Staff data analysts may not have the time to merge data from multiple sources, conduct extensive data processing and manipulation, and estimate complex statistical models. Even if they are able to carry out these tasks, they may not be well equipped to produce a report with key themes and actionable items that staff on the program side can easily consume and operationalize. Lastly, there may be many nuances of the analyses and results that may be lost without the context of the qualitative findings.

B. Designing and Implementing new service delivery strategies

Implementing a new service delivery strategy that can be rigorously evaluated requires those designing the new strategy to take a series of initial steps. The approach taken during the design phase has implications for the implementation of the intervention and the degree to which the roll-out allows for quality evaluation. We use the experience of the TANF 16 project to illustrate how each of these steps can be operationalized.

Problem definition. Designing a new service delivery strategy begins with identifying and describing the problem or challenge at hand.

- ***TANF 16.*** In designing the TANF 16 project, DCS believed that there was the potential for increased revenue among NCPs with only state-owed arrears as a result of more targeted enforcement techniques. DCS leadership hoped to find new and effective strategies to improve collections from this population that could be introduced into the array of existing strategies and processes.

Articulate clear logic model. Following the identification of a problem of interest, the next step is to develop a potential intervention and articulate a clear logic model that outlines how this strategy will address the problem. ***Figure 1*** below provides an example of the logic model for the TANF 16 project.

The first step is to identify assumptions and context of the new strategy to be implemented.

- ***TANF 16.*** With the example of the TANF 16 project, the partnership began with the assumption that the current approach to the state-owed arrears-only population may not be the most effective way to maximize collections.

Next, describe the inputs of the intervention – the human, financial, and organizational resources a program has available to implement the program.

- ***TANF 16***. DCS received an appropriation from the Washington State legislature to cover the financial costs of this new strategy. This included the hiring of new staff to implement the intervention. These staff received training and support that focused specifically on the approach DCS expected unit staff to take.

The outputs of the logic model include the program activities expected to lead to outcomes and the direct products of these activities.

- ***TANF 16.*** DCS and the TANF 16 manager in particular, developed a set of specific expectations for how unit staff approached their caseload. There was a strong emphasis on the upfront review of cases and an active outreach approach to NCPs. DCS believed that the specialized roles of the TANF 16 team would make them better equipped to collect on these specific cases. In particular, DCS believed that the skills necessary to work these cases – strong locate skills, ability to negotiate with NCPs – could be better deployed by a specialized team. In addition, the unit was especially focused on ensuring the integrity of case data, including contact information and accurate debt calculations.

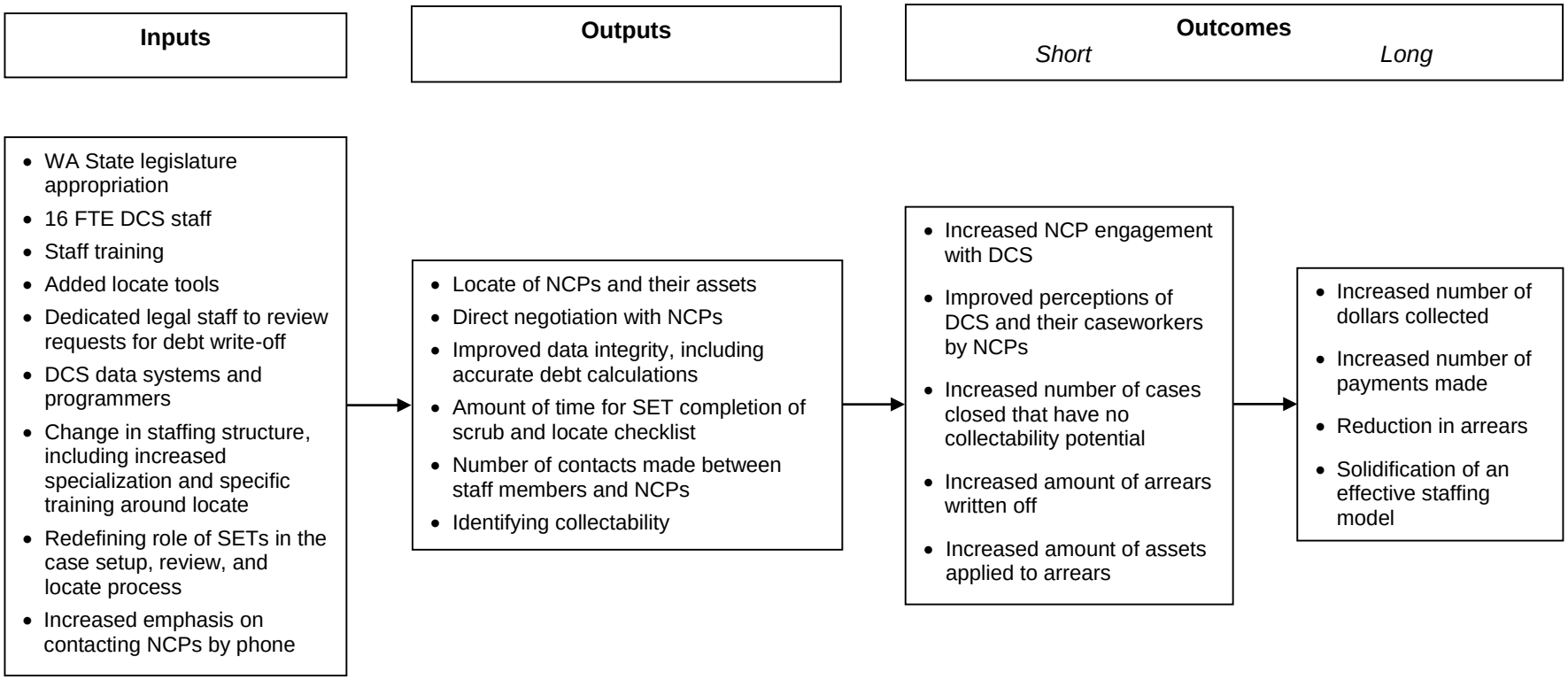
The outputs in the logic model should be directly tied to expected outcomes of interest. The specific, quantifiable outputs that capture the strategy that the team implements should drive the differences in outcomes.

- ***TANF 16.*** As the logic model in ***Figure 1*** shows, the emphasis on strong locate, accurate debt calculations, and NCP outreach were expected to result in increased NCP engagement and improve case review processes. This added review was also expected to result in identifying cases that might be suitable for closure or debt forgiveness. These outcomes together were expected to produce the long-term outcomes of interest in TANF 16. These outcomes were related to collections, such as increased number of dollars collected, increased number of payments made, and a reduction in arrears, as well as identification of an effective staffing model.

Figure 1: TANF 16 Logic Model

Problem: Low collections from NCPs with only state-owed arrears and no current support due

Goal: Identify and implement an effective strategy to improve collections from this population



Assumptions:
Current approach to the state-owed arrears-only population may not be the most effective way to maximize collections

Identify target population. In developing a new enforcement approach or service delivery strategy, identifying the appropriate target population is crucial.

- ***TANF 16.*** The TANF 16 project sought to increase collections from a particular subset of NCPs, those with no current support obligation and exclusively state-owed debt. DCS targeted this group in part because of the belief that the more general enforcement approach taken by the agency wasn't maximizing collections from this population.

Establish timeline. Following development of a logic model and implementation plan, agencies should develop a timeline for both the implementation and corresponding evaluation. This timeline needs to factor in the time it takes for the intervention to go from start-up to the fully implemented state, as well as the time required for data analysis and writing up findings. The size of any grants funding the intervention, any time-limited contracts with researchers, or the length of time in which intervention rollout needs to occur, may affect the timeline. Additionally, the timeline needs to be cognizant of allowing for a sufficient follow-up period to measure key outcomes. Depending on what outcomes are of interest, the length of the observation period may differ greatly.

- ***TANF 16.*** For the TANF 16 project, the research team worked with DCS to develop an evaluation timeline that built in upfront time for hiring new staff and providing them with unit-specific training. Based on the implementation timeline – in particular, when the unit would be fully staffed – the research team identified the appropriate point for the initial random assignment of cases. In addition, the team remained in close communication with the unit to ensure that subsequent rounds of random assignment would occur once the unit had worked through the initial cohort of treatment cases.

Assess context/environment and changes in relevant policies. Organizational culture and institutional policy can impact implementation. Project designers need to consider these factors in the early stages so that a feasible model can be implemented and done so with fidelity.

- ***TANF 16.*** While collections remained the ultimate priority, DCS also wanted staff in the unit who would take a specific approach. In particular, they wanted SEOs who were not hesitant to pick up the phone and call NCPs and who had an interest in developing a rapport with NCPs. In addition, the DCS management ensured that expectations of unit staff aligned with existing labor categories. This was particularly important as the intervention involved a new case workflow which increased SET responsibilities around locate and initial case setup.

Obtain buy-in/support from necessary partners and staff. Clear messaging from members of leadership can help implement an effective project. This can facilitate the launch of a new strategy, as well as ensure staff adhere to any research procedures necessary to conduct the test.

- ***TANF 16.*** Without staff who were willing to be open to negotiating payment plans and working with NCPs to pursue debt write-offs, the activities of the team would not have aligned with the intended implementation design, even if some members of leadership supported the intervention.

Identify qualified partners and staff. While leadership and research partners may develop a clear, well-founded design, it is also necessary to identify the qualified partners and staff to provide the direct services. Whether this is done through internal or external hiring, the ability to

find staff who fit qualifications needed for the job is important, especially in the program startup phase.

- ***TANF 16.*** Initially, leadership had expected to staff the TANF 16 team internally with experienced SEOs with considerable casework experience and SETs who already had a strong understanding of DCS processes. However, the hiring process was more difficult than anticipated, as it took time to identify a unit supervisor who would be leading the team, and some existing SEOs were reluctant to join the team. While it was easier to find SETs to fill the open positions, not enough people applied, and DCS had to expand its search outside of current employees. In the case of SEOs, some had little to no prior casework experience, and in the case of SETs, while some had collections experience, there was a high learning curve to grasp the complex DCS processes and acronyms.

Staff training. Any new staff-led intervention will require a certain level of training. This training should focus on ensuring that staff are well-equipped to carry out the intervention as designed. However, it can be difficult to determine the amount of training staff will require, and how this may affect the timeline.

- ***TANF 16.*** In the case of TANF 16, the difficult hiring process resulted in an unanticipated need for extensive staff training. The few staff with more experience were thrust into a dual role of active casework along with serving as trainers and mentors for newer hires. In the initial months of implementation, this substantially inhibited the unit's ability to fully implement the intervention as intended. Subsequent changes to the staffing structure, added training, and increased experience of the team resolved many of the issues encountered at startup.

C. Testing new service delivery strategies

Understanding the impact of new interventions requires a purposeful evaluation strategy that is developed in conjunction with the design and implementation of the intervention. Embedding research activities into the proposed initiative as seamlessly as possible increases the likelihood that the evaluation will support the policy, implementation, and research goals.

Develop appropriate research questions. Based on the desired outcomes in the logic model, the evaluation will focus on a set of well-defined research questions. These will be the basis for testing whether the intervention has the expected impact on key outcomes. These questions should be framed in such a way that answers can help inform decision-making by policymakers and program managers.

- ***TANF 16.*** For the TANF 16 project, the research team designed the study to understand whether the team collected more from the state-owed arrears only population than what was collected for control cases which remained on the caseload of non-TANF 16 SEOs. Additionally, the project focused on understanding the characteristics of those cases where the impact was greatest.

Identify opportunistic experiments. Identifying opportunistic experiments can reduce research costs and minimize the impact on overall operational efficiency. Opportunistic experiments study the effects of a planned intervention or policy change with minimal added disruption and cost. Opportunistic experiments may take a few different forms. A randomized pilot can test a new intervention with a random sample of the eligible population before deciding whether to implement more broadly. Alternatively, an agency can use randomization as part of a staggered

rollout of an intervention for sites, assigning sites to either immediate or delayed receipt of the intervention. For example, the treatment group receives the treatment in first year of the experiment, and the control group receives the treatment in the subsequent year if the treatment appears to be successful. Lastly, an oversubscription lottery design can be used where participant interest in an intervention exceeds capacity, and an agency uses a lottery to randomly assign interested participants to either an intervention group (offered a spot in the program) or a control group (not offered a spot).[4] In these three designs, the unit of randomization may differ (e.g., field office, staff, NCP, CP, case, child).

- ***TANF 16.*** The TANF 16 project is an example of an opportunistic randomized pilot experiment. The timing of the University Partnership grant coincided appropriately with the timing of DCS receiving the appropriation to pilot a new unit of 16 full-time staff to try to increase collection of debt owed to the state. Because the number of cases eligible to be transferred to the TANF 16 unit dramatically exceeded the unit's caseload capacity, DCS chose to randomly assign a subset of eligible cases to the unit.

Sample size and methods of analysis. Whether an experimental or quasi-experimental research design is feasible depends in part on sample size; the ability to detect the impacts of the intervention decreases as the sample size decreases. In other words, the effect that the intervention has on the outcome variables of interest must be large to detect impacts at a substantively valuable level if the sample is small. If the sample size is too small, experimental or quasi-experimental methods are not viable and any differences in outcomes cannot be confidently attributed to the intervention. In some cases where there is not an adequate sample, there may be a potential to build sample size by including individuals who fit the characteristics of the target population over time. In order to determine whether a sample is adequately large, a power analysis can be conducted. A power analysis allows a researcher to determine the sample size required to detect an effect of a given size with a given degree of statistical confidence.

- ***TANF 16***. Although the research team did not encounter the issue of inadequate sample size in the case of the TANF 16 project, they did increase the overall sample over time by adding new cases at a second and third round of random assignment. As any instance of sample buildup requires, these cases were randomly pulled from a pool of cases that met all of the eligibility requirements that were used to define the initial sample.

Develop methods of analysis. The research questions and implementation approach often dictate the extent to which researchers can deploy the most rigorous analytic methods. An experimental test – one that randomly assigns participants to either a treatment or control group – will provide the strongest evidence of any impact. Absent conditions that support this approach, researchers may explore the viability of quasi-experimental tests that compare the outcomes from the treatment group to a group of individuals with similar characteristics. However, even the best quasi-experimental approach cannot account for all selection biases or unobservable differences between the two groups. In addition to quantitative analyses, conducting qualitative research will provide an understanding of how the implementation experience influenced the outcomes. This supports the clearest and most complete understanding of the impact of the intervention.

[4] Resch, A., Berk, J., & Akers, L. (2014). *Recognizing and conducting opportunistic experiments in education: A guide for policymakers and researchers* (REL 2014–037). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Analytic Technical Assistance and Development. Retrieved from http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/REL2014037/

- ***TANF 16.*** The research team was able to use an experimental design in evaluating the impact of the TANF 16 team. Additionally, the research team conducted multiple site visits and interviews with TANF 16 staff. These conversations provided added insight into implementation and potential factors contributing to program outcomes. The qualitative research was instrumental in documenting and understanding the implications of the ramp-up to full implementation.

Establish a counterfactual. Describing the effects of an intervention requires more than just examining the outcomes; it requires an examination of impacts – the difference between the outcomes of those who received the intervention and of those who did not. Ideally, this is done through a random assignment design where individuals in the sample are randomly assigned to receive the treatment or to receive the status quo. This allows any differences to be attributed directly to the treatment. However, randomization can pose ethical constraints, as it involves denying the treatment, which may be potentially helpful services, to one group. It may also pose operational constraints, as it requires one group to not access the intervention services; in a case where the intervention is providing knowledge regarding an existing process or procedure, the treatment group must be kept from disseminating that information to control group members.

- ***TANF 16***. DCS estimated there were roughly 21,000 NCPs that met the criteria for the project – having exclusively state-owed debt and no current support obligation at the point of pulling the sample in fall 2012. Because the TANF 16 team could only work with a limited number of cases at any one time and the treatment only affected one group of localized staff, conducting a randomized experiment did not pose ethical or operational constraints. From the eligible population, DCS randomly assigned a sample of 1,955 NCPs to the unit (the treatment group) and 2,000 NCPs to the control group in November 2012. Control group cases remained in the caseload of their current support enforcement officers and received the usual enforcement methods for the duration of the experiment.

Obtaining authorizations. One step that may be time intensive is obtaining the requisite research authorization and ensuring that new interventions conform to existing regulations and policies governing agency practices. In addition, any research involving human subjects requires approval by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Washington State IRB is responsible for reviewing research in the jurisdiction of Washington State government agencies, such as DSHS.[5] Communication with an IRB representative about whether a review is necessary, what type of application and appendices should be completed, and whether it is a time-sensitive application can ensure adequate protections are in place.

- ***TANF 16.*** The research team received approval for the TANF 16 project from the Washington State IRB. This involved detailed description of the intended intervention and analysis along with identification of all potential risks to human subjects and agreement to use data stripped of all possible identifying information. In the case of the TANF 16 intervention, these risks were minimal.

Secure relevant data. The strength of the research design is contingent on the ability to collect valid and reliable data on key outcomes. Administrative data systems are often not designed with research goals in mind (e.g., they often are less effective at retaining historical data when case circumstances change). Similarly, variables of interest to researchers may not always align with

[5] https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sesa/human-research-review-section/frequently-asked-questions

how data are defined in these systems. As such, advanced planning to understand the capabilities and limitations of these systems is imperative. Equally important is understanding the way in which data are collected. To maximize accuracy, it is preferable to rely on fields with a fixed set of response options or where data are entered automatically. Text fields, open ended questions, and optional fields are typically more prone to inaccuracies or missing data. Additionally, it is important to have a plan in place for the timing of data collection. Collecting data at the point of random assignment (i.e., baseline data) and one or more follow-up periods allows researchers to measure the change in outcomes for the treatment and control groups during the study period.

- ***TANF 16.*** The research team used administrative data available through DCS's management information system to capture fields such as payment amounts, timing of payments, and debt amounts. The research team received study data from DCS at three points. The first data extract, five months after the initial randomization, was particularly useful. The research team used these data to determine whether randomization was correctly implemented, understand how the data elements were being captured, and identify any anomalies in the data before the point of the final data analysis. In addition, subsequent data extracts allowed the research team to begin developing the necessary software code to execute the final analyses.

Monitoring and documenting adherence to intended implementation plan. The ongoing monitoring of implementation should be mapped to the specifics of an intervention. In other words, are the outputs of the intervention occurring as defined in the logic model? Ongoing review of implementation can increase the likelihood of fidelity and can also support program improvement. Qualitative data collection (e.g., staff interviews) can provide valuable insight into factors that may be reducing the degree to which the intervention is being implemented as intended. Documenting implementation may involve conducting staff interviews, case file reviews, or client focus groups and interviews.

- ***TANF 16.*** The research team was interested in whether the team was focusing on the activities which had been identified as the core outputs of the intervention, which included increased attention to data integrity through the debt calculation and locate work. They conducted multiple site visits in service of documenting implementation. They conducted separate interviews with the unit manager and small groups of the various staff (e.g., groups of SETs or SEOs). These interviews were instrumental in understanding what was occurring on the ground, how implementation deviated from design, and how staff dealt with situations and challenges that the design had not considered.

D. Refine broader agency approach based on findings

One of the main goals of this project was to learn how DCS can marry research and operations to improve service delivery. While DCS may have a programmatic change in mind when it develops an intervention or at an early stage of the intervention, research is only of value to the agency to the extent that it answers relevant policy and programmatic questions. Moreover, the results need to provide operational lessons that can inform next steps. During the experiment, this may mean making changes to the intervention. At the end of analysis, it could mean doing further research in light of inconclusive results, not rolling out an intervention if there are negative or neutral impacts, or implementing the intervention in a specific manner. Ideally, DCS

and researchers would discuss the findings together, as they may inform each other on how to interpret the findings operationally or on how best to deploy the findings in the agency.

Analyze program impacts. As noted earlier, there are different ways of examining the outcomes of an intervention. These findings may provide information that is useful in refining and improving the intervention for the future.

- ***Outcome improvements***. One of the most straightforward impacts that would be useful for leadership to determine whether to expand and continue an intervention is to examine whether the intervention improved outcomes compared to the status quo. In the TANF 16 project, most of the analyses indicated that the intervention did improve collection outcomes compared to the status quo.
- ***Research results may yield unexpected impacts.*** While this may be an intuitive finding, the TANF 16 researchers found that the effect of the intervention varied by the number of months of treatment; the effect of the treatment was bigger the longer the NCPs were exposed to the treatment, which means including the later cohorts to the analysis actually diluted the intervention's impact. In operational terms, this would mean that in order to get the most out of the TANF 16 strategy, these state-owed arrears cases would need to receive the intervention for a sustained period of time.
- ***Subgroup analysis.*** If the subgroup analysis showed differential impacts on a subset of the sample, this could be used to refine the target population. For example, in TANF 16, the intervention had a much larger impact on male NCPs than female NCPs. It may be more efficient to focus this strategy on male NCPs.
- ***Continuation of intervention***. The last finding that DCS may find very useful is whether the impact was sufficient to warrant continuation and expansion beyond the demonstration period. With the TANF 16 project, this could be considered in two ways; it may be enough evidence that the difference in collections between the treatment and control groups was more than the cost of running the team. What would have further justified expanding the intervention is finding that the amount collected per dollar of treatment cost exceeded the amount collected per dollar spent on status quo practice. However, it was not possible to measure this last outcome as the project lacked data to accurately estimate the cost of business-as-usual practices for the control NCPs.

Review implementation experience. A thorough review and understanding of the implementation experience can inform agency decision-making. An understanding of the steps that were required to implement the intervention provides useful information should the agency choose to continue the intervention. In addition, the experience of the demonstration may have laid the groundwork for expansion, removing or reducing the effort for start-up. For example, any work that was done to gain authorization for a change in procedures may not need to be repeated. Reviewing the implementation experience can also highlight barriers that arose during implementation, both on the research side and operationally.

- ***TANF 16.*** Operationally, many lessons can be learned from the staffing, training, and staffing structure issues the TANF 16 faced. For example, DCS did not anticipate the difference in speed with which the SEOs and SETs worked through cases. DCS adapted to these early findings, changing the ratio of SEOs to SETs. Similarly, early visits

identified areas of specific training needs, especially given the unexpectedly high proportion of unit staff with no prior case work experience.

Create reporting/dissemination plans. There may be many parties interested in the research findings. A key part of creating dissemination plans is determining who the audience of a report or presentation will be. For example, management may use the findings to decide whether to expand the program. Line staff may be more interested in the research results that have practical implications for how they could improve collections or how big of an impact the intervention had in pure dollars, as opposed to probability or likelihood estimates. The results may also be of value to other states' child support agencies and OCSE. DCS also needs to consider the timing of dissemination; there may be more interest in the findings based on the timing of annual budget meetings or performance evaluations.

- ***TANF 16***. UW-Evans prepared a final report for DCS on the experimental evidence of the projects conducted under the grant. The methodology section uses plain language and short explanations of unavoidable terminology where needed, and presents only the most important results needed to understand the conclusions. These conclusions and recommendations were presented in the context of issues that would be of concern to DCS, such as federal performance measures.

Implications of scaling up. If DCS determines that an intervention or aspects of an intervention would be useful to introduce to a wider DCS context, there are several pieces that should be considered in advance. Scaling up the intervention may have implications for current staffing and agency policy.

- ***TANF 16***. In the case of TANF 16, this could mean redefining the job description for a subset of SETs to include more scrub and locate tasks and putting in place a professional advancement flow from SET to SEO for interested individuals. In addition to staffing and agency policy, scaling up may entail securing and allocating the necessary program funding to facilitate implementation. For example, introducing new work flow procedures could mean allocating more funding to staff training and quality assurance.

Staff training and standardization. DCS will need to develop a strategy for translating the research findings into operational language and then create standardized training materials for the relevant staff. Results of subgroup analysis that find bigger impacts on particular types of cases or NCPs may mean that focusing the intervention on this population would be wise. In this case, the training materials may specify that SEOs are to prioritize providing this intervention to this group.

- ***TANF 16***. The unit manager highly emphasized the importance of data integrity to the line staff. As such, some of the main tasks of the SETs were to review the collections actions that the cases had received prior to coming onto the TANF 16 caseload, as well as to conduct locate to find the most up to date case information. In addition, SEOs focused highly on the debt calculation to ensure that the arrears amount listed on the case had been calculated correctly.

III. Conclusion

The University Partnership Grant created a unique opportunity for DCS to work collaboratively with local research partners to implement and evaluate innovative approaches to program improvement. This close relationship and combination of research and operational expertise

resulted in policy relevant tests that helped provide actionable research findings that also have broader implications for the child support and research community.

In addition to the specific findings from the research projects conducted under the grant, the partnership provides a broader template for how child support agencies can work with research partners to develop and implement rigorous, operational tests. In this paper we outline a framework that can support such tests, with an emphasis on the discrete steps child support agencies and researchers can take. We emphasize that the collaborative nature of the partnership allowed for the project and research design to be more responsive to the implementation experience. Ongoing communication and interim research activities that are attentive to implementation challenges will leave agencies better positioned to make quick adjustments while maintaining the rigor of the initial design.

The experience with the University Partnership Grant provides examples of how child support agencies can think creatively about efforts to support program improvement. This includes identifying innovative and new practices and being strategic about how to implement these practices in such a manner that allows for concurrent research activities. Instead of viewing research as a discrete activity independent of agency operations, a collaborative research approach occurring in lockstep with ongoing program management can more directly support broader program improvement goals.